The European Students' Union

ESU
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BWSE FORward

Bologna With Stakeholders Eyes For a Stronger Future of the Bologna Process

Bologna With Student Eyes 2020

BOLOGNA WITH STUDENT EYES 2020

IMPRINT

Content
Carmen Romero Rodríguez • Daniel Altman • Gohar Hovhannisyan • Hélène Mariaud • Jakub Grodecki • Martin Paluoja • Martina Darmanin • Monika Skadborg • Nina De Winter • Rajko Golović • Robert Napier • Sebastian Berger • Urša Leban

Project coordination
Gohar Hovhannisyan • Maria Sierra • Robert Napier

Collaborators
The National Commission for Further and Higher Education, Malta
The Ministry of Science and Education, Croatia
The Ministry of Education and Science, the Republic of Armenia

Editing
Caroline Sundberg • Chiara Patricolo • Nicole Butterfield • Nikola Baketa

Proofreading
Ani Hovhannisyan

Design credits
Cover Illustration / Infographics: Stella Komninou Arakelian

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INTRODUCTORY WORDS

We close another cycle of the Bologna Process while entering the third decade of it. Through this process, we've tried to build a shared culture and understanding of cooperation and trust among participating countries. For more than 20 years we have worked on defining, promoting, and implementing key commitments. We have agreed on fundamental values and core priorities.

The European Students' Union is convinced that the Bologna Process creates a unique platform for its members to make common commitments, respect fundamental values, and together implement higher education policy for Europe. From the very beginning, we believed that this platform creates an opportunity for valuable dialogue between the many diverse higher education systems of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Today this dialogue is more than ever needed in order to overcome barriers of virtual collaboration, to build trustworthy recognition processes, to bring a paradigm shift of student-centered learning, to increase attention to the social dimension of education, to foster democratic societies through higher education and in all of this, to bring positive outcomes to the lives of students. Our convictions, though, do not always transform into the reality of the EHEA where the voluntary commitments of members sometimes remain formally stated rather than factually implemented.

We invite you to take a deep dive into our Bologna With Student Eyes 2020 results in order to look into the views of the European students on the implementation of the Bologna Process. We hope these findings serve you as a good reference for reflecting on the future steps of the Bologna Process as we look into the outcomes of the Rome 2020 Ministerial Conference and prepare to kick-off the next BFUG cycle. We welcome you to engage in follow-up activities in the framework of our BSWE FORward (Bologna with Stakeholders Eyes For a Stronger Future of the Bologna Process) Erasmus+ project and together build a stronger higher education area for Europe.

The 2019-2020 Presidency of the European Students Union

Robert Napier, Gohar Hovhannisyan, Sebastian Berger

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Bologna Process was initiated to establish a pan-European higher education system and create more coherence and harmonisation across the European Higher Education Area. Moreover, ambitious Bologna reforms also aim to facilitate student and staff mobility, make higher education more inclusive, accessible, attractive, and competitive worldwide. Over the past two decades, many reforms, including the participation of the European Students' Union (ESU) as a consultative member have been accomplished by the Bologna Process.

2.1. STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION

Since 2003, ESU has been observing and evaluating the implementation of the Bologna reforms through the Bologna with Student Eyes (BWSE) publications. Through BWSE, students offer a critical reality check on the political commitments and the implementation of Bologna reforms decided upon within the scope of the European Higher Education Area.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic, which has already made a huge impact on the activities of higher education institutions (HEIs), continues to reshape the higher education agenda. Therefore, now more than ever it is time to rethink the future of the EHEA, and truly foster innovation, digitalisation, and inclusion.

The chapters of the BWSE 2020 present the analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data submitted by the National Unions of Students (NUSes) allowing to present how students perceive the Bologna Process and its reforms.

The results of the analysis show that students, being immediately affected by the practical implementation of the Bologna reforms, often report dissatisfaction and concern due to uneven implementation or failure to follow up on some of the commitments undertaken by the EHEA ministers, whereas progress is also reported in certain areas.

2.2. BOLOGNA PROCESS 2018-2020: LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE ENDEAVOURS

The data for this edition was collected by surveying NUSes on the following areas: student participation in higher education governance, social dimension, quality assurance, recognition, internationalization and mobility, structural reforms, financing of higher education, student-centred learning and the future of the Bologna Process.

Student participation

Over the last three versions of the Bologna with Student Eyes (BWSE) publications, NUSes have increasingly reported that the Bologna Process is decreasingly considered to be a decisive factor in effectively supporting students' participation. The student voice within higher education institutions (HEIs) is alarmingly, becoming more and more silenced, ignored or not sufficiently empowered. ESU considers it crucial that the principle of collegiality is reaffirmed in HEIs through bottom up approaches, such as, institutional action strategies that aim to empower students and safeguard their academic freedom and autonomy in representation.

Social dimension

Steadily but surely, through the years, the social dimension of higher education has become a mainstream issue of discussion and advocacy among many student unions and an essential priority for ESU. According to ESU's responding unions, there is a growing perception that positive developments are taking place all across Europe, with a social dimension (SD) being considered a highly important subject on both the governmental and HEI levels. The Principles and Guidelines for Social Dimension (PAG) give a solid ground to start concretely improving the situation. Moreover, the European Qualification Passport for Refugees also remains a tool that can practically improve and broaden the accessibility to higher education for the underrepresented groups. Therefore, ESU strongly welcomes such an initiative and has been at the forefront to push for broadening its use within the EHEA.

Quality assurance

Since 2018, ESU has seen an increase in the numbers of students participating in its Quality Assurance (QA) Expert Pool and engaging in training activities on external QA. As one of the key commitments of the EHEA that seems to mark the highest rates of implementation, ESU firmly believes that the effective implementation of QA in HEIs is enhanced through the engagement of students as equal stakeholders of such processes. However, while there always is a verbal affirmiration that students should be part of the governance and implementation of QA, the reality spoken by students reflects differently. In fact, since 2018, fewer students were reported to be considered equal stakeholders in internal QA processes. Unfortunately, the same trend is seen in the governance process of QA on the national level and among QA agencies.

Recognition

Automatic recognition has long been an ambitious goal of the Bologna Process that still gathers support from ESU's student unions. However, this goal is still far from being achieved due to persisting discrepancies between the implementation of Bologna tools in EHEA countries. For example, some NUSes report that the lack of national legislation hinders the implementation of the diploma supplement on the institutional levels. Furthermore, only half of the respondents think that recognition procedures are transparent and exactly only half of them consider the approaches to be non-discriminatory.

As for the recognition of prior learning (RPL), only a minority of the unions reports initiatives that support the RPL procedures, while lack of trust remains one of the main barriers to RPL.

Internationalisation and mobility

Financing for internationalisation and mobility to be accessible to students facing socio-economic disadvantage remains the most pressing issue in this year's edition of BWSE. A clear majority of all respondents indicated that financial difficulties are the number one barrier for students who would like to undergo a learning mobility period but ultimately decide against it. The internationalisation and mobility goals cannot be achieved as long as crucial aspects of internationalisation remain underfunded. Therefore, there is a need to set more incremental and inclusive goals for internationalisation in all countries while partnering with the students' unions to achieve these goals.

Structural reforms

Despite the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQFs) in most EHEA countries, students still face difficulties getting their qualifications recognised. The results of this year's edition of BWSE show that in most of the countries where NUSes were surveyed, the three-cycle system is implemented either 'always' or 'in most of the cases', while in a very small minority of countries, NUSes point out the need to put further effort into ensuring that degree programs are truly comparable with similar qualifications of other EHEA member states.

Financing of higher education

Achieving inclusive, innovative, interconnected and sustainable higher education is highly dependent on the financing accessible to HEIs. In the past decades, the number of students in the EHEA has increased significantly, while public funding of higher education has either stagnated or reduced in many countries in the EHEA. Based on its belief that a person's socio-economic background should not serve as a barrier for them to access education, ESU calls on all stakeholders to commit to this leading principle and consider it in all their decisions. Attempting to bridge the public funding gap in higher education, national governments and HEIs tend to turn to students as a resource to quickly resolve funding issues. Introducing or raising tuition fees is alarmingly becoming the common choice in many EHEA countries however, ESU emphasizes that this is only an easy way out of a complex problem that is causing harmful and long-term financial problems for students.

Student-centred learning

Student-centred learning (SCL) has been one of the core topics of the ESU's advocacy work since 2010. Today, SCL has a prominent presence in European higher education policy discussions and is included in different forward-looking and action-setting documents, however, there is still a noticeable gap of actions and change triggered by these policy measures on the national and institutional levels. This gap becomes more obvious when comparing the results of the BWSE 2018 to the 2020 data where little to no improvement was identified. The analysis of the responses shows that the implementation of SCL is highly dependent on the level of student participation in the implementation of the Bologna tools. The latter effectively enables students to have a seat and a say on the table where their learning experiences are being shaped and evaluated.

Future of the Bologna Process

While the EHEA is, by nature, dynamic it is important to be attentive towards discrepant speeds of implementation on the national and institutional levels, as this can, if neglected, fragment and negatively impact the historical achievements and development of the EHEA.

As we enter the 2020-2030 decade in extraordinary times, ESU firmly believes this should be a decade of completing, testing, and perfecting EHEA members' compliance with the agreed commitments. Achieving more ambitious targets for inclusion, innovation, interconnectedness and sustainability in higher education does not necessarily require us to reinvent the wheel, but may rather require more collective efforts and resources on policy-based actions and strategies that will build mutual support, trust and solidarity amongst the members of the EHEA.

2.3. RECOMMENDATIONS

The outcomes of the new goals of the Bologna Process after 2020 set an ambitious direction for the EHEA to become more inclusive, innovative and interconnected to be able to respond to challenges and remain competitive. Meanwhile, the following recommendations should be taken into consideration for ensuring the full implementation of the Bologna commitments and establishment of new priorities.

Student participation

The Bologna Process should be more engaging and crucial for students on the national and institutional levels. This can facilitate more transparency in all the related processes. However, the autonomy of the student representatives and the financial security needed for the student movement to operate independently must be strongly addressed and taken very seriously by the higher education community. Students' participation must be empowered on all levels through bottom-up approaches and strategies to safeguard students' rights to representation and decision making in higher education paths as equal partners shaping the future of society.

Social dimension

A long and uphill journey needs to be started once the PAGs are adopted by ministers to closely follow the implementation of this document. A holistic approach to the social dimension and an aim to create coherent policies from early childhood education to lifelong learning should be ensured. Reliable data should also be seen as a necessary precondition for an evidence-based improvement of the SD of higher education. The BFUG should enable the establishment and work of the Advisory Group for Social Dimension in the next BFUG Operational Program 2020-2023.

Quality assurance

Multipurpose quality assurance should be utilized as a tool on the national and institutional levels for further enhancing the transparency and public trust in and amongst higher education institutions in the EHEA. On the national level, there is a need to create more incentives for universities to involve students as full members in internal QA, while on the institutional level an environment where students and other stakeholders acknowledge students as full members should be created. The existing barriers to student engagement should be reflected and addressed. Students' engagement in QA should be supported through flexible study conditions and non-academic learning recognition.

Recognition

National legislation should define a framework for the diploma supplement to be issued free of charge after graduation. Furthermore, ESU believes that there needs to be more focus and resources put into creating synergies and harmonisation in the assessment of foreign qualifications and foreign diplomas, in order to build more trust in automatic recognition and to reduce discriminatory approaches towards refugee students or non-EU students. More peer support should be made available for the respective authorities/ bodies in the EHEA to enhance transparency, accessibility, and time-efficiency of recognition procedures. A robust exchange of information should be developed among recognition bodies. The implementation of the Bologna tools should remain a priority and further supplemented to guide and facilitate automatic recognition. RPL should be seen as a strong enabler of student-centred learning and access to formal education.

Internationalisation and mobility

Increased funding should be ensured for equal access for a larger group of beneficiaries from all ages and different educational purposes, especially those from disadvantaged groups who still struggle to access and be successful in mobility programmes. There is a need to make language courses free both for international and local students, while HEI teachers' training on teaching in English and on confronting western-centric bias in curricula should also be addressed. The international students' needs should be understood

by HEIs and discriminatory practices towards them including tuition fees, access to health care, housing, and social services should be dismantled.

Structural reforms

To foster the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, including students it is important to better communicate the reasoning and benefits which come from the full implementation of NQFs and the LRC. Moreover, HEIs across the EHEA should promote and inform learners of the fact that education can be more effective within the three cycles by creating more flexibility. The full implementation of the ECTS should give the basis for extensive facilitation of mobility and recognition of learning outcomes in the EHEA, and the ECTS system should be considered as successfully implemented, only when based on learning outcomes and learner's workload.

Financing of higher education

Tuition-free and accessible higher education needs to be the long-term goal for all EHEA member states. The availability and funding of student support services should be improved and better provision of information on funding opportunities for students should be provided. Moreover, more funding should be allocated to PhD studies and research, and governments must monitor and contain commodification policies in higher education.

Student-centred learning

There is a need for a structure to guarantee that the policy discussions on SCL extend from the European to the national level. Internal QA should enhance the involvement of students and promote their meaningful participation, seeing them as full members of the processes, while external QA should focus on prioritising the assessment of those accreditation standards which are linked to SCL. Those involved in curricula development should be retrained to communicate the importance of well-defined learning outcomes. In parallel, resources should be allocated for building the capacity of students to be involved in the development of the learning outcomes and the ECTS credits allocated to study programs and courses.

Future of the Bologna Process

Better communication and peer support need to be available to tackle issues that exist at the local and institutional levels that are still hindering the implementation of commitments and respect to fundamental values. Moreover, the BFUG should enable the establishment and work. of the Advisory Group for SD in the next BFUG Operational Program 2020-2023. Greater focus for SCL is necessary to provide students with flexibility and a sense of ownership of their education. The digitalisation of education has to be given the necessary resources to build capacity of both students and staff and to ensure access and opportunity to all.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. BOLOGNA WITH STUDENT EYES – PAST AND PRESENT

ESU has been reviewing the implementation of the Bologna Process since 2003, using a range of methodological approaches through the Bologna with Student Eyes (BWSE) publication, launched prior to each ministerial conference.

