



## Bologna With Student Eyes 2015 Executive Summary

Bologna With Students' Eyes presents a reality-check of what has been agreed upon by national governments within the Bologna Process and what the actual reality is for students. Reforms discussed and recommended in an inter-governmental process on European level are not simply implemented overnight at the national and institutional level. Nevertheless, ESU's concern has been that the information provided for the reporting on the implementation of Bologna reforms has been detached from the reality at the grassroots level, sometimes even with factual errors (either by mistake or consciously). The aim is to highlight the current status, successes and future challenges that students see in the implementation of reforms and the Process as a whole from the students' point of view, as the main stakeholder in higher education, thus complementing the views presented in the EHEA implementation reports and reports by other stakeholders.

The data for this edition was collected by surveying ESU's national unions of students on the following areas: student participation in governance, social dimension, quality assurance, recognition, mobility and internationalisation, structural reforms and financing of higher education. The questionnaire also included general questions about the Bologna Process and its future. In total, over 38 national unions of students responded the questionnaire, from Norway to Malta and Ireland to Armenia.

The authors of the chapters have integrated the analysis of the BWSE questionnaire together with other relevant reports and documents into the main findings. The combination of the qualitative and quantitative approach allow for presenting a full picture of how students perceive the Bologna Process and the implementation of Bologna reforms. This served as the basis for suggesting considerations for the future and recommendations that should be taken into account when ministers meet at the 2015 Ministerial Meeting to discuss and agree upon future commitments, as well as in discussions related to the structure of the Bologna Follow-Up Group for the upcoming period.

The results in this publication have shown that the original commitments of the Bologna Process are far from being evenly implemented within all participatory countries. It is clear

that the main obstacle for reaching the goals of the EHEA is the lack of a minimum level of implementation of the Bologna reforms. The lack of implementation raises extreme concerns and a lack of confidence in the Process among students, as after more than 15 years the goals of the Bologna Declaration remain unfulfilled to a large extent

## **1. Time to Meet the Expectations from 1999**

The Bologna Process has a great influence on higher education in Europe, as many European countries are reforming or have reformed their higher education systems in light of the Bologna Declaration and the following communiqués. However, it is still far from achieving a fully functioning European Higher Education Area.

Since the very beginning of the Bologna Process, it has aimed to initiate a change of paradigm in the role of the students in higher education. However, the policy debate on teaching and learning in Europe is intensifying, much more now than even three years ago. This presents a key moment in time to address these issues head-on at a European policy level. There seems to be a momentum promoting a real paradigm shift towards a student-centred approach to learning and teaching, where the focus is on the goals of the learning process from the student's perspective.

Despite the continuous commitments from the ministers in EHEA and because of the lack of full implementation of the structural reforms, automatic recognition is yet to become reality. Moreover, the diploma supplement is still not granted for free and automatically in every EHEA country and the recognition procedures seem to be complicated and time consuming and therefore inaccessible. When it comes to the recognition of prior learning seems to be at a the early stage of implementation, with rather limited impact. Recognition procedures must be accessible, clear and transparent to all applicants, without red-tape. Having regard of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, there should be automatic recognition of degrees between the European Higher Education Area countries that have already fully implemented the Bologna structural reforms, as there would then not be any substantial differences with similar qualifications in any other EHEA country.

Higher education has multiple purposes, and when focusing on employability as one of them, it should always be defined in a broad sense, and never used in a way that instrumentalises education to suit narrow or short-term needs of the labour market.

Even if some progress has been made in certain areas, the prevention of discrimination of underrepresented groups in higher education must be addressed more holistically, and the groups possibly affected must be considered carefully and according to their specific needs. Not only sufficient funding but also the further implementation of national access plans is crucial.

After more than 15 years of the Bologna Process, many challenges exist and there is a need for rethinking the Process. Many challenges have yet to be tackled in the implementation of the reforms ministers have committed to: a lack of funding, lack of interest and lack of knowledge are just some. With the discussions on the future of the Bologna Process up for

debate at the Ministerial Conference, students have weighed in on what they believe is crucial the continued success of the Process; the top priority: a restructuring to ensure proper implementation.

Rethinking the Bologna Process must entail a full reassessment of its structures, and a possible two-speed process should be evaluated. Countries must take on the responsibility to fund the reforms that they have (or should have) implemented. Involving students, academics and institutions in all discussions and decision-making regarding the Bologna Process and its implementation is key.

