



The Student Voice

The monthly newsletter of the European Students' Union

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Editorial

Dear Friend,

It undoubtedly has an important role to play – the market and private sector have been shown to deliver multiple benefits in areas such as air transport, multimedia and communications and retail services, providing a level of choice and competition for consumers that enable them to select the best product for their requirements.

Some then argue that, given the successful track record of the market in this respect, that it should be extended to other areas of daily life, such as education. After all, it is just a logical extension of a tried-and-tested approach. If people gain from price reductions and product choice because of market forces and privatisation when buying a foreign holiday, surely they should and could benefit from the same choices with their educational provision.

This is where the market logic collides with fundamental human rights and entitlements. There are several key differences between buying a foreign holiday and following an educational pathway that make the marketisation agenda fall down. Buying a holiday abroad is optional – as much as we may like to think the opposite, it is a luxury – an addition to our daily lives rather than an essential necessity. And because it is an optional extra which we can choose to have or not, we expect to have to pay for it. Having one simply makes our lives temporarily more enjoyable, rather than bringing any wider individual and societal benefits. Failure to have one impacts on no-one but ourselves.

Education is another matter entirely. Widely acknowledged as a basic human right, it is an entitlement and an essential pre-requisite for realising individual potential, citizenship, equal opportunities and creating a knowledgeable, sustainable and equitable society in which everyone can flourish. It is therefore something that needs to be available to everyone, regardless of financial means, origin, background or situation. The market does not work for basic human rights and entitlements, because it functions on an entirely different logic – of creating a good deal for optional extras that people can either choose to have, or choose not to have. Education is not an optional extra, and marketisation in practice simply means a shift away from universal access and entitlement to limited access based on the ability to pay for the 'goods' in question.

For this reason, the recognition this month at the World Conference on Higher Education of higher education as 'a public good and public responsibility' was a major breakthrough against a growing tide seeking to inject market forces into learning provision. While such a statement at global level is an important statement of principle, the signs in Paris were that it's just another step forward in a much longer-term battle. It's going to take a lot more work by ESU and other higher education actors before the marching tide seeking to marketise this 'public good' is forced into a permanent retreat.

Until next month,

Frances

Editor – The Student Voice



Students make their mark on the WCHE

At no time in history has it been more important to invest in higher education.' This was the strong and unequivocal message emanating from global higher education leaders at the UNESCO World Conference held in Paris earlier this month. In a clear illustration of the strength of the student voice, this statement is just one of a series of major step forwards made by the conference as a result of the work of ESU and student platforms across the world.

The communiqué, issued by UNESCO as the conference organisers, on 8 July, provides the overarching position statement of the conference and sets out the agreed framework and objectives for higher education at a global level in the coming years.

Crucially, the communiqué clearly stresses the place of higher education as 'a public good and a strategic imperative', and adds that, 'higher education must be a matter of responsibility and economic support of all governments.' This recognition comes at a critical time for the sector, with a series of threats to higher education funding in the face of the current economic crisis, and the ever-increasing advancement of the privatisation/marketisation agenda.

The need for member states' not to waiver in their financing of higher education is a recurrent theme, and is accorded extra weight through a specific call for action to 'maintain, and if possible, increase investment in higher education in order to sustain quality and equity at all times.'

Another breakthrough resides in the recognition given to access, equity and quality as interlinking objectives of primary importance, with an understanding that, 'the objective must be successful participation and completion, while at the same time assuring student welfare,' including '...appropriate financial and educational support to those from poor and marginalised communities.' Member states are called upon to, 'encourage women's access,' as well as 'guarantee equal access to under-represented groups.' The communiqué also takes the first tentative steps towards a full embrace of student-centred learning by calling upon governments to develop, 'more flexible entry pathways and assure better recognition of prior learning and work experience.' In this way, the communiqué marks a move away from a view of higher education as merely an economic tool for creating the workforce of the future, and towards an appreciation of higher education's intrinsic value, stating that higher education institutions should, 'increase their interdisciplinary focus and promote critical thinking and active citizenship'.

The acknowledgement of the need for student participation in academic life marks the third major area of progress at the WCHE. The communiqué clearly states that, 'students should be given a voice in the governance of higher education at all levels' with a call for member states to ensure active student participation, as well as to safeguard freedom of expression and the right of organisation, and to provide adequate student services. And this in spite of the reluctance of some countries to accept students as equal partners – a fact reflected in, and made all the more important by, the continued breaches of student rights witnessed in countries from all continents.