Bologna with Student Eyes explores the perception of implementation amongst ESU's members operating in EHEA countries and seeks to bring attention to the students' priorities and recommendations for the future of the Bologna Process.

Comparisons over time have been more and more developed over the years facilitated by online survey tools that are available now but were not at the beginning of the publication's history. The 2020 edition is not exclusively constructed on the data collected through its survey but draws on the desk research done within the frames of the BSWE FORward (Bologna with Stakeholders Eyes For a Stronger Future of the Bologna Process) Erasmus+ project led by ESU.

3.2. METHOD

Selection of method

Bologna with Student Eyes follows the common EHEA trend of a stock-taking report in order to commend and critique policy. Stocktaking that has been captured via an online survey for the most recent years of the publication's history. The 2020 edition is exclusively based on quantitative material with a few cases of follow up discussions with NUSes presenting perceptions of significant nature to them. The selected method enables for future publications to compare the development and attitudes of the National Unions of Students over time, in the same manner as this publication.

Online survey

The Survey of 2020 has been based on the survey of 2018, with some questions being replaced; added, deleted. Some questions remained untouched, in order to ensure comparability over time. The questions that were added came about by following new developments within a certain field and our thirst to learn more. Those questions that were replaced were based on the changing nature of the Bologna Process,. Those questions that were deleted had already been covered by questions posed to national unions as part of the ESU questionnaire for the Bologna Implementation Report survey. Questions were likewise deleted if it was assumed to be outdated or not in accordance with ESU priorities.

The Survey was developed through Survey Monkey between August-October 2019 in ten different stand alone sections; these were General questions about the Bologna Process, Student Participation in Higher Education Governance, Social Dimension, Quality Assurance, Recognition, Mobility & Internationalisation, Structural reforms and the Financing of Higher Education.

Replies were collected between November 2019- February 2020. At the point of closure of the Survey, those answers only containing contact details and/or lacking a grand majority of answers were deleted and the NUS was asked to fill out the survey once more. After the cleaning there are now between 37 to 40 NUSes answering each part, from 40 EHEA countries from Iceland to Armenia covering all EHEA countries where ESU members are operating. For further reference to the NUSes contributing, see annex BWSE 2020 data collection.

Analysis of the data

Access to the original dataset of 2018 and 2020 was given to the authors in February 2020. The Authors were made aware of the differences in questions in the Survey on 2018 and 2020 and deviations in reply rates. Analysis of the dataset has been carried out separately by each author(s).

Furthermore, within the frames of the BSWE FORward project researchers were hired in summer of 2020 to do a desk research and cross-check the findings of the BWSE 2020 survey with the data available on the web. The authors of the chapters were provided with the findings of the researchers.

3.3. PROCESS

Preparation

The coordination of the work was divided into three different parts:
1. Coordination of the survey revision and collection of responses
2. Coordination of the project application of the BWSE FORward project
3. Coordination of analysis of the results, preparation of the publication

The Presidency members of the 2019-2020 Executive Committee team have worked on the coordination tasks.

Membership capacity building - getting ready for the survey

The Executive Committee of ESU started to work on revising and adjusting the BWSE survey in the summer of 2019. To ensure both the survey and the publication were as user-friendly as possible a training activity was set up. Hence, sessions during the 38 and 39 European Students Conventions ware dedicated to discuss the survey and the publication between the members of ESU and the Executive Committee and one session at the European

Students' Union's Board Meeting 77 seminar 2-3rd of december 2019 was dedicated to discuss the survey tool.

To ensure support for the NUSes to answer the survey, every NUS member of ESU operating in an EHEA country was provided with a "BWSE Buddie" from the Hacks team of 2019-20 with regional or national expertise specifically helpful for the NUS. In addition, consultations of the survey with the NUSes were made available for greater understanding of overarching concepts and questions.

Authors

The following chapters should be understood as thematic articles based on the same dataset with a common outline written by one or various authors. The authors were appointed on the basis of their policy expertise within ESU. The authors are responsible for their material and the conclusions are drawn from the trends they have captured.

3.4. CLOSING REMARKS

The result of this publication will make a change. No country wishes to have a bad review from the majority population at their Higher Education Institutions; the students. This publication aims to clarify the position of students and showcase where more student's eyes are needed in order for a change. With the ambition of enabling replication of the study and measure positive development in the future, the Bologna with Student eyes survey will be sent out again in 2024 prior the Ministerial Conference.

4. STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE

4.1. INTRODUCTION

Since its beginning, the Bologna Process has recognised students as crucial stakeholders who should take part in shaping their education. The Prague Communiqué declared that students are to be considered full members of the higher education community (Prague Communiqué 2001). Onto 2018, The Paris Communiqué included students' participation as one of the fundamental values of the process (Paris Communiqué, 2018).

As members of this community, students involved in the governance of higher education actively and evidently contribute to the development of policies as they are the ones benefiting directly from this public good, while also contributing to raising awareness on how different approaches can be implemented to achieve common goals. Having said this, National Students Unions all over the European Higher Education Area have been facing challenges to developing their activity as formal representatives of students as well as other difficulties including external pressure and threats for raising their voices.

Whilst the Bologna Process has accomplished many things over the past two decades, including the participation of the European Students' Union as consultative member, over the last three versions of Bologna with Student Eyes, NUSes have increasingly reported that they don't consider the Bologna Process as a decisive factor in effectively supporting students' participation. The past editions of BWSE pointed out an overall decrease in student participation in the formal decision-making-bodies particularly at the institutional and faculty/department levels. Today's situation remains the same or occasionally has worsened.

It is important not to forget, but rather to draw on the successes of the involvement of student representatives in the Bologna-initiated policy processes such as Quality Assurance, but also from the EHEA's political endorsement that first led to improved student participation in national-level higher education policymaking (Klemenčič, M., 2012). As governance reforms sweep across Europe, ESU considers it crucial that a more sustainable and prosperous model of student participation be achieved, through continuous political endorsement and local action strategies that safeguard and promote student participation from the bottom up. This is rooted in that students' participation is not only fundamental for the well-being of democratic institutions but also for our democratic society as a whole.

4.2. MAIN FINDINGS

Legislation vs. enactment

As seen in Figure 4.1., in 29 countries, NUSes benefit from legislation that demands student participation both at the national and institutional level. Some countries that do not guarantee participation at both levels have laws concerning the institutions and overall 7 countries fall into this category. Fewer countries (22) stipulate regulations or legislations for student participation at the programme level, which may be due to the autonomous prerogative of institutions to decide on these issues. On paper, student participation seems well embedded in the EHEA; however, in practice the enactment is not unanimously celebrated by student representatives. Within the countries that have a legal provision on both national and institutional levels, 25 out of 39 NUSes (64%) are satisfied with the enactment of this legislation, while 8 NUSes (21%) have mixed opinions and 6 NUSes (15%) are left dissatisfied, as seen in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.1.
Legislation ensuring a minimum level of student participation in EHEA countries

Figure 4.2.
Satisfaction with the enactment of legislation

Legislation ensuring a minimum level of student participation in EHEA countries

Satisfaction with the enactment of legislation
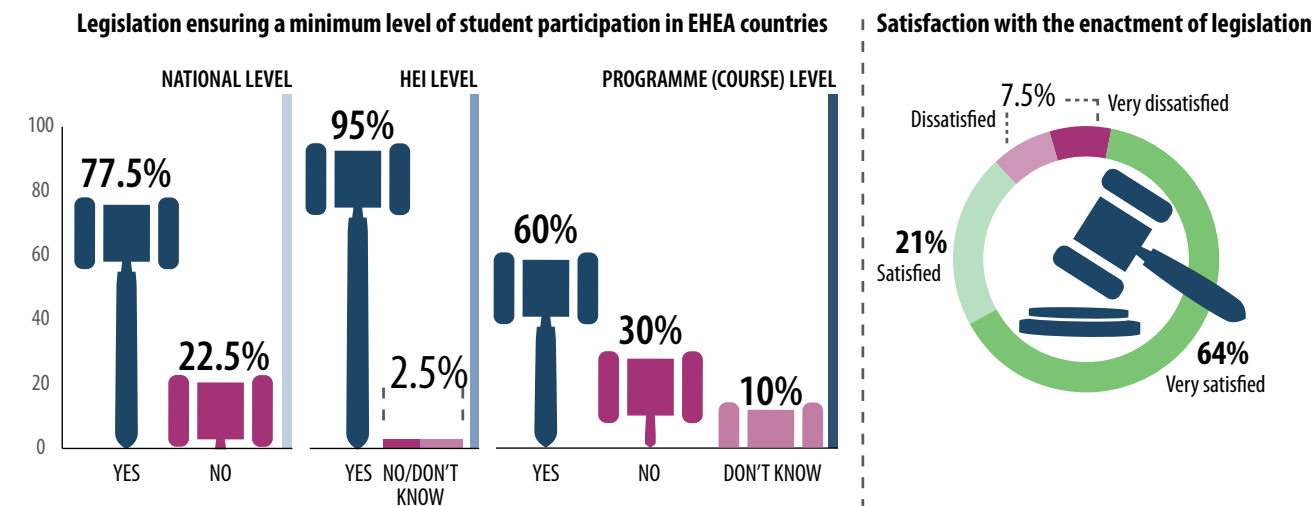
This indicates that what defines student participation, and how it is enacted is often understood differently amongst students and the governmental and institutional leadership. Our unions recognise the following threats to democratic student participation on the national and institutional level:

- Students are not able to elect their own representatives on higher education governing bodies, or the procedure is lacking transparency;
- Student participation is constrained to minor decisions or reduced to a consultative role;
- Student representatives make up too small a minority in decision-making bodies to have any "real" influence or impact.

A declining Bologna effect

The European Students' Union considers student participation in higher education governance to be one of the core values in European higher education and a prerequisite towards the democratic governance of public institutions by all politically significant constituencies. With the fundamental values high on the agenda of the Bologna Process, assessing the effect it has had on student representation over the past years is a required, yet unfortunately often overlooked exercise by many stakeholders. On the one hand, many unions point out that the Bologna Process has been instrumental in guaranteeing students' participation in quality assurance processes. However, beyond quality assurance processes, over the past 3 versions of BWSE, fewer and fewer NUSes consider the BP as a driving force for student involvement particularly at the local and institutional levels. While this does not paint an optimistic picture, it should indicate the opportunity and urgent need for support. While our NUSes from Luxembourg, Lithuania and Armenia indicate that the Bologna Process has been an essential driving force for student participation in their countries, 12 unions say that there has been some influence, 22 claim that there is very little or no effect to be seen. The decline is evident over the past 3 cycles of the Bologna Process. Back in 2018, 2 unions said they felt a significant positive impact on student participation, while in 2015 and 2012 it was higher with 10 and 14 unions respectively (Bologna With Students' Eyes 2012, 2015, 2018).

As two NUSes (FZS and VSS-UNES-USU) highlight, for many students that need to work to afford studies and living costs, it is often problematic to participate and engage in higher education governance structures while combining their studies and work, leaving such involvement for students that may be coming from a more privileged background. Furthermore, the unions point towards the commodification of higher education as a growing threat to student participation, that reduces the responsibility and focus of the educational community to foster democratic culture, social consciousness and active citizenship amongst the student body and community as this is not considered an asset desired by the job market.

Lack of democratic student representation

Over and above legislative measures regulating the presence of students in such bodies, further commitment is required towards supporting students' participation and their active contribution at all levels of decision-making. In 2015, the Yerevan Communiqué welcomed the importance of supporting and protecting academic freedom and representation of students and staff as part of their rights as full partners of higher education governance structures. However, in the 2018 BWSE publication, the lack of real, democratic student representation and lack of transparency in the selection of student representatives was prominently highlighted by the respondents. After two years, our NUSes highlight that the situation has not improved at all, and in fact more seem to have given examples of the lack of transparency that surrounds the process, as well as of the interference that exists at the national and institutional level on students' representation.

In Belarus, democratisation in higher education is not only non-existent as representative bodies in higher education are created and chosen by the administration, but also students face oppression such as expulsion and detainment for expressing an independent opinion. Our NUS in Armenia describes how universities have a tendency of including students in decision-making bodies who represent the same views as other stakeholders within those bodies. In Serbia, our NUS reports that even when the students' representatives are elected and not chosen, there are still instances where members of the HEI leadership still try to interfere with the process by endorsing some candidates over the others. Another NUS (FEF), also speaks of and mirrors the views of other unions that there exists "*constant pressure, threats, or consequences on the student representatives' studies, particularly at the local level, because of their daily work to defend students interests in balance with institutions' interests or private operators interests.*"

ESU strongly condemns such behaviour from any level and stands firmly against tokenism in student representation. As one of the fundamental values of the Bologna Process reiterated in the 2018 Paris Communiqué is to defend student participation, it is evident that more tangible support is required to foster democratic, transparent and independent student participation through tangible measures aimed at training student leaders and empowering students to take an active role in shaping and governing higher education as independent movements.

