

Statement on the future of the Bologna Process

In one year, the ministers of higher education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) are expected to adopt the Tirana Communiqué, outlining the progress done within the Bologna Process and setting targets to be pursued to make EHEA more inclusive, interconnected, and innovative, according to the key overarching priorities set out in the Rome Communiqué in 2020.

ESU expects that the Ministerial Conference in 2024 will also be a moment of reflection, as it would mark the 25th anniversary of the Bologna Process. In celebrating the most successful intergovernmental cooperation in higher education in the world, the ministers should look into the crucial elements that turned EHEA into a force of change. One of the key uncontested drivers of the implementation and development of the Bologna Process is the spotlight put on the role and engagement of stakeholders. For ESU, this culminated with the trust and responsibility that was put into the organisation to co-chair the working group on social dimension and, later, the Drafting Committee for the Ministerial Communiqué of 2024. Apart from the symbolic gesture of promoting student agency, this is also a signal of the role students are expected to play in European cooperation on education.

However, past achievements or steps forward should by no means be complacent towards the shortcomings of the process, even more so in a time of profound transformations and challenges in societies and higher education systems in Europe and across the world.

Despite expanding the themes, topics covered, and commitments taken by the ministers across the years, we still see both persistent and, in the cases of long-standing commitments, unacceptable differences in implementation across policy areas and countries. We are looking forward to the results of the Bologna with Student Eyes publication, the Bologna Process Implementation Report and assessments done by other consultative members of EHEA as snapshots that need to be followed not only by reflection, but also structural action.

In terms of policies, the lack of full or adequate implementation applies indiscriminately to commitments old and new. Despite repeated commitments for over two decades, too many students are still unable to access study programmes that have robust degree structures, clear learning outcomes and appropriately allocated ECTS. These programmes should foster student-centered learning in practice and be automatically recognized across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), but this is not a reality yet. Even less is the case for full access to recognition of prior learning opportunities. Despite the approval of the Principles and Guidelines on Social Dimension, the slow or lacking progress on implementation has resulted in the expansion of student poverty during Covid and the energy and inflation crisis, with many members of EHEA lacking adequate student support systems. Fundamental values of the Bologna Process, while postulated in the Communiqué, are yet to be ingrained in all the higher education systems or are even blatantly violated.

ESU believes the ministers should answer with solutions to the overarching questions mentioned above. We believe that while allowing for flexibility and diversity of approaches in the implementation of commitments, a more developed monitoring system should be in place that would function as a guarantee for the achievement of the objectives of the process. While the approach of the peer support and action plans of the Thematic Peer Groups (TPGs) could be transposed in other areas as well (for example on promoting student-centred learning), the tools of the TPGs should be improved nevertheless to ensure more impactful participation of members, promotion of good practices and meaningful progress in the follow-up. The monitoring should also look into both de jure and de facto indicators from a different array of sources. Finally, for countries constantly lagging behind on certain or several commitments, roadmaps should be put in place so as the members could be supported, and progress more carefully monitored.

ESU believes that EHEA is and should be the main fora of debate and policy creation on Education in Europe, and as such it should have an enhanced operational capacity. Therefore, we welcome the ongoing work of the dedicated Task Force on the proposition of EHEA Statutes and reiterate our support for a permanent, professionalised, and independent Secretariat, with all members having a stake in ensuring its functionality. We furthermore call to take in consideration the supranational and transnational dimensions of the implementation of the Bologna commitments, in particular for the European Education Area and the European Universities initiative: since all the EU Member States and the European Commission are full members of the EHEA, they are bound to respect the EHEA agreed policies when developing joint endeavours between them.

The ongoing transformation of the provisions of the Bologna Process should also finally settle procedural issues which are politically sensitive. While welcoming the introduction of the majority vote for membership issues, we reiterate our belief that consensus should be kept for policy issues, in order not to create a two-speed Bologna whilst still not even fully complying with the commitments agreed to. Regardless of the already introduced provisional rule on the voting for the membership issues, we expect a consensus from the ministers that the EHEA should continue after 2024 with a member less, as the Russian Federation does not follow the basic structures of the Bologna Process, like the structures of the degrees and the fundamental values. ESU believes that a member that does not follow the Bologna Process should be suspended as a member.

