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Emerging International and European Group Encourages Data Exchange Standards to Support the Bologna Process

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Representatives from thirteen countries met in Rome, Italy on November 8-9, 2007 to discuss the assembly of common data exchange standards to support the goals of the Bologna Process. I attended the workshop as a representative from the United States, invited to present PESC and how AcademyOne in context, has supported and adopted specifications created by the PESC workgroups.

In order to establish a European Higher Education Area by 2010, 46 European states (January 2007) agreed with the Bologna Process on common aims concerning the restructuring of study programs and academic degrees at universities. Different measurements are about to be implemented to reach more comparability and compatibility for these study programs and academic degrees:

- Bachelor Degree and Master Degree Study Programs
- Modulation of Study Programs
- Increased International acceptance of exam certificates and study programs workloads – by use of Diploma Supplements and European Credit Transfer System (ECTS)
- Increased support for the mobility of students and lectures between universities.

The workshop was organized by members of several European software companies, universities, consortiums, associations and state run systems. Introductions and welcoming remarks were provided by Dott.ssa. Emanuela Stefani, CRUI’s Executive Director in Italy. Meeting in the CRUI’s executive conference center put into perspective the history, challenges, opportunities and interests of a diverse group getting together to align their data exchange ideas and approaches. The conference center was immense with fresco murals dating back over a thousand years. The Roman battles, led by Constantine in 300 AD, reveal how powerful the drive was to consolidate, standardize and sustain governance. It begged the question, what kind of battles do we face in order to achieve commonly accepted standards which can be used to support student mobility, economic development and efficient use of resources that will enable us to compete in the 21st century?

The battle to consolidate and standardize religion and trade across Italy lasted hundreds of years. Centuries later, the complexity and motives of participants coming together to collaborate on data exchange standards across Europe to overcome the barriers of acceptance of academic credentials centuries later was a much improved perspective. The conference room, like the Bologna Process, reveals that society recognizes the need to standardize in order to foster mobility and enhance trade.
The goals of the workshop were introduced by Simone Ravaoli from Kion and Stephane Vely from unisolution, two software companies reflecting the emerging calls to collaborate and coordinate efforts on the development of student data exchange standards. Specifically the workshop was organized into four segments:

- Best practices presented as state level demonstration projects across Europe representing how systems are evolving to be compliant with the Bologna Process.
- Best practices presented as projects throughout the world that have revealed issues, opportunities and lessons learned.
- Discussion of using international standards for exchanging student data consequences for current projects and new opportunities.
- Discussion for steps toward an international standard for exchanging student data; requirements, constraints, approaches and dissemination.

Conclusions and next steps were summarized at the end of the workshop leading toward a follow-on meeting to be arranged in Dublin Ireland early 2008. The group agreed in concept to encourage the European University Information System association, which represents more than 120 institutions across 22 European countries, to investigate a task force that would fall under their auspices.

As an American and someone who has worked long and hard on creating an awareness for the need to develop data exchange standards across the education eco-system, I entered the workshop inspired by a day spent visiting ancient sites and walking the narrow streets of Rome. Centuries ago, the Romans created specifications for chariots and aqueducts with precision. Their roads were designed to accommodate the chariots. So were the houses and doors which are still standing with door knockers eight feet high off the stone path. Aqueducts brought portable water to support health and life. Each invention was architected, refined and then deployed, giving the Roman Empire economies of scale and competitive advantages of lesser organized communities.

In Italy, higher education is a thousand years in the making. Europe is migrating to a federated model by market demand, what centuries of conquest and wars attempted to accomplish. This does imply I am comparing the call for data exchange standards to the discipline and force manifested through the centuries. Yet, there are similarities in the call for economic development requiring standardization. Granted, we are not working through aggressive power. Peaceful governments are negotiating goals, methods and desired outcomes to make their educational systems more competitive and global facing. Regions divided by borders and institutional legacy must overcome fears, trust and urges for control and domination. This obviously takes time.

My suggestion to the group was that the act of getting together with discourse will reveal the need to specialize efforts, create workgroups with the goals of study and isolation of practices. It will also create the need to construct a common dictionary, policies and procedures and governance to steer. In this effort, historical perspectives and prior
specifications and standards can be reviewed in practical terms, related to the present and future goals and requirements. If standards are found, they can be reviewed, adjusted and brought into view for the group to consider. I also suggested terminology separating the need of the group to potentially create specifications based upon requirements, which individual organizations can adopt and support, leading to standards. Standards evolve through adoption. Some come about by market penetration while others can be achieved by mandate.

Given the public investment in education and the political drivers, I was really moved by this voluntary effort convened in response to 46 governments trying to align goals, methods and outcomes. So, going forward, the evolution of data exchange standards in Europe will be a long term process of collaboration, comprise and determination to create a means to improve, streamline and employ operational practices voluntarily or by mandate that will serve institutional centric issues as well as student services. Sustainability will be dependent upon adoption and overcoming many barriers. Time will tell, if the goals set out by the workshop can eventually be achieved. I hope my effort and contributions were appreciated. Arrivederci – until we meet again.