These achievements are attributable in part to the prominent role played by ESU in the build-up to, and delivery of, the WCHE, namely through shaping the event as a member of the WCHE+10 Programme committee, speaking alongside key actors on the opening Stakeholder's panel and representing the student platforms in the drafting group of the communiqué.

ESU's contribution also came in facilitating the build-up of a collective voice for the global student movement, both through a preparatory meeting in January 2009 and a follow-up event immediately after the conference close. These meetings resulted in an agreement to create a global student dialogue platform – a major stride forward in creating a stronger student movement and a more coherent student voice at international level.

The litmus test will now be member states' willingness to give UNESCO the role and resources it needs to coordinate higher education in the global arena, while fully committing themselves to the objectives set out in this once-in-a-decade event. If the words of the communiqué are to leave the paper on which they are written, all of those involved in the WCHE need to commit themselves fully to implementing the concrete actions contained within it. ESU will be playing its part in the months and years



ahead to ensure the legacy of the WCHE is found not in the declarations it made, but in the changes it delivered to the student reality of higher education.

Mobility figures up, but still far short of targets

2 million students have now been mobile under the Erasmus programme. This was the celebratory news from the European Commission, released in a press release yesterday (30th July). In the year 2007/8, 162,695 Erasmus students studied abroad, representing a 2.1% increase compared to 2006/7. In a new addition to the programme, 20,002 students benefited from placement mobility to undertake a supported traineeship abroad, a number that the Commission says is set to expand in the coming years. Mobility grants have also increased to an average of over 250 euros/month for both teacher and student placements.

While ESU welcomes these figures and the increased Erasmus programme budget under the enhanced Lifelong Learning Programme, the cold fact remains that across Europe, only 4% of students are able to benefit from Erasmus-supported mobility. Furthermore, the existing Erasmus grant, even with the increase, is still insufficient to cover full study costs, making it difficult for those from poorer backgrounds to benefit from the scheme. As data from a Eurostudent report for the Leuven Ministerial Conference of the Bologna Process found, students report that, 'financial resources constitute a main obstacle to mobility...studying abroad still depends on socioeconomic background. In most countries, students from highly educated family backgrounds are more likely to have experienced a study-related stay abroad; this share was sometimes more than three times higher than for students from families with a low educational background.' ESU strongly believes that mobility must be an opportunity available to all, regardless of financial circumstances.

There is also a worrying lack of coherence at the centre of the EU's mobility policy that threatens to undermine progress on the issue. While the 46 countries of the Bologna Process (which include the EU-27) formally adopted ESU's 20% mobility by 2020 target in the Leuven Communiqué earlier this year, those same 27 countries failed to make the same target part of the Strategic Framework for Cooperation on Education and Training just one month later.

Equally concerning is the fact that mobility rates actually appear to be falling in some countries - the Commission's press release highlights that 10 countries have actually recorded negative growth relative to the previous year. In reaction to this news, ESU's Chairperson, Ligia Deca said 'Given that Europe's leaders, in the context of the Bologna Process, have committed themselves to a 20% mobility by 2020 target, it is extremely worrying that the trend in nearly 1/3 of Erasmus countries is going in the opposite direction. Going from 4% mobility at present to 20% in just over a decade is going to be a tough challenge as it is. This data simply reiterates the need to significantly increase resources for mobility in order for the EU and Bologna countries to have any hope of meeting this target, which is a cornerstone of the whole European Higher Education Area project.'

Student expertise the key to quality assurance

It has been up-and-running for the last two years, but with the help of Council of Europe, ESU has just held the very first training session in Strasbourg for students keen to join our Students' Experts Pool and thereby play a key role in ensuring quality in institutions and quality assurance agencies around Europe. 22 national QA student experts from across Europe came together for 5 days of training to enable their participation in review panels at European level, and thus to facilitate the sustainable evolution of the pool.

