

ESU'S POLICY ON THE BOLOGNA PROCESS AND THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

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1. Introduction

ESU acknowledges that 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 following communiqués. However, we believe that we are still far from achieving a fully functioning European Higher Education Area.

The main challenges of the current process from the students' perspective have been: **inconsistency or lack of implementation at the national level**; Pushing of national reforms under the pretext of the Bologna Process; poor follow-up on previous commitments and lack of independent reporting on its progress.

Nevertheless, **ESU is committed to a European Higher Education Area that promotes and delivers high quality, accessible and student-centred education**; social justice, participative equity, opportunities for mobility and serves as the foremost way to fix a broken social ladder; and autonomous and democratically led higher education institutions, which create critical thinkers and active citizens in democratic societies.

ESU recognises that these are all equally relevant and interlinked goals. Autonomy of the academic sector is a tool to protect the right to freedom of expression, diversity of methods and content of education and research. Therefore, autonomy must not be used as a way of putting universities in a competition based



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development. Democratic higher education institutions cannot exist without social justice and participative equity. Participative equity is a stimulating factor for high quality education because it is enrichment for the educational environment. By ensuring participation of a diverse student body in higher education decision-making process, a student centred approach can be fostered. Therefore, these goals are mutually reinforcing.

Thus, the European Higher Education Area must embed a quality culture whilst enshrining academic freedom; recognise that higher education is a human right, public good and public responsibility; work on the principle of cooperation, not competition; include students as co-creators and partners in the delivery and governance of the learning experience and recognise its own responsibility to society itself as a social good, and as such, be publicly funded.

2. From the Bologna Process to the consolidation of the European Higher Education Area

Due to the nature of the Bologna process, the goals are often formulated in an abstract way in order to make it possible for every member state to agree to such a goal and for it to be acceptable in the national context. This created a problem for implementation on the ground, as the Bologna goals are rather disconnected from the reality at institutional and national level. **ESU believes that such problems need to be addressed through the use of national actions plans** that specify the action lines in more details for each national context. National-specific objectives should be clearly formulated, which will increase its relevance and state clearer goals for the institutions, students and other stakeholders.

Nonetheless, **ESU warns that the Bologna Process' aims cannot be reached as long as member states are approaching the implementation in an "a la carte" manner.** National governments shouldn't be able to handpick the reforms and action lines they want to work on and must make an effort to achieve more fundamental changes or address those areas that are of lower priority for governments. The action lines of the Bologna declaration and the subsequent communiqués are all interconnected and interdependent, so the reforms must be done in a comprehensive way. Countries need to make an express commitment to implement all the Bologna action lines equally. **A fully**

functioning European Higher Education Area cannot be achieved without reaching minimum standards of commitment and integration.

ESU believes that there should be a control mechanism that would verify that governments and institutions are not misusing the name of the Bologna process to justify policies that are unrelated to the Bologna implementation. The Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) should find a way to ensure this.

Moreover, ESU believes that Bologna signatory countries should commit to implement commonly agreed pan-European benchmarks stated in the Bologna process action lines. **The Bologna Process needs to be rebuilt on an approach based on targets for minimum expected standards of implementation.** For example, a European Higher Education Area “label” could be reserved for areas where countries have properly implemented envisaged policy measures. Ignoring minimum standards risks affecting the coherency of the European Higher Education Area, thus a possible consequence of a country breaching the minimum standards would be to lose the EHEA “label”.

While the structure of higher education systems is being reformed, little is being done to make it understandable, clear and comprehensible to the wider public, especially prospective students. ESU thinks that it is crucial to enhance the communication and outreach of the European Higher Education Area, putting in place adequate and accessible transparency and information tools about the European Higher Education Area. Ministers should commit to establishing credible and easy to use guidance systems and to communicate what the academic opportunities in the European Higher Education Area are about to everyone. The European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) would be a suitable institution for providing information if supported adequately. A true shift to a European area will not happen without these support structures, rendering the European Higher Education Area as a myriad of systems that are incomparable while still carrying the same labels.

Students should also easily have access to information concerning universities, courses and student supports available in every country through the creation of a set of European guidelines on the description of study programmes.