## 2. Progress and procrastination in the Bologna Process since 2012

Many challenges have yet to be tackled in the implementation of the reforms ministers have committed to: a lack of funding, lack of interest and lack of knowledge are just some. With the discussions on the future of the Bologna Process up for debate at the Ministerial Conference, students have weighed in on what they believe is crucial the continued success of the Process; the top priority: a restructuring to ensure proper implementation.

**Student Participation** in higher education governance has advanced slightly in recent years with the enactment of legislation but many barriers are still in place, preventing or limiting the involvement of students at all levels. It is clear that other stakeholders have an important role in addressing the perception that students are ‘seen but not heard’ and not considered equal partners. The Bologna process has not contributed to the improvement of student participation in most countries. Effective inductions and trainings for student representatives participating in decision making structures along with continuous supports can advance the involvement of students in higher education governance.

According to National Students’ Unions the **Social Dimension** is seldom a priority on national or institutional level. The lack of clear measures taken shows the need for further action in order to prevent discrimination and to support underrepresented groups. In order to intensify the efforts to reach the goal to reflect the diversity of society in the higher education student population, the pressing lack of funding for student support services has to be addressed. Data collection may serve as a first step, but has to be followed up by the implementation of concrete measures which shall be supported by national access plans among other tools.

The primary purposes of **Quality Assurance** systems are generally perceived as for enhancing the study conditions and providing transparent information. There are a considerable amount of countries where the external quality assurance systems are a combination between institutional and study-programme accreditations. Meaningful participation of students in quality assurance at all levels has slightly increased and in several countries had or have developed specific experts’ pool where students are included. However, there is a lack of information about QA among the student body and students generally think that these processes are not useful because there is not any visible consequences perceived by them.

**Student-Centred Learning** has been one of the key commitments of the Bologna Process since 2009, and is closely linked with the concept of 'learning to learn'. Much progress has been made in implementing student-centred learning, however the results of the PASCL study have shown that much of this has been done piecemeal, and lacks a holistic change from national to classroom level. Putting students in the centre of the learning process requires providing them with choice in curricula, assessment methods and study paths. It also means that students must be seen as equal partners and co-producers of knowledge. Therefore, it is also of utmost importance is ensuring students have a real voice in decision-making structures, affecting their daily lives.

**Recognition** has been analysed in terms of four aspects: diploma supplement, recognition procedures, automatic recognition and recognition of prior learning. Despite the continuous commitments from the ministers in EHEA and because of the lack of full implementation of the structural reforms, automatic recognition is yet to become a reality. The recognition procedures seem to be complicated and time consuming and therefore not accessible. Diploma Supplement is not granted for free and automatically in every EHEA country and recognition of prior learning seems to be at a the early stage of implementation, with rather limited impact.

**Student mobility** has been at the core of the foundation of the Bologna Process. Important aspects have been brought to the attention and added to the documents over the years with the aim of removing obstacles to mobility programmes in order to enhance the quality and widen access. The actions taken on European level, the aims and goals have been met on paper rather than in the reality leaving the student mobility still at a stage of privilege for a few and having the 20% target of mobile students by 2020, pressured countries to prioritise quantity often at the expense of quality.

**Internationalisation** strategies are yet to become common in EHEA countries. There is a noticeable lack of involvement of all of the relevant stakeholders in the process of drafting them and not enough consistency in the efforts taken to adjust the higher education systems to live up to the challenges of the global reality.

**Back to Basics! Structural Reforms** have been core elements of the Bologna Process, essential for fulfilling the basic aims of facilitating recognition and mobility through ensuring comparability and compatibility, as well as transparent, quality higher education. Despite their importance, it is clear that structural reforms have not been fully implemented. National unions of students report that there is a considerable lack of political will in the development and implementation of reforms. Even for the countries that have the reforms on paper, they have been superficial at best in a majority of countries, simply translating and not transforming the higher education system.

Higher education has changed during recent years with the Bologna implementation but now, a key factor enters the game, **employability**/employment. Higher education and the labor market have to look for mechanisms to interconnect themselves, in order to increase employability, especially for new graduates, but always having in mind the multiple purposes of higher education. Tools have been designed to help creating this bridge between the academia and the business world, but they have to be correctly defined, implemented and

used. The automatic recognition of prior learning, of general skills or of learning outcomes is still a goal to be reached. On the other hand, social dimension inclusion can be strengthened by opening and improving access to higher education for students and learners coming from underrepresented groups which would have better opportunities when entering the labor market. All stakeholders have to look for a better and more constant cooperation in order to achieve curricula which are linked to the real demands on each sector but always ensuring the decision making remains in the institutions.