In the setting of the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg, students discussed a range of novel ideas including delivering higher expertise through peer to peer and non-formal learning. An in-depth look was taken at the European Standards and Guidelines in Quality Assurance (ESG) which should, in the view of students, be the central reference document for quality assurance. As data

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from Bologna With Student Eyes 2009 (BWSE 2009) shows, proper consideration of the ESG has led to higher student participation, yet there are still enormous gaps across Europe in terms of how students in quality assurance processes, especially those focusing on internal quality assurance.

ESU strongly believes that promotion of a quality culture, including equal participation of stakeholders, is essential to the development of higher education institutions, and we are fortunate to be witnessing a steady growth in student participation. With more and more requests being received to help institutions find expert student evaluators, the development of the pool and its capacity is essential to respond to this. The Strasbourg session was part of a whole programme of activities designed to continue building up the experts' pool – including training sessions, administrative support, facilitation of new concepts in quality assurance, quality enhancement study visits to student unions and so much more. One possibility is to have all-student review panels doing special evaluations of institutions in the very near future, or to have student support services embedded into quality assurance processes.

Student-led quality assurance is unbeatable - a central tool for ensuring that higher education serves its purpose in developing students' skills and values, facilitating new knowledge and ensuring the enrichment of the wider society. ESU is excited and privileged to be at the forefront of such an initiative.

Numbers in HE rising, but not fast enough say ESU

11% of EU public expenditure goes on education, and investment must be maintained even in the face of the current economic and financial crisis. This was one of the key messages from a new report published last month by Eurydice, an agency of the European Commission. Combining statistical data and qualitative information, the report provides a wide-ranging overview of recent trends and the organisation and functioning of European education systems.

One of the principle findings is that the number of people in higher education has risen consistently since 1998 to reach over 18 million, representing an increase of 15% in 8 years. This means that one-third of all 20-22 year olds are now studying in higher education. While this advancement seems significant at first sight, it is in fact insufficient to fulfil the objectives of the EU's Lisbon agenda for growth and jobs. Societal progress has pushed forward the need for personal development and the perspective of only allowing 1/3 of the population to access HE in its youth years is extremely worrying from this perspective. Social inequalities that are reflected also in the access, progress and completion of HE are to be also tackled by mainstreaming LLL in the institutional missions and giving a new dimension to this concept, by fully considering its role in social mobility. Furthermore, the impact of the financial crisis on the enrolment rates in HE is still not assessed, however worrying signs are coming from a number of European countries and ESU is currently conducting a survey among its members to gather the necessary data for a more complete picture of how the latest decline in HE financing has affected European students across the continent.

Another key finding from the report was that women's participation in higher education is higher than men's overall, with 123 women enrolled for every 100 men), but significant imbalances remain depending on the field of study. In ESU's view, women's participation in HE has indeed increased, but significant imbalances remain with regard not only to the field of study, but also to the cycles, due to the glass ceiling effect. The proportion of female students decreases visibly in the second and third cycle and thus special attention must be paid to the financial and social factors influencing the decision of female student to further their education. This situation has a dramatic effect on the quality of life, serves as a handicap in career progression and maintains the gender pay gap - a fact that has been confirmed by the very recent European Commission's Report on the Equality between Women

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and Men.

You can download the full Eurydice report [here](#).

ESU visits IFMSA Workshop on the Bologna Process

At the last board meeting (April 2009), ESU delegates welcomed the International Federation of Medical Students Associations (IFMSA) as an associate member. Medical students are all-too- often underrepresented in local and national student unions because it is common that their studies are separate from the rest of the university. This makes our new connection to IFMSA particularly important, due to its strong contacts with both national and local medical student associations. Together with the dental students' association and the pharmacy students' association which are existing associate members, ESU now works together with the strongest players in medical higher education, enabling us to improve the integration of the specific needs of all medical students into our policies and activities.

As a starting point, ESU sent David Troxler, who studies medicine himself, as a representative to IFMSA's Bologna Process workshop which took place from 6-10 July in Cordoba, Spain. David presented the ESU Policy Paper "Towards 2020: A Student-Centred Bologna Process" (adopted in Sofia, November 2008) and contributed to the task of producing a similar paper for IFMSA.

This initial collaboration was appreciated by all – enabling participants to understand alternative approaches and improve IFMSA policy on the basis of ESU's experience and knowledge. ESU is delighted to be able to contribute to improved representation for the millions of medical students in Europe and would like to thank IFMSA once again for their invitation and for a very productive workshop.