3. Policy scope of the Bologna process

While the structural reforms, for ensuring comparability and compatibility of national systems of education, have been at the core of the Bologna process and the European Higher Education Area, ESU believes that the scope of the Bologna process needs to be expanded if the process is to remain relevant to all the signatory countries and ESU member unions. Therefore **ESU encourages more discussion on overarching issues such as social dimension, mobility, recognition, funding, E-Learning, governance or research in the European Higher Education Area.**

ESU acknowledges that different countries have joined the process at different times, and there are differences in the extent to which different member countries have implemented the action lines. While some countries are focusing on the implementation of the structural reforms, those who have already implemented them are willing to continue the further development of the cooperation within the European Higher Education Area. **ESU believes that a two-speed process might be considered for the future of the Bologna Process and the sustainability of cooperation in the European Higher Education Area.**

4. Structures and governance of the EHEA and the Bologna process

More attention needs to be put on the governance of the Bologna process and the European Higher Education Area. **The decisions on the steering of the process should be reserved for the Bologna ministerial meetings; however ESU believes that the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) should be given an even stronger voice during the entire process.** The working groups should discuss the issues in-depth, prepare the background information and propose the issues to be discussed in the Bologna Follow-Up Group, while the visionary decisions are made at the ministerial conference.

Furthermore, ESU encourages the Bologna Follow-Up Group to explore possibilities for a permanent Bologna/EHEA Secretariat that would be responsible for supporting other structures of the Bologna process and European Higher Education Area. ESU believes that the Bologna Secretariat should not be handed to any European institution, but should rather rely on the collective support of the Bologna participating countries and organisations.

ESU believes that a fund should be created to support the permanent structures and common projects and events on relevant topics, allowing a more diverse group of countries to participate and take the lead in the follow-up activities.

5. Stakeholders' involvement in developing and implementing the Bologna Process

One of the distinctive features of the Bologna Process has been the involvement of stakeholders, especially of students, in the process since its really initial stages. ESU recognises that the stakeholders, through being consultative members of the process since its initial stages, have contributed significantly to the discussions and the developments of the different action lines. **ESU stresses that trust, participation and ownership from the stakeholders has led to a better implementation of the reforms.** A clear example is the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, one of the most successful Bologna tools, which were developed by the E4 group (ESU, ENQA, EUA and EURASHE) and have also been revised by them in cooperation with the social stakeholders. It is of utmost importance that the path taken regarding student participation in the development and implementation of the Bologna Process should be continued and enhanced on all levels.

6. Follow-up and monitoring of the Bologna Process

While the current implementation and progress reports have contributed to accelerating the reform by exposing the countries' evolution, **ESU sees the need for an independent monitoring and reporting mechanism.** Objective indicators, based on the above-mentioned student values of Bologna Process, should be developed. Together with improved data gathering and analysis, this would present the basis for further discussion and actions, however these indicators should not be used as a tool for incentive management of students or institutions.

Furthermore, ESU encourages the Bologna Follow-Up Group to develop the methodology to complement the current reports with better data gathering from different sources of information at the national level and not just ministerial officials. Additionally, the possibility of organising on-site visits by experts from

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other countries should be considered, which would allow for proper evaluation of the implementation of the Bologna reforms as well as the effect that they had on the higher education system of the country.

7. Bologna implementation on national level

In order to achieve proper implementation on the national level, all member countries should establish (or continue) a structure with decision-making power that would include all stakeholders (akin the Bologna Follow-Up Group) and would be responsible for the implementation and follow-up of the reforms while respecting the autonomy of higher education institutions. ESU is absolutely certain that consistent consultation and involvement of stakeholders at national levels is essential for a successful implementation of the Bologna reforms. **Students, academic staff, institutional leadership and management as well as other stakeholders are the ones bearing the brunt of any change and thus should be part of any discussion and decision.**

Governments need to establish special incentives and provide a significant level of financial and regulatory support for institutions that are trying to implement various elements of the Bologna process. There should be a system of scrutiny for the implementation of Bologna while focusing on improvement rather than penalisation. **An additional “EHEA-label” for institutions with corresponding minimum standards should be developed as a tool for encouraging institutions to implement the Bologna process effectively.**

The **European Students' Union (ESU)** is an umbrella organisation of 47 National Unions of Students from 39 different countries, **representing over 20 million students in Europe**. The aim of ESU is to represent and promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at the European level towards all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, Bologna Follow Up Group, Council of Europe and UNESCO.

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