No influence where it matters

Higher education laws, policies and strategies are constructed in multiple steps and procedures, but the process can roughly be grouped into the preparatory stage (initiation, planning, consultation and development stages) and decision-making and implementation phase. Student participation within decision-making bodies is more often than not considered as little more than rubber-stamping, where student representatives are not able to have any real influence in changing final outcomes. ESU firmly believes that student representatives should be more systematically and consistently involved in the preparatory, decision-making and monitoring processes of higher education laws, policies and strategies. Unfortunately, just 30% of NUSes take part in both preparatory stages and decision-making, while 61% report that they are somewhat involved in either one of the two processes, as seen in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3.
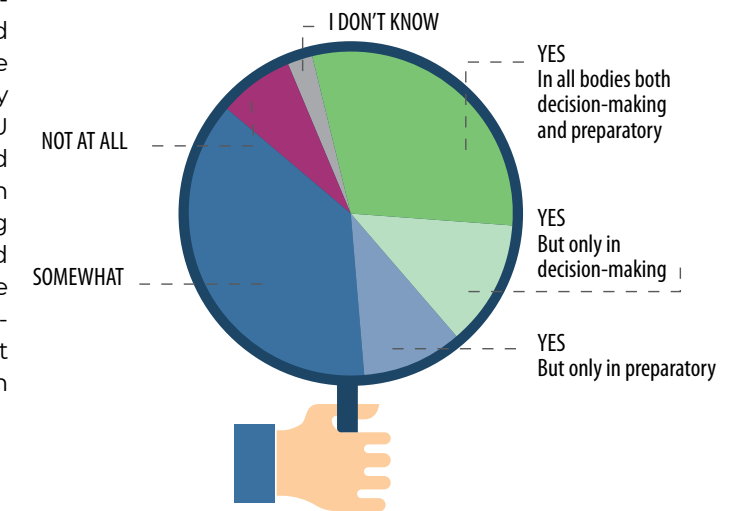Student representation in the decision-making and preparatory processes of higher education policies

I DON'T KNOW

YES
In all bodies both decision-making and preparatory

NOT AT ALL

YES
But only in decision-making

SOMEWHAT

YES
But only in preparatory

Too few seats provided

Influencing and changing decisions as a student representative is easier said than done when students find themselves outnumbered by a more prominent majority of experienced academics and staff. Here, it is important to take into consideration the higher turnover for student representatives within education systems than other stakeholders. As a consequence of all these, students tend to find themselves eclipsed in such governing bodies, risking that their role would be increasingly diminished.

The vast majority of legislation on student participation sets a minimum standard of representation. By setting minimum levels, most systems provide institutions with the choice to go above the baseline and become national best practice on student participation, but this is rarely the case. Within HEIs, 3 out of 40 NUSes state that student representation in decision-making bodies is above 25%, while half the respondents (20) remark that the representation is between 15-25% and 9 NUSes point out that the representation of students is under 15%, as seen in Figure 4.4. In view of these differences between countries, representative student organizations continue to argue a case for more participation - formal as well as actual, while working towards recognition of student representation and organising student training activities.
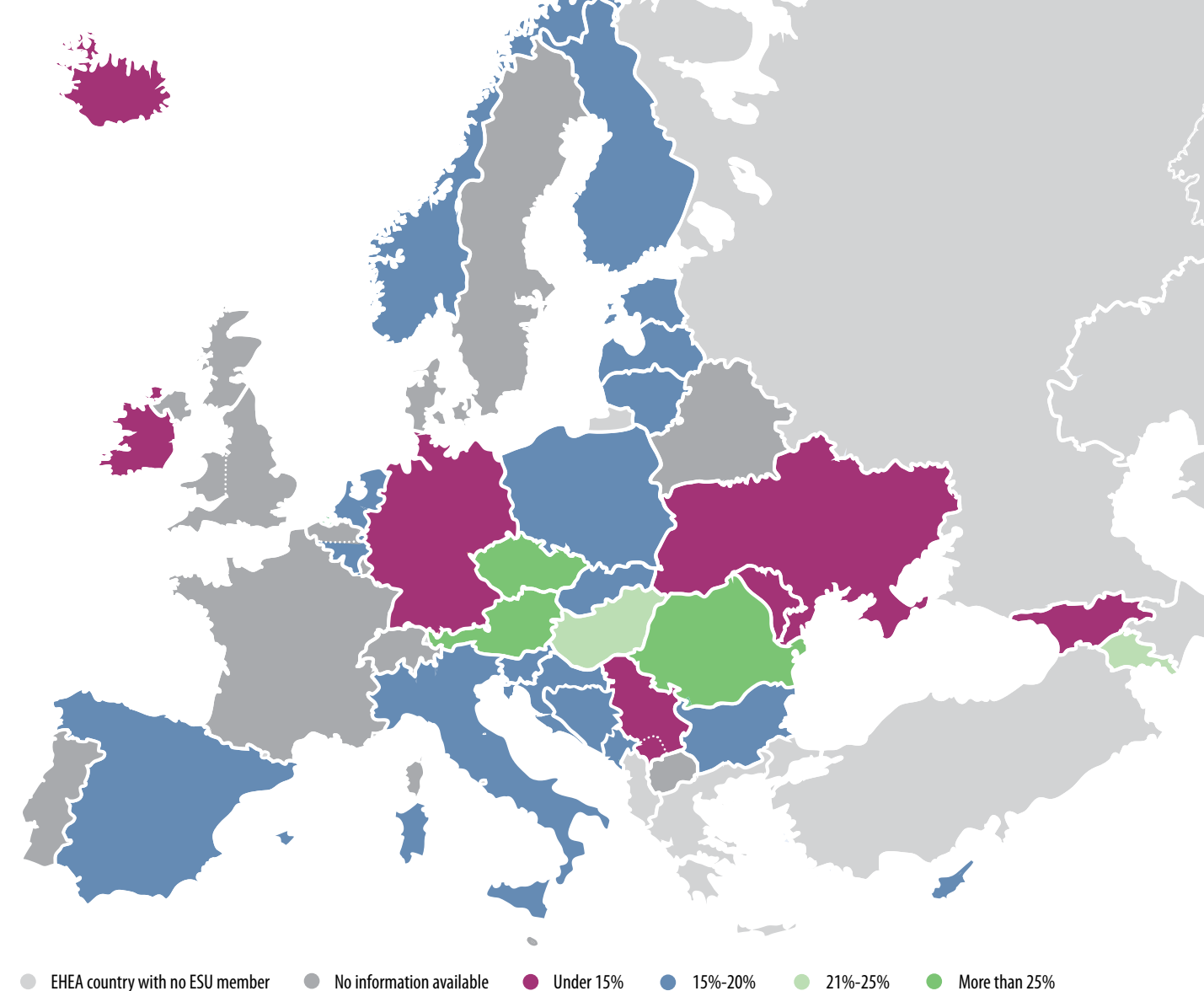
In France, as reported by our NUS FAGE, students are allowed by law to either take an academic leave or to ask for ECTS recognition of their engagement when they are elected or involved in a student organisation (Articles D611-7 à D611-9). The implementation of the law is not perfect yet, but most universities are working towards it. In this regard, ESU wants to foster the recognition of student participation not just as an important activity for democratic institutions such as HEIs but also the necessity of recognising their rights as well as their duties as students' representatives.

Differences between national and institutional levels

Among European countries, a wide spectrum exists in the way that legislation specifies the roles, responsibilities, and composition of higher education governing bodies on different levels. Based on these legal provisions, students may enjoy full voting rights on all issues within decision-making bodies otherwise they may simply fulfill a consultative role.

At the national level, while 76% of total respondents confirm there are legal provisions guaranteeing students' participation in decision-making bodies, 38% of total respondents report that they are present only for consultation, not for decision making. In Iceland and Denmark our NUSes (LÍS and DSF) report that they are working to guarantee students' participation in decision-making processes around higher education reforms as it is rare to have students included.

Similarly, at the institutional level where 95% of total respondents confirm the presence of legal provisions demanding students' participation, 28% of total respondents say they

Legend: EHEA country with no ESU member · No information available · Under 15% · 15%-20% · 21%-25% · More than 25%

are present for only consultation. In Ireland, our NUS reports that the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) plays a key role in the sector in supporting cooperation between staff and students to improve student engagement processes at an institutional level. In Switzerland, appropriate participation rights of all members of higher education institutions (including students as the largest group) are a prerequisite for the accreditation of a higher education institution (Article 30 Federal Act on Funding and Coordination of the Swiss Higher Education Sector). Most universities in Switzerland have a legal basis and

Map 4.4.
Average percentage of students represented in HEI decision-making bodies in the EHEA

institution-specific agreements that contain important provisions on students' participation rights. In 2019, the Student Delegation of the University of Luxembourg was formed as a permanent student body to increase student participation, as a response to the university's reassessment in 2016 which pointed out that student representation in decision-making bodies is lacking. The regulation also states that students can be present in different university bodies, but it does not specifically state if they have voting or advisory rights.

Disturbingly, the perception of the role of the students declines at the faculty level as 53% of unions claim students are viewed as equal partners, 30% say they have only a consultatory role and 13% say they are not perceived as a partner. An even more disappointing trend is seen at the programme level. While 1 respondent (3%) reports that students are the main partner, only 25% of unions state that students are viewed as equal partners, while 48% indicate that students have a consultatory role and 13% claim students are not viewed as partners or are excluded from decision-making processes. In Romania, our NUS (ANOSR) reports that few HEIs permit the involvement of student representatives even as observers at department level, as legal provisions state that students can be represented, but in effect, this means that it is not mandatory. On the other hand, a good practice example was reported by our NUS (SKRVS) in the Czech Republic, where a programme council is defined by the inner regulations of the university that includes a previous student of the programme for more evidence-based discussions. In Italy, our NUS (UDU) is working on increasing the establishment of joint committees (constituting of students and professors equally) in decision-making processes as they offer better environments for constructive discussions and are more likely to find good solutions.

The 2012 Bucharest Communiqué addressed how many of the Bologna Process reforms happened thanks to the involvement of staff and students. ESU considers the role of students essential in the continuous evolution, transformation and reform of higher education, particularly at the faculty and programme level where decisions have the most impact on the students.

Financial impact on autonomy of student representation

One of the main challenges of student representation across the EHEA lies in the financing of student unions, whether at local or national level. Indeed, two trends can be highlighted: the first one being students unions not receiving any funding from HEIs or the government and the second being the opposite, students unions receiving funding from these stakeholders. In both cases, this raises the question of the independence of said student unions.

In the first situation, when student unions do not receive any kind of public funding, the challenge is that even though the independence from such structures is ensured, the efficiency or the activity of the student union can be hindered due to the lack of funding.

In the second case, student organisations receive funding from HEIs or the government. Even if in some cases this funding is guaranteed by law, which allows the SU to function

Can students' unions/representatives operate independently?
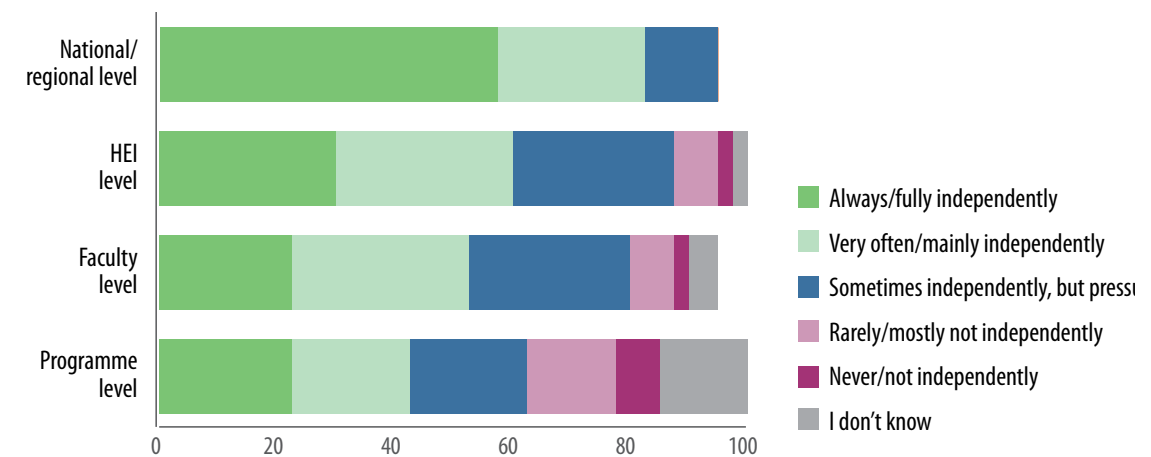
Figure 4.5.
Legislation ensuring a minimum level of student participation in EHEA countries

and lead their activities, a number of unions including those from Estonia, Sweden, Norway, Slovakia and Belgium have reported that the autonomy of student representation is under pressure by the financing bodies. In Montenegro, our NUS reports that when the relations between the SU and the university management are not the best, the budget of the union tends to be lower. In Romania, the situation is even more negative as our NUS states that at university and faculty level, unions that receive funds from the institutions are mostly under their control due to this financial link.

The situation is confirmed by the quantitative answers to the survey to our members, as seen in Figure 4.5. At the national level 57% of respondents stated that they operate independently, 25% often operate independently, 13% sometimes and 5% rarely operate independently. At the HEI level, 30% of respondents stated that they always operate independently, 30% often operate independently (30%), 28% sometimes and 10% rarely or never operate independently. If these numbers are not striking, the situation changes drastically when evaluating the faculty and programme level. Indeed, at the faculty and programme level a mere 23% function fully independently.

This data that ESU has collected through its members reveals that the more local the level, the less independent the student representation. Such situations were already described by our members in 2018, and no improvement seems to have taken place ever since. ESU is concerned by these practices, as students' representation, even when fully or partially funded by other stakeholders, should be autonomous and independent. Student representatives should in no case be bullied or pressured to conform to the opinions of any other stakeholder.

4.3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The whole picture of Student Participation in the EHEA is not as exciting as it should be: despite many countries' efforts to comply with the Bologna Process' requirements, the student voice within the higher education Institutions—the very first place where it should be heard and where it should get affirmed as a fundamental tool for democracy—is being silenced or ignored or not sufficiently empowered way too often.

Student Participation is not just a tool for students to complain about classes that they dislike, it is a fundamental way to shape learning paths and therefore to shape the society of the future. Too many times the student perspective is being sacrificed in the name of profit and, as a consequence, many students lose their will to participate in their communities' lives and every time someone loses their will to be heard and to be an active member of society, our democracy loses ground.

It is crucial, especially in the current political framework of distrust towards the authorities, be them political or scientific, and raising populism with its easy—but too often unjust—solutions to societal problems, that we protect democracy at its basis, by empowering student participation and ensuring that the student voice is independent and autonomous at every level. A society is not as free and democratic as it values itself when its students are not able to freely express themselves. The fundamental role of student participation must be recognized.

Recommendations

The Bologna Process should be more engaged and crucial when it comes to foster students' participation in the national context.

