



## European Students' Union (ESU)

Fighting for students' rights since 1982

[www.esu-online.org](http://www.esu-online.org)

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### European Students' Union Statement to the Ministerial Conference

#### **We believe in European cooperation**

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 the 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 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. Furthermore, ESU wishes to point out that budget cuts or lack of funding in higher education is contradictory to the complete transformation of the learning process.

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 improve social mobility; and autonomous and democratically led higher education institutions, which create critical thinkers and active citizens in democratic societies.

#### **Student-centred learning - it's about time!**

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. **ESU calls for taking stock of the momentum created and 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.** This paradigm shift toward a student-centred learning approach relates to both a mind-set and a culture within a given higher education institution. It is characterised by innovative learning and teaching methods and interaction between teachers and students to support the achievement of intended learning outcomes, where the students are viewed as responsive and active participants in their own learning process. Through the

use of active learning, and linking learning and teaching with research, students develop transferable skills, such as problem-solving and critical and reflective thinking.

Learning outcomes, credit systems, qualification frameworks, flexible curricula and recognition of prior learning are examples of approaches and instruments that form the conceptual and operational basis of a paradigm shift from teaching to learning and a student-centred education system. However, ESU emphasises that a paradigm shift cannot be achieved only by structural measures, but requires adequate funding, constant promotion within, and acceptance by, the whole academic community, including students.

Higher education institutions, student organisations and quality assurance bodies have a responsibility to promote a shift towards student-centred learning, predominantly through the provision of development training, specific support to teaching staff and proper infrastructure for students, as well as the dissemination of good practices. Governments should provide the necessary resources to support the implementation of student-centred learning.

Pedagogical training for teaching staff in higher education institutions must be a requirement, and institutions must also offer continuous staff development trainings. Strategies on learning and teaching should be designed on national and institutional levels, and the implementation of student-centred learning should be continuously evaluated. Students should be represented in the design, implementation and evaluation processes.

ESU supports sharing digital learning resources and Open Educational Resources policies for improving the accessibility and flexibility of education. However, digital learning must not be seen as a way to reduce the amount of direct contact between teachers and students. Furthermore, the quality of the digital tools should be assured, and it should be based on the principles of student-centred learning.

## **Reinvest in the Social Dimension**

Despite the fact that the social dimension is a central action line of the Bologna Process, it has not been prioritised in a majority of the member countries, according to the National Unions of Students who participated in the Bologna With Student Eyes 2015 survey. While ESU appreciates the efforts taken, more emphasis on the social dimension is needed in order to fulfil the commitments made, and meet the targets set.

ESU believes that any student in the need of financial support should have access to a sufficient grant to follow their studies in good conditions. 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. **This can be supported by defining underrepresented groups according to a national access plan, which sets clear targets.** To improve access to higher education, substantial funds must be allocated not only to define and

describe underrepresentation with the help of data collection, but also to be able to implement concrete measures. It is crucial that not only access, but also progression and completion of higher education are taken into account. In addition, student support services across Europe are in a grim state and must be prioritised in public budgets. The support and well being of students, and especially vulnerable groups, is a public responsibility and a necessity for the success of the student population as a whole.

## **Right to recognition! The unfulfilled promise of an EHEA**

There should be procedures for recognition, which must be accessible, clear and transparent to all applicants, but must not serve as a bureaucratic burden. They must be based on the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. ESU emphasises that recognition shall be granted if no substantial differences can be proved by the institution that is charged with recognition. Students must also have the right to appeal.

**It is essential for ESU that the recognition of degrees is guaranteed and granted automatically in all countries of the European Higher Education Area based on the tools already developed within the Bologna Process.** Having regard of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, ESU considers that there should be automatic recognition of degrees between the European Higher Education Area countries that have already fully implemented the Bologna structural reforms (a three-cycle system, ECTS, a national qualifications framework aligned with the qualifications framework of the EHEA, a quality assurance agency registered in EQAR, and automatically issued Diploma Supplement), as there would then not be any substantial differences with similar qualifications in any other EHEA country. For example, this means that students holding a bachelor degree in one European Higher Education Area country should be able to enrol in a master degree study programme in any other country within the EHEA without having to initiate any additional procedure for formal recognition of their degree. The Bologna Process should prioritise this action line in order to fully implement a true European Higher Education Area.

## **Genuine academic freedom for students and academics**

Academic freedom is a concept often used, but seldom the same concept behind those words is understood or truly lived up to. **True academic freedom means that all students and academic staff have the right to organise themselves freely in legally recognised entities and have the right to freely express themselves.** It is important to stress that this is not strictly limited to academic matters. Students and academics must not suffer academic, financial or legal consequences on the basis of such involvement. Furthermore, students have the right to be informed about all higher education affairs in a transparent manner.

Academic staff must be provided with freedom of expression and should be able to raise their views and opinions without fearing that it may affect their position and

career. Security of tenure in particular has a direct relationship to academic freedom. Job insecurity represents a threat to freedom of expression in many institutions.

The relationship between students and higher education institutions must be autonomous. Active participation in decision-making processes should be encouraged and facilitated. Representatives of teaching staff and student representatives must be active participants at all levels of decision-making processes.

While seemingly evident, these issues are at the heart of the future of the European Higher Education Area. If these principles cannot be lived up to, ESU questions the entire point of a more integrated European Higher Education Area.

## **Employability - let's get it right**

ESU reemphasises the importance of distinguishing between employability and employment. 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 needs of the labour market. Therefore, we urge the ministers to be cautious when considering the Bologna Process in relation to labour market policies.

## **Re-structuring the Bologna Process**

More attention must be put on the governance of the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area. Decisions on the steering of the Process should be reserved for the Bologna ministerial conference. 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. The visionary and main policy decisions should then be discussed and made by the ministers at a conference every three years.

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, ensure continuity, and promote a deeper sense of commitment from the member countries to achieve a truly functioning European Higher Education Area. ESU believes that the Bologna Secretariat should not be handed to any single European institution or country, but should rather rely on the collective support of the countries and organisations participating in the Bologna Process. ESU also 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.

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 should not be able to handpick reforms and action lines they want to work on, but rather make an effort to achieve more fundamental changes or address the areas that have been 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 must make an expressed commitment to implement all 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 the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) should find a way to ensure a control mechanism, which would serve to verify that governments and institutions are not misusing the name of the Bologna Process to justify policies that are unrelated to the Bologna implementation.

## **Stakeholder involvement**

One of the distinctive features of the Bologna Process has been the involvement of stakeholders, especially of students, in the process since its very 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 the group in cooperation with social stakeholders. It is of utmost importance that the path taken regarding student participation in the development and implementation of the Bologna Process is continued and enhanced on all levels. **It should be highlighted in this context that the current situation where far from all countries at the Ministerial Conferences include students and academics in their delegations is unacceptable.**

## **National responsibilities**

In order to achieve proper implementation at 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 still respecting the autonomy of higher education institutions. ESU is absolutely certain that consistent consultation and involvement of stakeholders at national level is essential for the 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 should therefore be part of any discussion and decision. National-specific objectives should be

clearly formulated, which will increase the relevance of the Bologna Process and its reforms, and state clearer goals for institutions, students, and other stakeholders.

**Governments must 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 also be a system of scrutiny for the implementation of Bologna while focusing on improvement rather than penalisation.