



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

### **United We Stand Strong**

In a changing society with political forces moving towards isolation, exclusion, and mistrust we call on greater enactment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

ESU, representing 46 national unions of students and almost 20 million students in Europe, calls for a step change in order to finally fulfil the promises and expectations set out in the Bologna Declaration and all subsequent Communiqués. The Paris Communiqué must reflect the need for action towards:

- A systematic, proper and full implementation of all the agreed Bologna tools in all of the EHEA countries;
- Much greater investment in the Social Dimension of higher education toward making it truly accessible for all - the creation of a thematic network of practitioners is essential to achieving this aim;
- Ensuring a strong commitment towards realising Student Centred Learning in practice which requires the support of a BFUG Advisory Group to drive forward implementation on both national and institutional levels;

Safeguarding and advocating for the fundamental values of the EHEA and to develop mechanisms to respond whenever these values are undermined.

In a changing society with political forces moving towards isolation, exclusion, and mistrust we call on greater enactment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This requires implementation of all Bologna commitments; revitalisation of the Social dimension; the SCL paradigm shift; and respect for the fundamental values of the EHEA.

### **Full Implementation of Bologna Process commitments**

ESU is deeply worried about the stagnation we are witnessing when it comes to the implementation of the EHEA. We believe that the Bologna Process has to do much more work to ensure systematic, proper and full implementation of all the agreed Bologna tools in all of the EHEA countries. A system of periodic reviews is necessary in order to support countries in the implementation process and foster trust between countries. If such a system is not introduced for the next cycle, the Bologna Process will continue its stagnating for the foreseeable future as it is completely natural that this process cannot move forward when the fundamental elements are still not consistently implemented in all of the EHEA countries.

This overall lack of progress is further illustrated by the three commitments, from the very beginning of the Bologna Process, that are now (again) identified in the Communique as some of the fundamental elements and factors of success of European higher education: A Three- Cycle system compatible with the QF-EHEA and scaled by ECTS; Compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention; Quality Assurance in Conformity with ESG. ESU supports an urgent and full implementation of these commitments which should result in quality assurance systems that are truly of comparable reliability in all the EHEA countries and three cycles systems in which each of the cycles delivers a meaningful qualification conveying required competencies to students. When it comes to recognition, this key commitment needs to result in recognition practices which completely adhere to the Lisbon recognition convention, including recognition of refugees' qualifications. Automatic recognition of qualifications in the entire EHEA is another valuable goal to reach, for which a prerequisite is a systematic and full implementation of the Bologna tools.

In order for the Bologna process to fulfil these goals, we support the creation of Bologna Implementation Coordination Group (BICG) which should facilitate mechanisms through which full implementation can be achieved.

To be clear, these three key commitments are far from representative for all commitments ministers and heads of Delegations have signed over the past 20 years. Essential Bologna Process elements have been left out completely from this "key" list of commitments, including but not limited to social dimension; recognition of prior (non-formal and informal) learning; innovative learning and teaching processes; employability; mobility for all; and the internationalisation of the learning environment. However, the fact that even the three commitments that many consider the key building blocks of the EHEA have not been properly implemented can only be seen as a grand failure, jeopardising the existence and future of the process.

ESU, therefore, calls on all members of the EHEA to urgently and fully implement the agreed commitments so that the EHEA can finally set and reach more ambitious goals.

## **Social Dimension - from endorsement to noting**

On May 19th, 2001, at the EHEA ministerial conference in Prague, Social Dimension of higher education was chosen to be one of the overarching themes of the European Higher education area by the Ministers endorsing the communique. Since then, various forms of how to move from paper to practice have been endorsed in subsequent communiqués until the one proposed to be adopted in Paris, May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

Both *EUROSTUDENT VI* and *The 2018 Bologna Process Implementation Report* show that someone's socio-economic background still is predominantly the strongest influencing factor if one will enrol, progress and graduate from Higher Education. This means that students who are obliged to pay tuition fees to a larger extent need to invest their time in employment enabling them to study; that students that are parents are underrepresented in all countries<sup>1</sup>; that gender inequalities within the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. DZHW (2018). Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe, EUROSTUDENT VI .2016-2018 Synopsis of Indicators. Available at: [http://www.eurostudent.eu/download\\_files/documents/EUROSTUDENT\\_VI\\_Synopsis\\_of\\_Indicators.pdf](http://www.eurostudent.eu/download_files/documents/EUROSTUDENT_VI_Synopsis_of_Indicators.pdf)

choice of study programme remains and that students with imparities face increased financial struggles. The list can be made longer, keeping in mind that these students are the lucky few who have managed to get into Higher Education. Changes need to be made in order to deconstruct the ivory tower that divides some from others. Higher Education is a public responsibility and therefore relies on strong public funding, as mentioned in previous Communiques<sup>2</sup>.

The communique and ministerial conference in Yerevan, soon to be archived, set the bar for how the EHEA should proceed within the field of Social Dimension. A Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension (European Higher Education Area, 2015) until 2020 and structures were promised to be changed in order for higher education effectively to build inclusive societies. Yet, these remained empty promises. Far from half of the EHEA members have adopted and implemented National Access Plans; the majority of the EHEA members have general targets related to widening participation but no specific measures for increased participation of underrepresented groups; and greater monitoring tools are yet to be developed, according to *The 2018 Bologna Implementation Report*.