- The first step towards fostering students' participation is, for sure, making sure that all related processes are extremely transparent: from the way elections are held, to what happens within decision-making bodies the students and the community need to be informed and well aware of the processes
- The student voice needs to be autonomous from every power and every influence at any possible level. The issue of autonomy of student representatives must be strongly addressed and taken very seriously by the HEIs, not only to avoid the needed economic support to turn into a tool for controlling them but also to avoid possible threats to the students' careers in case of differing opinions
- Students' participation must be recognised in its crucial democratic value by the whole society, and the efforts that student representatives put into their roles must as well be recognized and emphasized in their learning paths
- A crucial step in fostering students' participation is to ensure representation to all diverse voices within the student body, safeguarding the role, engagement and enrolling of underrepresented groups

- Technically speaking, students' participation must be ensured at all levels, which means, not only at the decision-making level—which is the level where students representation is more often present—but also at the preparatory level, to ensure a participatory approach to the shaping of higher education paths as well as the shaping of future society

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5. SOCIAL DIMENSION

5.1. INTRODUCTION

The social dimension of higher education has been reiterated as a priority within many previous Ministerial Communiqués. The London Communiqué defined the social dimension as "*the societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations*". This definition clearly outlines the link between the student population and society, which is an inseparable one, as the two coexist together within the larger community. The Paris Communiqué of 2018 reaffirmed the goal "*to improve access and completion by under-represented and vulnerable groups*". This, however, remains an aspiration that is still very far from being achieved.
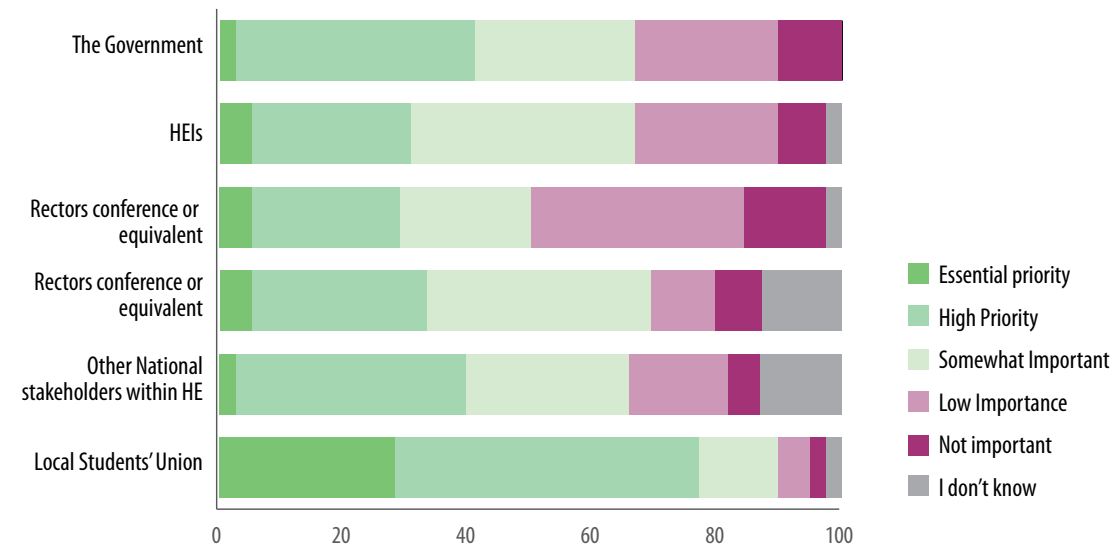
Steadily but surely, through the years, the social dimension of higher education has become a mainstream issue of discussion and advocacy among many student unions and an essential priority for the European Student Union. The reflection of the diversity of the society in the student body is a fundamental indicator of the fairness, equitability, and accessibility of any higher education system. Thus, it is heartening to see the gradual but steady increase in the perception that stakeholders on different levels, from national governments to Rectors' conferences to teacher unions to local student unions, prioritise SD in their work. According to ESU's responding unions, there is a growing perception

Social Dimension as a priority for stakeholders

that positive developments are taking place all across Europe, with SD being considered a moderately to highly important subject on both the governmental and HEI levels in ⅔ of the countries that participated in the survey, while being assigned no importance in only 10% of cases in relation to governmental prioritization and slightly less than 10% in relation to HEIs (see Figure 5.1). This signals a possible steady rise in the prioritization given to the social dimension by some of the relevant stakeholders since 2015.

The perception that stakeholders increasingly prioritise SD should not be seen as an indicator of improvement in the actual lived experiences of students across Europe. While it is easy to state one's commitment to the social dimension, actions to improve access, retention, diversity, equity, and well-being in higher education still lag behind written commitments in most countries, and even face ideological opposition from governments that have nominally taken on commitments they don't intend to fulfil. To exemplify this chasm between promises given and policies being carried out, national unions of students state that there are no national targets in place at all in half of the responding countries. Only 6 out of 39 countries have national targets in place to enhance participation of underrepresented groups in HE, with another 9 countries having targets in place which are not being followed.

An important and new data point to emphasise in relation to this is the extent to which the social dimension of HE is being focused on at the level of local student representation. National unions of students report that SD is dealt with as an essential or high priority for local student representation in 30 out of 39 countries. This statistic, while being measured within this survey for the first time, indicates a broad agreement among the students of Europe that the significance of a broadly accessible higher education system and a diverse student body is an essential value and of high priority, and that there is a willingness to fight for it together.

5.2. MAIN FINDINGS

Data collection

ESU firmly believes that effective policies for widening access to HE should be based on continuous national data collection efforts that can highlight the requirements for student populations to reflect the heterogeneous social profile of society at large.

In this study, the majority of NUSes (64%) mentioned that students from low socio-economic backgrounds are mostly considered underrepresented in HE by their national governments, followed by students with physical disabilities (46%), students from minority ethnic backgrounds (41%), and students from immigrant backgrounds (36%). Based on data gathered from the 2019 EUROSTUDENT publication, "*students with parents without tertiary degrees are the most underrepresented group in all EUROSTUDENT countries*". Keeping intersectionality in mind, the social conditions of one individual may overlap with more than one underrepresented group.

Figure 5.1.
Social Dimension as a priority for stakeholders

Data collection and analysis through one holistic entry point such as EUROSTUDENT as this allows for reliable, multilateral assessments and international comparisons of the social conditions of students in the EHEA. This enables more concentrated and collective efforts in strengthening the social dimension of higher education by highlighting the strengths and identifying the weaknesses of national educational systems. Achieving real diversity and inclusion in higher education requires that higher education institutions then complement national data collection exercises with frameworks and strategies for enhancing participation of students in accessing, transitioning and completing HE, particularly students from vulnerable, disadvantaged, and underrepresented groups.
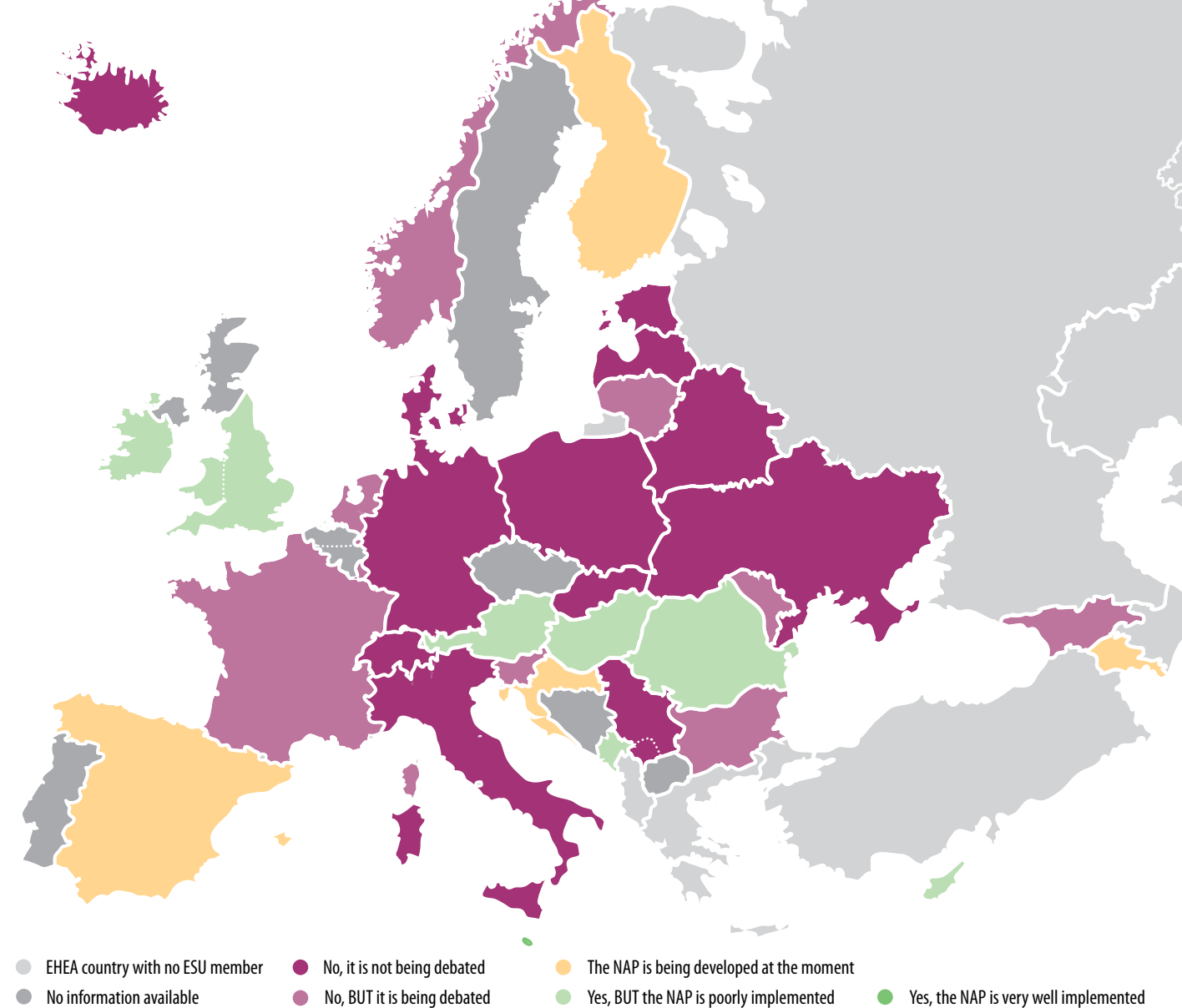
With an enhanced emphasis on data collection, careful attention must also be paid to protect the right to privacy and the security of every individual's data to prevent misuse. This means putting in place mechanisms that ensure anonymity and proper data handling and protection.

National strategies for widening access

In the 2012 Bucharest Communiqué, the educational ministers agreed to adopt national measures for widening overall access to quality higher education. In Finland, for example, our NUS reports that the government is developing a National Access Plan for higher education, which aims to increase the participation of students from underrepresented groups, such as students with immigrant backgrounds, disabilities, learning difficulties, or chronic diseases, and students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds in HE. There are also continuous efforts to decrease gender segregation in education and in the labour market.

NUS Scotland contributed as a full member to the "Widening Access Commission" established as part of the Scottish government's 2014-2015 work programme. The implementation of the Commission's framework for enhancing access and fairness in higher education was monitored by an Access Delivery Committee that also included NUS as full members of the group. The commission serves as a positive example for student participation. The NUS in Ireland reports that one of the most significant issues that Ireland faces in meeting its National Access Plan is that institutional services don't link up effectively and share data and information across institutions. This makes it very difficult when attempting to map or understand the experience of specific students attempting to access different support mechanisms or resources. While NUS in Ireland (USI) welcomes and participates in this, increasing financial investment for data collection and sharing is required to see this strategy make sufficient progress.

As seen in Map 5.2, the process of adopting and implementing the National Access Plans (NAP) on the social dimension of HE looks to be stalled in major ways, with a NAP in place in only 9 out of 38 countries according to the ESU members. Moreover, the NAPs are viewed as poorly implemented in 8 of those countries. Additionally, NAPs are being developed in only 4 other countries, while in 21 countries these plans are only being debated or not brought up at all. In Belgium (FEF), the NUS reports that although a policy exists to increase participation of

Legend:
- ● EHEA country with no ESU member
- ● No information available
- ● No, it is not being debated
- ● No, BUT it is being debated
- ● The NAP is being developed at the moment
- ● Yes, BUT the NAP is poorly implemented
- ● Yes, the NAP is very well implemented

students with disabilities in HE, this is not really fulfilled. In Slovenia, the SSU reports that they are working on the Rules on the Procedures and Manner of Exercising the Rights of Students with Special Needs and Students with Special Status in Higher Education.

The goal of NAPs, that is to widen access and foster equity and inclusion in higher education is a public responsibility of higher education systems as a whole. As this serves as a public good, targets for access, equity and inclusion in higher education can see better success

Map 5.2.
Implementation of National Access Plans

if public stakeholders are engaged in the design and implementation of national and institutional policies and strategies. As suggested through the proposed Principles & Guidelines, community engagement should be a process whereby higher education institutions engage with external community stakeholders to undertake joint activities that can be mutually beneficial. Like social dimension policies, community engagement should be embedded in the core missions of higher education systems. Such engagement provides a holistic basis on which universities can address a broad range of societal needs, including those of vulnerable, disadvantaged, and underrepresented groups, while enriching their teaching, research, and other core functions.

As one of the most underrepresented groups in higher education, students with migrant and refugee backgrounds face a number of challenges accessing higher education. Refugees, in particular, face significant challenges to accessing higher education. In fact, by the end of 2018, only 3% of young refugees were enrolled in higher education, compared to the global average of 37% for non-refugees. In this regard, community engagement between higher education institutions and relevant external stakeholders (such as NGOs, banks, and immigration offices) could be a way to address and mitigate the most significant barriers that exclude people with refugee backgrounds from higher education in the EHEA, such as the prolonged, bureaucratic, and ambiguous processes for achieving international protection status, visa and work permits, financial insecurity and insufficient funds, and inadequate language support.