The illegal invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation put to a test both the solidarity of the higher education systems across the continent and the capacity to adapt to overlapping crises. ESU expects that the experiences of the last years echo in the objectives and actions the ministers approve. We call for continuing and expanding the support and reconstruction efforts for Ukraine, as well as considering how to support academic communities from Belarus and Russia.

As a consequence of the lessons of the Covid and of the energy crisis, we demand a political boost to the mandate of making access to quality higher education a reality for all, in an environment that fosters suitable digital platforms and software, student mental health and wellbeing. As we would await for the indicators on the implementation of the Principles and Guidelines to be approved by the ministers, we believe further emphasis should be put into monitoring, supporting, and ensuring comparable data.

Ensuring students' access to higher education needs also to be complemented with a system that fosters student rights and fundamental values. As we are content with the developments of defining fundamental values in the dedicated Working Group, we also see the importance of highlighting that the key to success would be measured through the national reforms promoted to ensure their application. This will require the agreement on a comprehensive set of indicators and a monitoring system that can provide both de jure and de facto analyses. Information should be collected from an array of sources, including grassroots organizations, experts, and stakeholders, to ensure a thorough and accurate assessment.

In a world of increased geopolitical tensions and expansion of extremist forces, the role higher education plays in promoting democracy and towards the Sustainable Development Goals (where access to education is a priority) is crucial and needs to be pushed forward.

According to the results displayed in our survey within the QA FIT project, there is a high degree of support from national unions of students in seeing the revised European Standards and Guidelines on Quality Assurance, which we would expect to be revised by 2027, as a tool to enhance the implementation of social dimension policies and ensure the compliance with the fundamental values, such as student participation and academic integrity. As one of the most successful tools within the Bologna Process, the E4 analysis of how QA could be able to serve evolving challenges is essential.

Furthermore, Learning and Teaching practices, as scope of ESGs but also a central element within the Bologna Process, has been critically impacted by exogenous developments. The soft and digital skills are even more required in a fast-changing world for personal development, labour market and active citizenship in society. Adapting to the digital opportunities requires commitments of investment, accessibility, training, and space for innovation, and how this impacts student-centred learning, as well as diverse forms of in person and online learning, including microcredentials, should be further explored within the Bologna Process. Ensuring a timely reaction would also mean focusing on the benefits and limits of using Artificial Intelligence and data analytics in education, before a full-scale deployment.

Digitalisation is seen as one of the twin transitions, the other being the urgently needed climate transition, in which Higher education institutions (HEIs) are expected to play multiple and overarching roles. Despite the Rome Communique mentioning the contribution of the European HEIs and the EHEA to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, there is no discussed path towards supporting the sustainability of HEIs and how they are projecting sustainable approaches in classrooms, interactions and in society. We propose that the Bologna Process has a reinforced vision and ministers give a clear mandate towards amplifying the work on sustainability at European level.

If sustainability has only recently entered directly under the inventory of EHEA issues to be tackled, we believe an objective which started as a sweeping aim of the Bologna Process, but lost focus overtime is promoting students and staff mobility. The target of achieving at least 20% of students in international mobility is still far to be fulfilled, and the barriers of mobility, from grants to recognition of qualifications and learning periods, sustainability of

mobilities or support systems, are not directly confronted. In this regard, ESU believes that a working group should focus also on the topic of internationalisation and mobility in the next workplan of EHEA.

For almost 25 years and despite the obstacles and occasional loss of momentum, the EHEA was able to be a stable ground for development of higher education policies, but keeping pace may become increasingly difficult. Increasing focus on local and national stakeholder involvement and a sense of ownership within Bologna at all levels is the way to ensure the necessary conditions conducive to both implementation of already agreed commitments and adaptation to the present and future challenges and opportunities.

Adopted at ESU's 84th Board meeting in Tbilisi, Georgia.