The stagnating interest for Social Dimension is alarming. The EHEA student population is far from being representative of our heterogeneous populations. We call for far greater investment to be made in the Social Dimension of HE and to make higher education truly accessible for all.

Through greater expertise and knowledge sharing, we firmly believe that changes can be made. For this purpose, we call on the ministers to mandate the Bologna Follow Up Group to establish an EHEA thematic network of practitioners and stakeholder representatives for knowledge development, implementation support and effective evaluation in the field of Social Dimension supervising the Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the European Higher Education Area towards 2020. We emphasize that a full and proper implementation is necessary and can only be achieved if national actors see it as their responsibility.

## **Student-Centered Learning - time for a real paradigm shift?**

Student-centred learning has been explicitly mentioned for the first time as a goal of the EHEA countries' higher education systems in 2009. Today, nine years after the Ministerial conference in Leuven/ Louvain - la - Neuve (2009), we cannot really say that European students are studying in systems which are tailored to their needs – preliminary results show that almost half of ESUs member unions believe that presence of SCL in their systems is unsatisfactory or even non-existent<sup>3</sup>. Even though a “paradigm shift” towards student-centered learning is often mentioned, this is not reflected in everyday life of students and because of this, stronger motivation and an innovate drive are needed at the grassroots level.

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<sup>2</sup> E.g. in Prague (2001) and Yerevan (2015).

<sup>3</sup> ESU Bologna with Student Eyes 2018 (forthcoming)

In addition, the teaching (including, pedagogical practices and the curriculum) must be broadened, whilst respecting academic freedom, to reflect the growing diversity of students from a range of backgrounds now entering Higher Education.

We demand from the EHEA members, in accordance with previous ministerial communiques, to clearly state their commitment to the implementation of student-centred learning. Furthermore, in order to operationalize the commitment, we, propose the formation of the BFUG Advisory Group on implementation of student-centred learning, organizing peer learning activities and/or programs in order to support national and institutional stakeholders in the implementation of SCL and development of a list of indicators for measuring the stage of implementation of SCL in the EHEA (including teaching competencies and their recognition, recognition of prior learning, innovative pedagogies, individual learning paths, teacher-student contact quality).

## Fundamental values

From the very start of the Bologna Process, the unique vision behind the EHEA was that it was not only built on comparable and compatible higher education structures but equally on a set of shared fundamental values that are essential for higher education in and for 21st-century democratic societies and the challenges they face. These fundamental values include public responsibility and public funding for HE; institutional autonomy; academic freedom and the full participation of students and staff in all decision making processes.

Although these fundamental values cannot be emphasised enough as prerequisites for HE within the EHEA - and we urge for a reiteration of them in the Paris Communique, as has been done in previous communiques- it is also time to make unequivocally clear these should not be mere words. Fundamental values are not just to be committed to but also need a strong defense when they are endangered. Committing to the value of institutional autonomy also means speaking out when the autonomy of an HEI is under threat; academic freedom means supporting and protecting students and staff when they exercise their autonomy; public responsibility for HE does not go well with the introduction and/or increases of tuitions fees and privatisation of HE; and full student participation means guaranteeing students are involved in a timely and meaningful way and are allowed to express their opinion without endangering their studies or worse.

When ministers reiterate the fundamental values of the EHEA, we would expect that those values are fully respected throughout the EHEA and we call on Ministers to firmly speak out in those instances where these values are under threat - of which there have been several examples in the recent past.

It logically follows from this that any country wishing to join the EHEA should recognise the fundamental values as a sine qua non for a successful implementation of all the other Bologna reforms and thus for membership itself. Without any doubt, this is not the case with Belarus. The Final Report "Support for the Belarus Roadmap" makes unequivocally clear that the Roadmap set for Belarus in 2015 will not be fulfilled by 2018 and that in relation to fundamental values progress has been a "lack of progress concerning the fundamental values of education such as academic freedom, autonomy and the establishment of student unions [...]." Furthermore, independent Belarusian student organisations report that government authorities have returned to a violation of students' rights and to systematic repressions against the leaders of independent student organisations and that there is a huge disrespect to academic freedom by Belarusian officials at any level.

For ESU, this continuous violation of the fundamental values of the EHEA is clear proof that Belarus is not willing to implement any significant changes. We genuinely believe that Ministers take their

commitments to the fundamental values of the EHEA very serious and show zero tolerance when these are not respected. We therefore call upon them to implement stricter mechanisms in an extended Belarus roadmap and not accept full membership of Belarus in the Bologna Process until significant changes are implemented and the fundamental values of the EHEA fully adopted.

For a process already past the teenage years, we demand more. We demand implementation, respect of the agreed fundamental values and collaboration for accessible Higher Education. Where not only "Europe's Youth" is "empowered" but where one can learn freely throughout a lifetime. This for a strong, united Europe in times of political forces moving towards isolation, exclusion, and mistrust.