Recognition processes

Recognition of qualifications, degrees and prior learning plays an essential role in one's academic journey as it is the first and most important step when talking about the accessibility to continuing higher education. It has become more evident how important recognition of prior learning (RPL), either formal or informal, can be for enhancing access and equitable participation of non-traditional learners in higher education. Moreover, RPL also connects closely with lifelong learning and flexible pathways. Lately, RPL for people with migrant and refugee backgrounds has gained more popularity, with the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees providing an essential tool to enable access to further studies for those without official documentation of their educational background.

Public student support systems

Student support systems are the means through which access and success within higher education are ensured. The term covers a variety of support mechanisms that vary from grants, scholarships, and other monetary allowances received by those enrolled in higher education, to concrete material necessities such as housing, transport, and infrastructure (libraries, university premises). Support systems also include services such as counselling, catering, and everything that is provided to students to help them sustain their basic needs, without which studying is not possible.

Undoubtedly, student support services are the cornerstones of higher education systems that discriminate less and allow individuals from very diverse backgrounds to enroll and complete the studies of their choice. In order to obtain such higher education systems, it is crucial for these support services to be sufficiently and publicly funded as well as accessible to all. Their adequate funding and governance can contribute to a society with reduced inequalities where equal opportunities become a reality for everybody, whatever their background, and not only for the most financially privileged.

That is why when studying the social dimension of higher education within the Bologna Process, it is imperative to also tackle the topic of student support services and how they have evolved.

Student retention measures

Inclusion and accessibility are very often—and rightly so—associated with the social dimension of higher education. However, being able to enroll in higher education is merely one of the steps towards more equity. Moreover, it is pointless without sufficient measures that aim to allow students from all backgrounds to complete their studies. That is why it is important to also analyse student retention mechanisms that are in place across the EHEA that focus on preventing high dropout rates. It is, however, necessary to keep in mind that such measures must be designed with the goal of truly supporting students to complete their study of choice and should not only be driven by the sole objective of having reduced drop out rates at all costs without guaranteeing the quality of what is taught and learnt.

Compared to 2018, ESU member unions have noted an increase in the number of countries that have established national dropout prevention measures where 24 out of 39 respondents identified existing measures in comparison to only 22 in 2018. Similar to previous years, the most popular measures taken to improve retention appear to be counselling (20 countries), as well as additional financial support (17 countries), and flexible learning paths (12 countries). Even if measures are in place, not only at the national level, but also within the higher education institutions, students unions are generally disappointed in them, with over half of the respondents expressing dissatisfaction, and only 5 out of 39 saying they were satisfied with these measures.

As stated both in 2015 and 2018, understanding the reasons behind student dropout is of high importance. This concern is also outlined in the Principles and Guidelines: systems should develop a strategy for data collection and the use of these data for identifying reasons for dropout and understanding completion rates, as well as implementing relevant policy changes in accordance with the information gathered. Without such an analysis, it is not possible to develop measures that truly tackle the challenges and are really effective.

Financial troubles and the rigidness of education systems that lack flexibility for working students to keep up with their studies are the most commonly mentioned problems that, according to the NUSes, need to be tackled to reduce dropout rates in the EHEA. In this

regard, another main policy change that could be made is the possibility of flexible learning paths. Flexible learning paths should be considered an important tool for students to remain within higher education while being able to cope with their other responsibilities, such as care duties, working duties, thus promoting both diversity in learning and diversity in student populations.

Financial support schemes

Although the social dimension of higher education cannot be solely defined in terms of financial support to the students, it is undeniable that this parameter plays an important role when it comes to increasing accessibility to studies.

Grants and scholarships are central to higher education systems that aim to be inclusive of a broader diverse body of students, especially of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Lack of adequate financial support leads to situations where students face no choice but to take a (very often time-consuming) job outside of their studies to be able to sustain themselves, or they are pushed into precarious positions where fulfilling basic needs such as housing and food become a daily struggle. For instance, FAGE, one of our French members, reports distressing figures about the precarity of the student population in the country, stating that "[...] half the students have to skip meals, 1 out of 3 already cannot afford medical care themselves and another 20% are living below the poverty line". These numbers are sadly illustrative of the deterioration of students' living conditions, to a point where one cannot afford to live decently.

Financial support systems do exist in many countries. However, even when they do, they remain in too many cases either not accessible enough or not sufficient with regards to the cost of living. For example, as our Danish member, DSF, reports, even if over the past years no significant cuts were made to funding and the grants generally remained the same, the fact that they are not indexed according to the rise of the cost of living makes them less and less sufficient to cover all the basic expenses that students may encounter. This state of play is also described by other member unions, such as Ireland and France.

In addition, in some occurrences, despite an existing grant system, very few students are eligible for such grants due to the consideration of low thresholds of revenue, while others are simply blocked from accessing financial support. In this regard, the example of Italy is striking, as this was already reported in 2018, "due to the underfunding, many students that would be entitled to grants and housing are given none", reports UDU. As of 2019, 5% of the students entitled to a student grant were given none due to lack of funding; furthermore, 10% of those eligible for student housing were given none due to lack of student accommodation - the percentage of students that in Italy are given student accommodation is 10% of the total student population.

An alarming trend has continued to grow in the last few years. An increasing number of National Students Unions note that governments have a tendency to move backwards in terms of grants, and instead try to implement more measures to promote loans. This is the case for instance in Finland, where cuts were made to the budget that allocated grants in order to leave more space for loans. For the ESU, this trend is not acceptable. Grants must be the main way to invest in the future of citizens of a given country and must be sufficient to allow students from any background to study. Grant-supported systems, combined with the absence of all tuition fees, are the only way to have a truly equitable higher education system and provide equal chances for all, not only to the more privileged. The combination of grants with other types of open and accessible support measures is of crucial importance.

Housing and transport

Housing was described as the number one problem according to our members in 2015 and 2018. Unsurprisingly, this is still the case in 2020, with 24 of our members reporting it as one of the main challenges. Housing is an essential part of a student's life. However, all over Europe housing is becoming more and more expensive and less affordable for students. When grant systems are in place, more than often the amount received by the students is not enough to be able to afford decent housing, and this leads to many students having to take a job to merely survive, which results in less time to allocate to the content of their studies.

Moreover, student housing projects are becoming increasingly rare. The ESU stands in favor of all students having access to good quality housing and a room for themselves. This is essential for students to be able to be independent and to study in good conditions. In addition to secure housing, students should also be able to easily access their place of study from their residence. Unfortunately, transportation can prove to be of great cost for students, even when student discounts exist, which can become yet another financial burden. Moreover, transportation connections need to exist to the higher education premises in a given city, allowing students to easily commute to their institution, but also to any other places that are linked to a student's activities (library, study rooms).

Mental health and well-being support

When debating the success of students within higher education it is crucial to acknowledge, support, and promote the necessity of mental health and well-being of students on different levels of higher education. According to the ESU's Mental Health Charter to be adopted in its' upcoming Board Meeting, the first and most important step is to raise awareness of mental health and decrease the stigma that still subtly exists in every layer of our society including higher education institutions. Mental health support services, the organization of supportive environments on campuses and the integration of mental health topics in the creation of curricula are of great importance. Apart from study-related stressors that have a direct impact on students' mental well-being, it is equally important to highlight the importance of indirect stressors such as the lack of financial support or appropriate housing, problematic family environments and/ or caring responsibilities. All of these

factors can cause feelings of instability or uncertainty, harming their mental health, and consequently cause huge obstacles to successfully perform in their studies.

According to the gathered survey data, 9 out of 39 (Hungary, Serbia, Croatia, Ireland, Armenia, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Spain) national unions of students have reported that students with psychological disabilities or mental health issues are still underrepresented in their national higher education systems. This implies that awareness and discourse on mental health are still lacking, and that measures to support students who deal with mental health problems are not yet prioritised and adequately resourced in many countries.

The social dimension of student mobility

Mobility is an overarching topic that overlaps with the social dimension of higher education, in particular in relation to access to mobility programmes and the living conditions of international students.

Mobility programmes, and especially the ERASMUS+ programme, are welcoming more and more students every year. Yet, the population of mobile students does not reflect the diversity of the societies that they come from. In fact, students from under-represented backgrounds or from marginalized groups only make up 7% of the total participants in ERASMUS+. Even if this statistic is alarming, this number is not surprising in the context described previously in this chapter.

This state of affairs is not new and was already acknowledged in 2015 in the Yerevan Communiqué, which stated, "*We will enhance the social dimension of higher education, improve gender balance and widen opportunities for access and completion, including international mobility, for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. We will provide mobility opportunities for students and staff from conflict areas, while working to make it possible for them to return home once conditions allow*". Regrettably, five years after this commitment was made, little to no progress was made, and mobility remains nothing more than a faraway dream for less privileged students.

International students are also often second class students in the receiving country. For instance, only 7 of our members, out of 38 respondents, noted that grants and support systems are equally accessible to foreign students. Twenty-six NUSes highlight the differentiation between national and international students when it comes to tuition fees. Very often, HEIs raise tuition for international students to enormous amounts that strongly restrict access to higher education. For instance, in Ireland, students from outside of the EU may have to pay more than 10 000 Euros per year to enroll in a higher education institution.Limited access to financial support mechanisms in the host country, combined with the difficulties linked to being a foreigner, leads to situations where it becomes extremely difficult for international students to find and afford housing. Internships and work placement are unequally accessible as well according to our member organizations.

In order for the situation to change, HEIs in host countries must ensure that grants and other financial support mechanisms are also available for international students, and that the latter are not discriminated against and forced to live in precarity. In the case of Erasmus grants, these need to provide enough for students to sustain themselves and be aligned with the cost of living of the region of the host country, while still guaranteeing a minimal income. Without such measures, mobility will continue to be limited to students with sufficient support, in particular those from more privileged backgrounds.

5.3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We need to acknowledge that within the EHEA there seems to be increasing awareness and information about the social dimension of higher education. With that being said, the situation remains far from perfect, and work on the social dimension of higher education is far from complete. The Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA give a solid ground to start concretely improving the situation. Through this tool, the EHEA should primarily ensure that the social dimension becomes central to higher education strategies on the system and institutional level, as well as on the EHEA and the EU level.

Secondly, it is important to ensure a holistic approach to the social dimension and aim to create coherent policies from early childhood education to lifelong learning. This requires more connectivity between the work of those responsible for higher education and other ministries and sectors, which can only bring about change in a joint effort. Reliable data should also be seen as a necessary precondition for an evidence-based improvement of the social dimension of higher education.

Recommendations

Once the PAGs are adopted by Ministers, a long, uphill journey needs to start, which will closely follow the implementation of this document. The social dimension requires more peer support at this point, as we still see significant discrepancies in the level of policy development and implementation within the EHEA. The current Advisory Group has suggested that within the next cycle of the Bologna Process, work on the social dimension continue to be a priority, by introducing a Peer Support Group in parallel with the Thematic Country Reviews for the Social Dimension, as this collaboration could ensure that the relevant areas for peer support are identified and acted upon.

Furthermore, it is crucial that the BFUG enables the establishment and work of the Advisory Group for Social Dimension in the next BFUG Operational Programme 2020-2023. The main objective for the new mandate of the Advisory Group for Social Dimension should be (a) the development of a system of monitoring of the Principles and Guidelines and (b) defining indicators and benchmarks for the principles for SD.

Lastly, the European Qualification Passport for Refugees also remains a tool that can practically improve and broaden accessibility to higher education for this underrepresented group. ESU strongly welcomes such an initiative and has been at the forefront to push for broadening its use within the EHEA.

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6. QUALITY ASSURANCE

6.1. INTRODUCTION

The implementation of Quality Assurance (QA) as a key commitment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was followed under a newly established peer support structure during the 2018-2020 cycle of the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG). This structured peer-based support platform served as a space for member countries to share their experiences, implement projects and drive changes in their quality assurance systems. ESU sees this as a step forward to foster the practical implementation of QA related EHEA policies which have come through many different communiqués.

As we remember, the Berlin Communiqué stated in 2003 that the quality of higher education has proven to be at the heart of the setting up of EHEA and the QA is one of the fundamental priorities of it. A milestone for creating a common language of QA among the EHEA countries was the adoption and then the revision of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), which underlined that quality assurance responding to diversity and growing expectations for higher education requires a fundamental shift in its provision (ESG 2015). The most recent Paris Communiqué from 2018 reiterated that QA is key in developing mutual trust as well as increasing mobility and fair recognition of qualifications and study periods throughout the EHEA (Paris Communiqué, 2018). The ministers recognised the progress made in implementing the ESGs and committed to removing the remaining obstacles to their implementation in national legislations and regulations. The Communiqué also addresses the need of enabling and promoting the use of the "European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes" in higher education systems promoting the development of the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR).

In this chapter we look into the specific aspects of QA - both internal and external, and we demonstrate how students see the implementation happening so far. We reflect upon indicators such as the involvement of students as full members or information sources, their role in decision-making bodies on institutional and national levels, existence of QA pools, as well as their perspective about the European level developments particularly in the context of EQAR.

6.2 MAIN FINDINGS

The purpose and focus of quality assurance

The ESGs as a commonly agreed and accepted tool for supporting the implementation around the EHEA, define the dual purpose of quality assurance processes: accountability and enhancement (ESG 2015). The Yerevan Communiqué from 2015 empowered this multi-purpose QA by underlining its roles in learning and teaching. ESU believes that indeed, quality assurance of higher education should have multiple purposes. Our member National Students' Unions (NUS) have indicated what the main aims of quality assurance are in recent years according to them, to see how this corresponds with the aims of multipurpose QA as stated in the revised ESG's (see Figure 6.1.)

Figure 6.1.
What is the purpose of Quality Assurance?