**The funding of Higher Education** Institutions and student support systems has been disproportionately hit by austerity measures and cuts in recent years. The cuts to student support systems and the growing trend of converting grants into loans is pushing incredible financial burdens on to families and students and risk pushing more out of higher education. The underfunding of HEIs is seeing reductions in student services, growing tuition fees and risks to education quality. Where education budgets have not been cut but remain static growing demand and inflation calls for further investment.

### 3. Recommendations

Rethinking the Bologna Process must entail a full reassessment of its structures, and a possible two-speed process should be evaluated. Countries must take on the responsibility to fund the reforms that they have (or should have) implemented. Peer-learning between countries, as well as trainings for teachers and staff will also assist in the challenges of implementation. Data collection must also be enhanced, establishing objective indicators and taking into account the views of stakeholders in reporting. Finally, involving students, academics and institutions in all discussions and decision-making regarding the Bologna Process and its implementation is key.

- i. **Student Participation:** ESU calls for immediate action to address the legislative and cultural barriers preventing or limiting meaningful student participation in higher education governance. All stakeholders have a role in ensuring student representatives are considered equal partners and are included and supported in decision making structures.
- ii. ESU calls for the treatment of the **social dimension** as a policy priority. Adequate data collection, identification and support of underrepresented groups and sufficient student support services must be provided to reach the goal of reflecting the diversity of populations among higher education students. To achieve these goals, not only sufficient funding but also the further implementation of national access plans is crucial.
- iii. **Quality Assurance** systems should be based on the principles and values of trust, participation and ownership of stakeholders and drive as real improvement. It is important that the revised version of the European Standards and Guidelines are rapidly implemented in cooperation with the national stakeholders. There should be

further development of EQAR providing information about quality-assured higher education provision in EHEA, for example, having a database of official degrees (study programmes) offered within EHEA.

- iv. In order to properly implement **student-centred learning**, adequate funding and resources must be secured, ensuring that higher education institutions can provide students with a conducive learning environment. Students must also be in the driver's seat, and here countries and institutions have the responsibility to ensure student representation in all decision-making processes. Staff must also receive continuous pedagogical training. Providing flexible learning paths where students are provided with real choice in curriculum and assessment methods is a key component of SCL. Holistic strategies, frameworks and procedures for the implementation of SCL and assessing its success should be a guiding tool in this process.
- v. There must be accessible, clear and transparent procedures for **recognition**, but the procedures cannot serve as a bureaucratic burden. Automatic recognition of degrees should be implemented between the EHEA countries that have already fully implemented the Bologna structural reforms, as there would then not be any substantial differences with similar qualifications in any other EHEA country, in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention. The Diploma Supplement should be fully implemented and automatically granted upon graduation or before graduation upon request. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) should be available for the purpose of enrollment in higher education as well as available for the purpose of replacement of parts of the curriculum. RPL mechanisms must be flexible and student-friendly.
- vi. Making **mobility** a reality is still a challenge. It must be perceived not as a goal itself but as a tool of or a result of internationalisation process. Every commitment must be followed solidary by the countries in order to ensure conditions for mobility on institutional, national level across and beyond Europe. The 20% target has to be reviewed and efforts need to be taken to ensure equal participation of underrepresented groups by removing target specific obstacles and granting support by full portability of grants and loans, adequate information provisions and automatic recognition.
- vii. **Internationalisation** strategies have to be in place on national and institutional levels that are designed, monitored and followed up with the engagement of all relevant stakeholders. They should embrace measurable targets, language policies and internationalisation at home in order to further create the coherent and attractive European Higher Education Area.
- viii. **Structural reforms** Full implementation of the structural reforms requires an understanding of the interdependence of the reforms. Countries cannot choose in an 'à la carte' manner which reforms they prefer, but must develop and implement them from a holistic perspective. Incentives such as automatic recognition for those countries that have implemented the reforms may function as an incentive for improved implementation. In order to ensure the transformation of the structures, the

development of reforms must involve the academic community and cannot be a top-down, forced process.

- ix. The countries need to take an effort to define and differentiate employment and **employability**, as those constitute two different concepts. Employability has to be perceived as ability to learn and gain employment whereas employment as an actual acquisition of a job. Higher education systems must not be designed to match the labor market needs, but should rather be tailored according to the needs of the society as a whole and recognize and keep in mind the complexity and diversity of educational programs, disciplines and professions when discussing enhancement of employability of graduates. Policies designed on national levels should clearly reflect that approach and make sure that it is followed in decision making processes within higher education systems.
- x. **Financing of Higher Education:** ESU urges Ministers to recommit to treating higher education as a public good and public responsibility by securing public funding and protecting education from austerity, as an investment in the future.