What is the purpose of Quality Assurance?
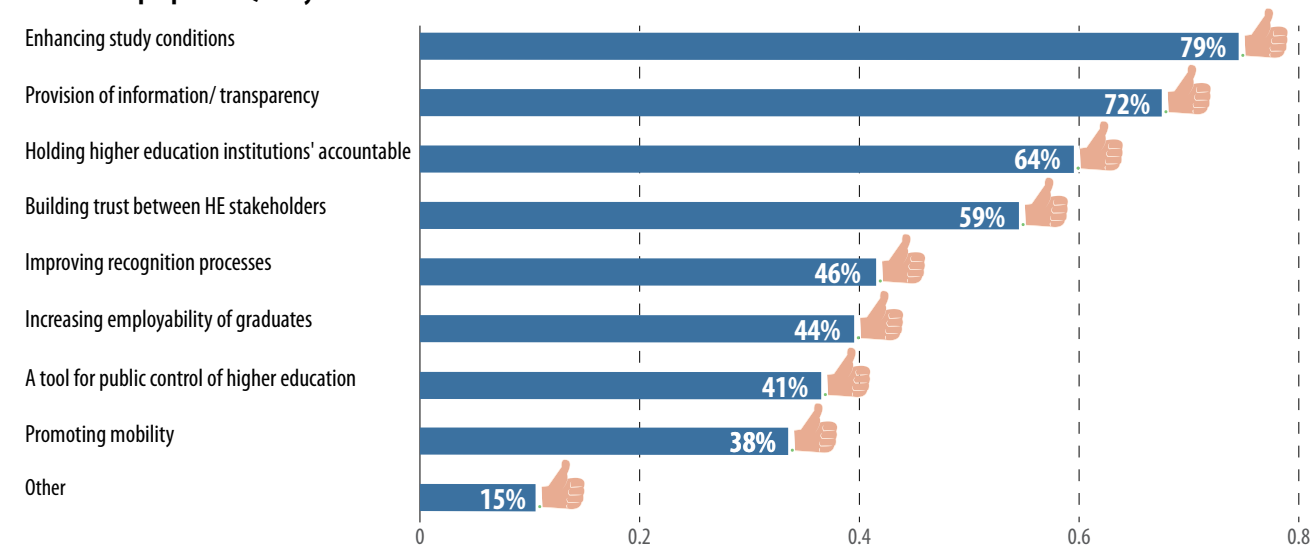
Already in 2018, the student unions responded that for them the purpose of QA mainly lies in Enhancing study conditions, building trust, provision of information/transparency and holding higher education institutions accountable. Similar to that in BWSE 2020, among all responses, enhancing study conditions (79%) has the highest selection which shows the trust towards using the QA as a constant improvement tool amongst students.

Next, 72% of the respondents see the purpose of QA in ensuring transparency and the 64% sees QA as an accountability tool. Building trust and improving the recognition process

among HEIs and national systems are selected by consequently 59% and 46% of the respondents. The 44% of the respondents assign a purpose to QA also for increasing the employability of the graduates which again is related to the concept of trust and recognition, because if the employers do trust in and recognise the qualification of graduates, their employability gets an increase.

When it comes to discussing the focus of QA procedures to understand how the QA supports the higher education system in the country, by far we see most of the countries combine both institutional and programme accreditation approaches - 71% of the respondents say so. This is 6% more than in 2018. ESU promotes this development, the various systems of higher education around Europe require a diversified approach to QA which can meet the different needs.

Internal QA

36 out of 38 respondents state that their students are involved in internal QA. Only one union, namely NUIS (Israel)states there is no involvement in internal QA, and one union from Bosnia & Herzegovina (SURS) could not confirm students' involvement.

Less than half of the responding unions - around 46% - state that the students are involved in internal QA with voting rights and as full members of the bodies of internal assessment processes. Compared to 2018 this indicator has fallen by around 14%. 19% of the student unions indicate the students are only involved as a source of information and here again, we see a decrease compared to the numbers of 2018 where 26% of the respondents indicated involvement of students as a source of information. Around 5% of the respondents (2 unions) state involvement of students in the follow-up actions or only as observers.

Notably, the 2020 results show an increase of unions that state that there is a diverse approach towards student engagement in internal QA in their country and it is hard to generalize the answer with a selection of one of the options. 11 of the unions stated that the level and way of involvement highly differs per institution, faculty and programme, therefore it is difficult to generalize. The role of students and their involvement in internal QA varies highly. In some cases, NUSes stated in the survey, that students are involved in internal QA through all of the above-mentioned options (UK and Latvia). Unions from a few countries, namely Germany, Ireland, Slovakia Sweden and Switzerland state that the scope of students' involvement is determined by internal regulation set by HEIs.

External QA

For the students' involvement in the external QA the ESGs adopted in 2015 are a firm guarantee. Accordingly, the majority of respondents of our survey (over 87%) reported that students are in some way included in external quality assurance. The roles they may have, though, vary - from full members of the panel till less committed ways of student engagement. According to the rest of the responses, this involvement is limited to either

being an observer or a source of information. In some countries students can take the position of a chair or a secretary in external review panels. The involvement of students within external quality assurance processes seems to be ensured by agencies' compliance with the 2.4 standard of the ESGs, however, the meaningful participation of students varies amongst the countries.

87% of the unions report that students are involved in external QA, which is notably 8% higher than in 2018. Even though this is a very positive development, it is still disturbing that 4 of the unions report that in their countries students are not involved in external QA, and one union doesn't know. Responding unions that state they are not involved in external QA are from Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Serbia (one union out of two members) and Belarus.

When looking more closely at how the students are involved in external QA we see that most of the countries involve their students as full members within the external review panel. Three of the unions, namely unions from the Czech Republic, France and Israel are only involved as an information source. The status of full membership is the 1st step towards meaningful and even participation of students in external QA therefore guaranteeing it with the regulations is a priority.

Governance of QA agencies and national decision-making

In the following question the NUSes were asked to indicate the role students have in QA agencies (indicating the highest role possessed: full members, observers, members in consultative bodies, planners). According to the answers provided, 74% (4% increase compared to 2018) of student unions reported that students are involved in the governance of QA agencies. 23 out of 28 unions, who reported involvement of students in the governance of QA agencies, indicate students are full-members of decision-making bodies, while four unions stated that in their countries students are members of consultative bodies. Among these 28 two unions selected more than one option—involvement in governance and administrative bodies (ANOSR, Romania) and involvement in governance and planning of the programmes (SKRVS, Czech Republic). The role of students as an observer was the case in Switzerland and Sweden. Gathered responses show that there is still room for improvement, especially for those not involved in the governance of QA agencies at all (26% of respondents).

Next, we look into how students are consulted on the national level decisions by the government about the QA matters. Twenty respondents (53%) affirmed that they are being consulted on national level decisions, while the number of unions who reported not being consulted is 13 (33%). 6 members mention they don't know if the government consults students on the national level or not, which can mean that in the recent time there was no such case of a consultation. The ways of consulting students differ between countries. Usually, students are members of consultative bodies (through QA agencies or led by a ministry), and they provide direct feedback as national unions of students, attend consultation meetings and workshops for the sector, etc. Some unions reported that there is no regular consultative process applied.

Instead, the students are consulted only at those times when governments change laws and are obliged to get stakeholders' opinion. As in other cases, here again, unions indicated that even while being consulted, the students' voice is not being heard or valued, usually, the consultation is being conducted at a late stage of the law-making process when negotiation around the major changes is no longer possible.
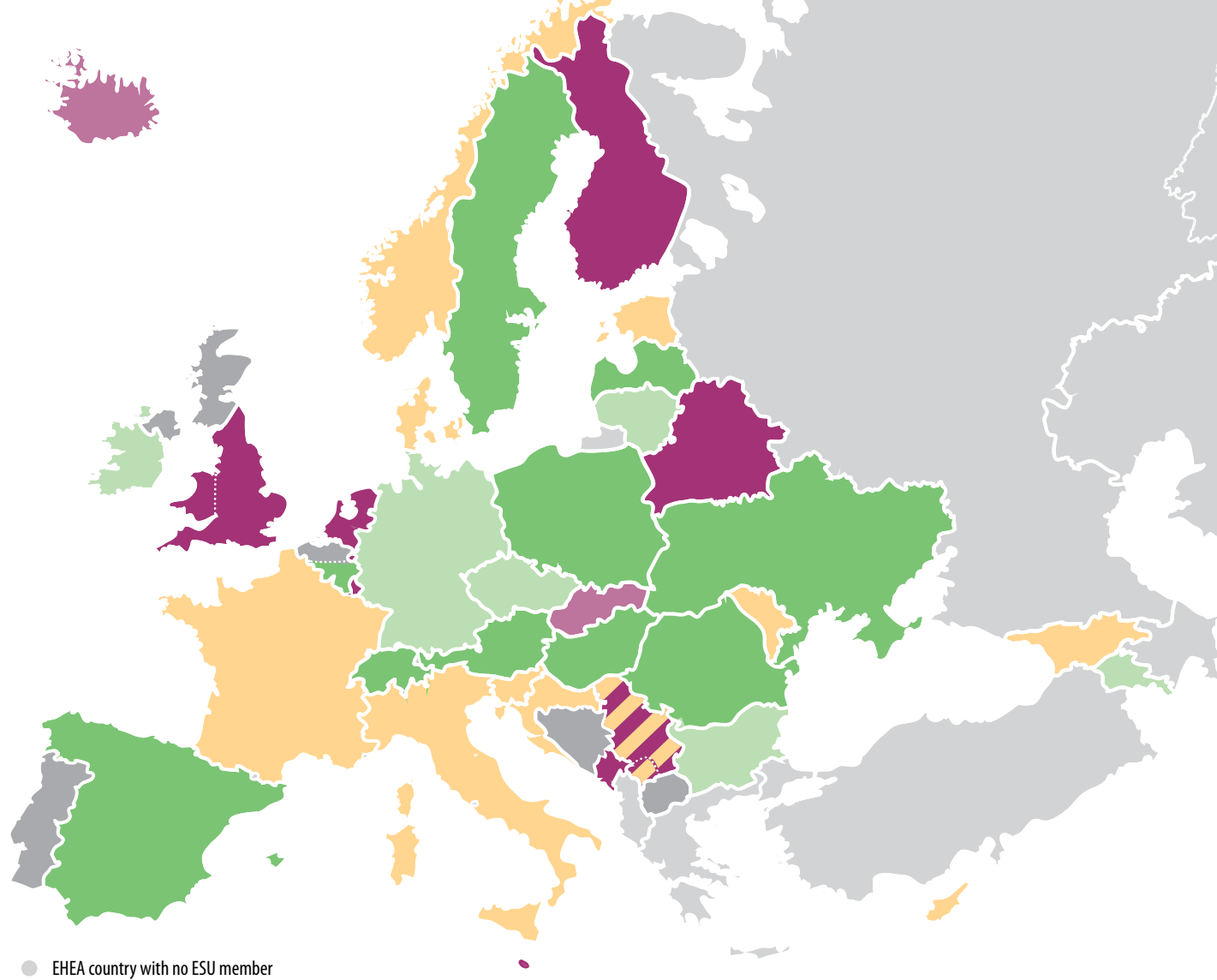
Expert pools

The student expert pools play a crucial role as incentives for the preparation of independent student experts, as well as for promoting peer learning, cooperation and meaningful engagement of students primarily in external QA. Student experts are usually connected with their student unions in universities, which often brings an indirect impact on internal QA as well through students' activities at universities.

Training activities provided in the scope of the expert pools not only equip students with general knowledge about QA procedures but also serve as a motivation for transferring their knowledge to other students involved at the local level. As we know, due to the limited student life cycle, students usually become quality assurance experts for a shorter period in comparison to other stakeholder representatives. However, this shouldn't be an excuse for insufficient investments into the capacity building of students. Well-organised recruitment and training process is essential for ensuring a smooth transfer of knowledge and skills that are required from student experts in the assessment panels. Structured student expert pools play a crucial role as a platform where students and QA agencies can cooperate.

Looking into the data we received on this topic (Map 6.2.), 27 respondents reported about the inclusion of students in quality assurance expert pools, while 10 stated that such pools do not exist or they do not include students. This is an improvement compared to 2018 results, where only 19 unions stated there were specific student expert pools, and 13 unions stated that these do not exist. Out of the 27, ten unions say the pool is operated by the national student union, and in 12 the responsibility belongs to QA agency. The rest of the answers stated that there is a joint approach for managing the pools by an NUS and QA agency. For example, in Ireland the pool is operated through a programme which is co-run by USI, QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) and HEA (Higher Education Authority). In the case of Slovakia the student expert pool is currently being established with the cooperation of the NUS, national authorities as well as ESU.

Obstacles to student involvement in QA

There are many obstacles that have a negative impact on students' involvement in quality assurance. For all levels (state policies, national QA agencies and HEI's) thorough and consistent work should be dedicated to ensuring equal, fair and meaningful engagement of students. The position of students has been empowered on the policy level and through the QA standards starting from the ESG 2015, but the meaningful involvement in practice
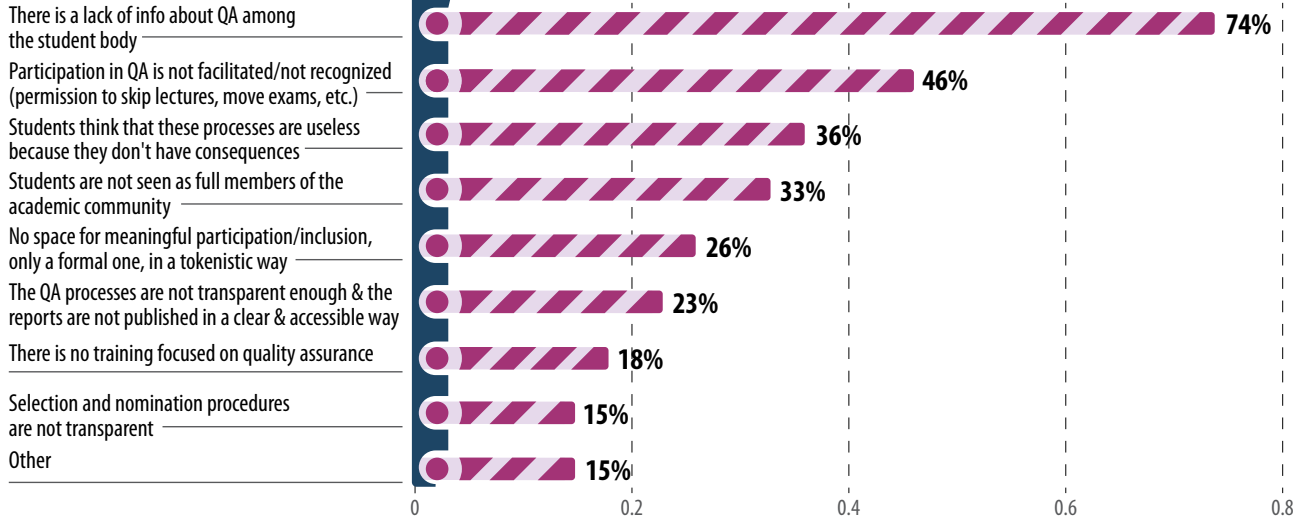
is not yet a reality. The chart below (Figure 6.3.) presents the obstacles that respondent student unions find significant for students' involvement in QA processes.

The majority of respondents (74%) stated that the lack of information on quality assurance amongst the students' representatives is the main obstacle to their involvement. It is unfortunate to see that we have an increase here of 7% compared to the 67% reported in the BWSE 2018. The provision of information plays a crucial role in quality assurance processes. The lack of relevant information causes either the exclusion of students or diminishes meaningful participation. Moreover, it harms the involvement of any stakeholder group, causing inequalities in the information held. When students lack information about procedures, programmes or are not supported enough to be involved in the decision-making process, they are left out of having any ownership and enthusiasm and consequently are not able to ensure a meaningful students' perspective in the quality assurance processes.

Next, 46% of respondents reported that participation in quality assurance processes is not well facilitated and recognized by HEIs and nearly 36% of NUS stated that lack of tangible results harms the belief, confidence and trust in a quality assurance process and this results in resistance from students to be meaningfully active in quality assurance, as they are convinced that their engagement will be fruitless.

33% of students' unions reported that students do not feel that they are seen as full members of their academic communities. While analysing the responses to all the above-mentioned

Map 6.2.
Structured student expert pools play a crucial role as a platform where students and QA agencies can cooperate

EHEA country with no ESU member

No information available

There is no Experts' Pool with student involvement

An Experts' Pool with student involvement is being implemented

Yes, the student-involved Experts' Pool is run by the agency(ies)

Yes, the student-involved Experts' Pool is run together by the agency(ies) and the NUS

Yes, the student-involved Experts' Pool is run by the NUS

Figure 6.3.
What are the main barriers of students' involvement in QA processes?

What are the main barriers of students' involvement in QA processes?

Barrier	Percentage
There is a lack of info about QA among the student body	74%
Participation in QA is not facilitated/not recognized (permission to skip lectures, move exams, etc.)	46%
Students think that these processes are useless because they don't have consequences	36%
Students are not seen as full members of the academic community	33%
No space for meaningful participation/inclusion, only a formal one, in a tokenistic way	26%
The QA processes are not transparent enough & the reports are not published in a clear & accessible way	23%
There is no training focused on quality assurance	18%
Selection and nomination procedures are not transparent	15%
Other	15%

questions, it may be observed that lack of equal position of students is experienced at all levels of quality assurance, from institutional involvement to the participation in review panels.

Through the open answers in the survey some of the respondents highlight the lack of quality culture within the HEIs which is seen as an overarching indirect barrier for meaningful student engagement. The internal QA systems should stimulate all internal stakeholders to participate in a dialogue, to evaluate and discuss the quality of learning and teaching. It is particularly important to involve students in such discussions from the early stage of their enrollment in HE.

One of the respondents mentions that the extensive time of the selection process for student experts is a big barrier. Particularly in the case of last year's students, this becomes problematic, as they have limited time to get involved with QA procedures as student experts. Other barriers mentioned by NUSes are e.g. not accessible QA reports, the lack of training opportunities and not transparent QA processes.
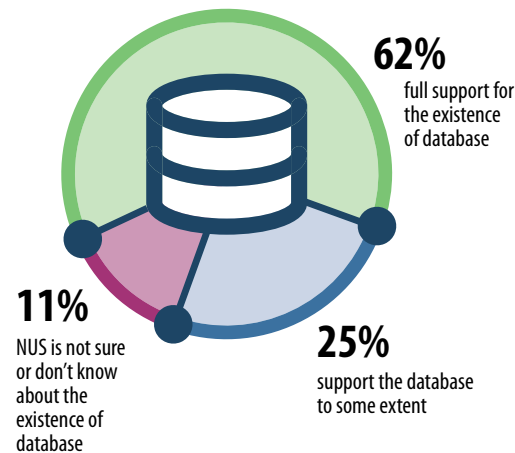
EQAR

ESU has promoted many of EQARs initiatives over the last 12 years. It can be seen in Figure 6.4., that 75% of our members fully (62%) or partly support (13%) the existence of a database in which all QA agencies are registered that work according to the ESGs. Nobody from the respondents opposes the idea of having the European register, but the other member unions are not sure (11%) or do not know (14%) about the existence of this database. This means there is work to do for EQAR's promotion, but there is no lack of credibility. These numbers do not show a significant change compared to 2018.

One of the main reasons for establishing EQAR was to increase the trust in the QA outcomes between countries. The unions were therefore asked if they agreed with foreign QA agencies registered by EQAR to perform reviews in their country (see Figure 6.5.) This same question was asked in 2018 as well where 42,5% responded that foreign agencies should be allowed in the country, but their conclusions had to be reviewed by the national agency. The same answer is now selected by 35.9% of the respondents. Another option for the same question suggested to automatically recognize the decisions of foreign agencies and 25% of the respondent supports this in comparison to the 20% of BWSE 2018 results.
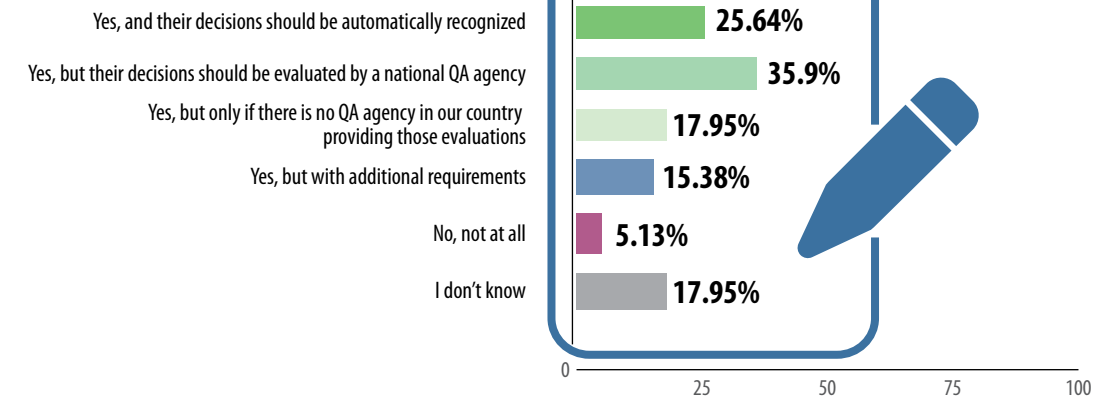
6 unions (15.38%) would only recognize their decision with additional requirements and 2 unions (5.13%) would not want this at all. Overall, we notice that the trust towards foreign agencies is increasing among the ESU member unions as many of them now prefer to have automatic recognition of QA procedures done by foreign agencies.

Do you agree with foreign QA agencies registered by EQAR to perform reviews in your country?

Yes, and their decisions should be automatically recognized	25.64%
Yes, but their decisions should be evaluated by a national QA agency	35.9%
Yes, but only if there is no QA agency in our country providing those evaluations	17.95%
Yes, but with additional requirements	15.38%
No, not at all	5.13%
I don't know	17.95%

Figure 6.5.
Do you agree with foreign QA agencies registered by EQAR to perform reviews in your country?

Figure 6.4.
How many NUS members support the existence of a database?

This leads us to the question of what impact EQAR has already made. In the multiple choice answers (see Figure 6.6.) we see that the impact of EQAR mainly comes down to increasing transparency (45.95%) and enabling cross-border QA (40.54%). This is more or less comparable to the answers received in BWSE 2018.

If we look at the future of EQAR our unions are very positive and see an important role for EQAR. We asked the respondents if they would support further development of EQAR in

How many NUS members support the existence of a database?

62% full support for the existence of database

11% NUS is not sure or don't know about the existence of database

25% support the database to some extent

What impact has EQAR already made?

- Increased transparency of the quality of higher education for students
- Enforcing the ESG
- Enabling the cross-border QA
- Giving higher education institutions the possibility to choose any QA agency from the register
- Opening national QA systems for agencies from abroad
- Other

45.95% 29.73% 40.54% 29.73% 18.92% 29.73%

Figure 6.6.
What impact has EQAR already made?

providing information about quality-assured higher education provision in EHEA and 41% agree to this fully. 38% of the unions support the idea with some concerns and 21% is not sure.

6.3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a key commitment of EHEA, QA seems to be one of the areas that witnesses at least some progress in implementation. The reason for this is of course the structure that exists around QA – the ESGs, QA agencies with registration to EQAR, external review experts, etc. These same structures are of utmost importance for us related to the topic of student engagement—not only in QA procedures but also in HE governance and decision-making, as we believe that students' engagement in QA is a core step to promote all the other engagements too. Therefore the meaningful student participation in QA—both internal and external is always in the center of our work.

This chapter helps us to reflect once more on the specific aspects of QA procedures where the voices of students can indicate developments and alarm about the need for stronger commitment and better communication. Noting as a positive step the work of 2018-2020 BFUG's Thematic peer group on QA in the introduction, we then discuss the purpose of QA to set a common understanding of what students think the QA should do. Enhancing study conditions, ensuring transparency and accountability in HE, as well as the trust building among HE stakeholders are the most-selected options among our membership which means that students want to experience, see and trust the outcomes of the QA.

Next, we see that compared to the previous year more countries are applying a combined approach of both institutional and programme reviews. This can be seen as a positive development as usually the combined approach can better address the diversity of institutions.

Moving to the internal QA, unfortunately, we record a regress compared to 2018 as fewer student representatives say that there is student involvement as full members. Furthermore, we also see responses about diverse approaches being applied within a country which makes it hard to identify a general type of student engagement in internal QA country-wise. This is a concerning development for us. Diversity of HEIs and universities in no way should imply a diversified approach to engaging students. Students are students in every mode and form of higher education and their meaningful and equal involvement is first of all a benefit for the quality of education—whatever form it has. Involving students should be embraced on all the levels and from all the bodies—from policymakers to practitioners in academia.

This smoothly leads us to the next part where we address the external QA and witness a strong majority of respondents stating students' involvement. Considering this information with the lack of involvement in internal QA (as stated in the previous paragraph) proves the point that implementing strong involvement in external QA through European standards does not necessarily guarantee student engagement in the internal QA. Furthermore, we also see that there are still some countries where students are not involved in external QA at all or are involved only as an information source. Ensuring students' participation in external

QA through embedding standards on this is a prominent step countries should make for having an enhanced QA system.

Another aspect of being involved in QA, particularly from the perspective of the national student unions, is the governance on the national level. Here we consider two indicators – involvement in the governing bodies of QA agencies and on national level discussions (mostly with the ministries or other state bodies). Though there is some affirmation that students are part of the governance – on the QA agency and national level, we also read a lot of comments from national student unions that often students are not taken as equal members, they are not treated as equal members when it comes to receiving information and feeling a part of a process, and they feel their participation is token. This is not only a structural problem, this is an issue of mindset too. Many of the times decision-makers remember about the students only at the very last point and even if they would want to involve them maybe at that stage, this turns into a token participation as students join at the end of the process to just say something without ownership and meaningful contribution. This is a dangerous disease that we all should work to get rid of.

On a positive note, compared to 2018 we see some improvement in the numbers of expert pools where students get a chance to have training about external QA. However, it is still a case for part of the countries only. This practice is especially useful when it's co-managed by the national student union and/or in cooperation with the national QA agency. The working process itself brings the atmosphere of collaboration, and further it motivates students to take initiatives as (co)managers of the expert pool and promote good practices of student engagement among students.

Building and utilization of QA expert pools in a collaborative manner requires resources and commitment to be in place from the side of QA agencies, national decision-makers and other beneficiaries. All the EHEA countries should have in place a collaborative structure for training, selection and appointment of the QA student-experts.

To understand the disengagement that is in place for internal or external QA, involvement on the national level, etc it is important to reflect on the barriers of student engagement that national student unions identify. The lack of information available for broader communities of the students is the highest barrier identified and the number of respondents here is higher than in 2018 unfortunately. Improving communication about QA should be a priority for QA agencies and QA offices at universities. Targeted communication tools should be developed to inform and engage students in the mission of QA.

Another major challenge is the lack of recognizing QA activities done by students. Universities can develop many mechanisms for this and this should be a tool to facilitate motivation and eagerness among students for participation. All these barriers highlight to us how much continuous work there still needs to be done, there should be clear actions and strategies for promoting student engagement in QA.

Recommendations

- Promote a multipurpose quality assurance on the national and institutional levels in EHEA. Utilize QA as a tool for enhancing the quality culture of higher education and for increasing the transparency about—and trust towards it

- In all EHEA countries apply a combined approach of institutional and programme accreditations to meet the diverse needs of higher education

- On the national level create incentives for universities to involve students as full members in internal QA. On the institutional level create an environment where students and other stakeholders acknowledge students as full members

- Through the ESG 2015 embed the involvement of students as full members in the external QA procedures throughout the whole EHEA. Reflect this in policies on the national and institutional levels

- Require the national QA agencies to include student representatives as full members of the governing structures and decision-making bodies

- On the national level sustain a regular dialogue with students about the QA policies and developments. Involve national students' representatives from the very beginning of policy initiatives and not only at the very end

- Across EHEA establish and use a QA pool to student-experts in countries with the purpose of enhancing the capacity of students through training in external QA, and use these trained students to promote engagement among other groups

- Regularly reflect on existing barriers of student engagement. Ensure the QA agencies and university QA offices implement outreach strategies directed to awareness-raising among wider groups of students about QA. Communication should be timely, comprehensive, accessible and user friendly

- Recognise and support student engagement in QA through flexible study conditions and non-academic learning recognition. This can include but is not limited to allocating ECTS, implementing extra-benefits and allowing flexible study timing for QA-related activities of students

- Stress and encourage the impact of EQAR on ensuring transparency and cross-border QA among the EHEA countries

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7. RECOGNITION

7.1. INTRODUCTION

Through the Bologna Process, as well as through other initiatives such as the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997), recognition of qualifications and degrees has developed into an important discussion topic among different stakeholders of the higher education community. Both on EHEA and global levels we have followed insightful developments on this topic during the past years.

In November 2019, after meetings and consultations for a few years, the General Conference of UNESCO adopted the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education and now it's in the process of ratification, acceptance, approval, or accession by the states.

On the level of EHEA, we saw through the Paris Communiqué in 2018 that Ministers commit to implement the Council of Europe/UNESCO Lisbon Recognition Convention and its Recommendations, in particular on the recognition of qualifications held by refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation. They urged the adoption of transparent procedures for the recognition of qualifications, prior learning and study periods, supported by interoperable digital solutions. Following this, in September 2018, the BFUG formally established the Thematic Peer Group B on the Lisbon Recognition Convention (TPG B on LRC) to function until the next Ministerial Conference in Rome 2020. This group has been discussing topics such as establishing the legal framework to allow full implementation of the LRC, establishing the distribution of work and responsibilities among the competent institutions to carry out transparable and fair recognition procedures, achievement of automatic recognition, recognition of other forms of education, qualifications held by refugees and the importance of digitalization in the area of recognition procedures. The group has had meetings, thematic seminars and peer learning activities that enabled sharing of knowledge and experiences between the key stakeholders.

In parallel to these international developments, of course, recognition procedures do not stop on local and national levels and they leave direct consequences and experiences for students. In this chapter we look into those experiences, presenting to the reader findings about recognition of qualifications and credits, automatic recognition and recognition of prior learning.

7.2. MAIN FINDINGS ON IMPLEMENTATION

Recognition of qualifications and credits: European Diploma Supplement (EDS)

The Diploma supplement is one of the most important documents introduced by the European higher education institutions as it provides a unifying document that enables and promotes the flexibility and diversity of the European higher education system. Furthermore, it represents a document that connects three bridges; the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the Bologna Process, and the Europass. It's a tool that provides higher education institutions, employers, recognition authorities and other possible stakeholders with a common understanding of skills and competences, that students gained through HE. Every student should be entitled to this document after finishing the studies, as it is a proof of learning outcomes and achieved qualifications that the students have gained during higher education. It should also include the nature, level, context, content and status of an individual`s study programme. It should be given automatically upon graduation and should be free of charge. We asked our membership about this and 65% (24 out of 37) of responding national unions of students have reported that there is a national legislation for European diploma supplement in their respective country, 13% of respondents replied of not having any official legislation on European diploma supplement and 22% don't know of such a legislation. Out of the 24 respondents who confirmed that students do receive European diploma supplements right after they finish their studies, 18 mentioned that those are free of charge.

Assessment and final decision on foreign diplomas/qualifications/credits

20 unions out of 34, making up for 58% of the total) reported that the assessment of foreign diplomas is done by recognition authorities. In 5 out of those 20 cases, the task is shared with higher education institutions while in 3 cases out of those 20 the competence is shared between the recognition authority and the national government. The national government is the sole responsible for the assessment of foreign diplomas in 24% of the cases and in only one case it shares the competence with higher education institutions. In the remaining 15% of cases, higher education institutions are solely responsible for the assessment.

When it comes to making the final decision of recognition after assessing the diplomas, all three entities have received an equal amount of selection by the respondents —around 40% as this is a multiple choice question. The numbers are not surprising and similar to the BWSE 2018 data.

Regarding the assessment of foreign qualifications, 14 out of 29 respondents have reported that the recognition authorities are responsible for assessment, 13 out of 29 have named higher education institutions and only 9 out of 29 have stated that National governments are assessing the foreign qualifications. This means of course that in some cases the responsibility is shared: in two cases the recognition authorities share it with national governments and in 5 with HEIs. Regarding the final decision of the assessment of the

foreign qualifications, the share is almost equally distributed between three entities across countries (around 40% as multiple options are possible).

On the other hand, the assessment of foreign credits is being primarily done by the higher education institutions (76%), as opposed to recognition authorities with 15% or national governments with 9%. (Only in 4 cases the task is shared between HEIs and recognition authorities and in just one the HEIs share it with the ministry. The ministry and the recognition authority work together on the assessment of foreign credits only in two cases.) The final decision is again in the majority of the countries responsibility of the higher education institutions (81%) and is less often left to the recognition authorities or national governments. This could be easily explained since the recognition of the credits is more time efficient and simpler when done by the higher education institution, in comparison to the assessment of diplomas or qualifications, which both take more time and are way more complex.

Transparency, simplicity and non-discrimination

Recognition procedures are often highly important for students on their academic path and for many serve as a stepping stone to higher education, that is why it is of extreme importance that all procedures and processes are transparent, simple and discrimination-free. As seen in Figure 7.1, NUSes mostly agree that the recognition procedures in their respective countries are transparent (15 unions or 41% of the total) and non-discriminatory (19 unions or 52% of the total), however, the situation is not similar when it comes to simplicity since the unions are split in half. 14 unions out of 37 respondents think that procedures are too complex, on the other hand, 12 out of 37 indicate the simplicity of the procedures, 9 of the unions are undecided and two unions did not know the answer. In comparison to the BWSE 2015 and 2018, the perceived transparency and fairness of the procedures have

To what extent does your NUS agree that the recognition procedures are transparent / simple / non-discriminatory?
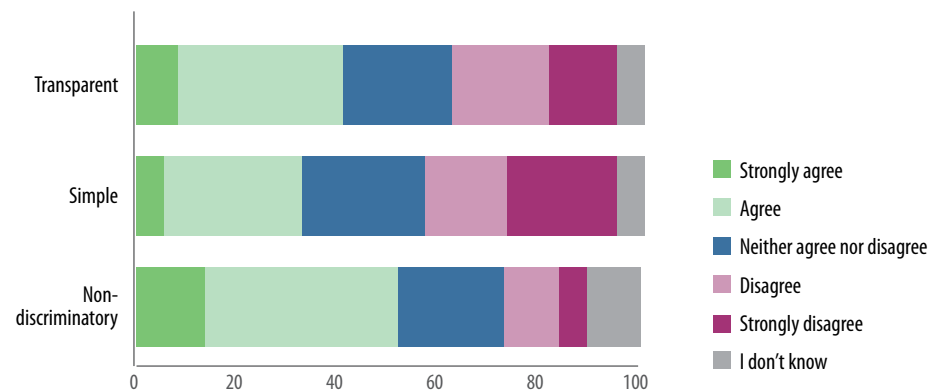
Figure 7.1.
To what extent does your NUS agree that the recognition procedures are trasnparent/simple/ non-discriminatory?

improved since the share of the unions have been increasing over the last couple of years: in 2018 37% of the unions have agreed with procedures being transparent and 42% saw them as non-discriminatory.

Unfortunately, regarding the complexity of the procedures there is no positive development, the figure is very similar to the one from the BWSE 2018 report, where 18 out of 42 unions (43%) reported of recognition procedures being complicated from the student perspective. This is not to be underestimated: while procedures can be built in a transparent and non-discriminatory way on paper, if they are too complex to be understood by those who need them, then they become unjust de facto.

A bit more than half of the responding unions (57%) expressed agreement that it is fairly simple for a student to proceed with degree recognition and recognition of credits gained within enrolment in a mobility programme (Erasmus) in their countries, however, recognition of the credits gained through enrolment outside of mobility is still a burden for many, since 38% of the respondents have expressed dissatisfaction about the credits' recognition procedures. Few unions are still generally reporting obstinate problems when it comes to the recognition of credits obtained during study exchange, such problems with credit equivalence have been reported by NUSes from the Czech Republic, Republic of Moldova, Slovakia and Germany. This suggests that complexity of processes in this area remains a barrier for many students on the way to their educational goals and this area has not improved much over the last couple of years.

Time limit

Besides administration issues that are heavy for many students applying for recognition procedures, there are sometimes also problems with the time frame. 22% of the responding unions indicate not having any fixed time frame for recognition processes. The majority of the respondents are not aware whether any time frame exists (41%) and in some of the countries, the procedure itself takes from 1 to 6 months (37%). Only 7 out of 37 (19%) have responded that recognition procedures last up to one month.

Despite the majority (approximately 57%) have agreed that the recognition of credits obtained within a mobility programme is pretty effortless for a student, there are some NUSes who do acknowledge that there are still problems arising when it comes to matching the credits of a study programme at home and host universities during the mobility.

There are some cases reported by our NUSes, that show how much recognition of education qualifications can complicate and even unnecessarily prolong an individual's academic goals, as time limit seems to be problematic in Bulgaria and Italy, as reported by NUSes, as this can make starting a new study year abroad very difficult due to overlapping of the time frames of academic years in different countries.

Another arising concern tends to be the possibility for recognition of PL for non-EU citizens or refugees. NUS from Switzerland reports that since RPL is done autonomously by universities, this can mean different approaches and criteria for asylum seekers or student refugees, giving them unfair circumstances when entering HE. Likewise, NUS from Iceland is also reporting difficulties in the area of recognition of qualifications for non-EU students while entering HE.

Automatic recognition

Automatic recognition has been one of the many golden goals of the Bologna Process, aiming to improve and unify diversity throughout the European Higher Education Area. The term has been firstly mentioned in the Bucharest Communiqué in 2012, so fairly to say almost a decade ago. As stated in the EHEA Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition from 2015 automatic recognition means that *"to the automatic right of an applicant holding a qualification of a certain level to be considered for entry to a programme of further study in the next level in any other EHEA country"*. This Bologna goal aims to give students endless opportunities to create and develop their individual academic growth in a personalized way, creating less-complicated, effective, non-discriminatory and time-efficient recognition procedures, boosting their motivation to thrive and search for the best academic path.

The internalization of higher education has brought a lot of changes and possibilities for students, as well as for teachers. Mobility programmes have gained popularity among students, increasing the number of short-term exchanges and full degree mobilities. This affects also the labour market and higher education area, creating a more competitive atmosphere between HEIs, which can also lead to positive effects, such as increased quality of HE programmes. However, even though a little rivalry between HEIs is healthy, it is crucial not to forget the essential focus - the students and their education. Therefore, unsuccessful recognition either of credits or diplomas should never be the sacrifice a student should pay, only due to prejudices or distrust HEIs still have between one another. Besides, it is important to emphasize that automatic recognition could be seen as the main and end-goal of the Bologna Process, as it does represent everything that the process in the EHEA stands for: mutual trust and common tools. We can expect that only when the full implementation of all Bologna tools will be in place in all EHEA countries, then common perception of trust will start developing, allowing automatic recognition to become a real possibility. If the most important Bologna goals are only implemented on paper, then we definitely cannot expect automatic recognition in the EHEA anytime soon.

Since the beginning students have been in favour of this idea, firstly confirming this in the BWSE survey in 2018 with the vast majority of the unions being fully or partially supportive of this idea. Not much has changed since 90% of the respondents have again confirmed to fully or partially support the idea of automatic recognition and no-one is against. Besides,

31 out of 37 respondents have stated that automatic recognition is either essential, of high importance or moderate importance for their NUS.
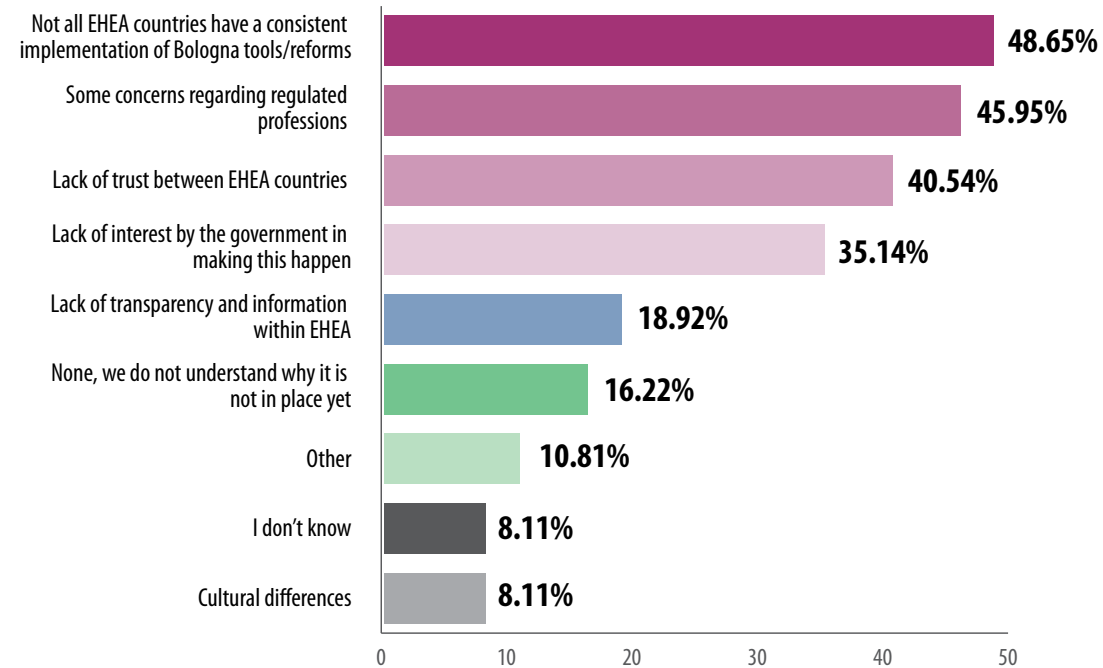
Even though students might seem excited and supportive about the idea of automatic recognition, unfortunately, the reality is still far from desired. As reported in the survey, 27% of the countries still do not have any form of automatic recognition. Only 16% of the respondents replied to have automatic recognition in place for neighbouring countries and only 27% automatically recognize degrees from countries with fully implemented Bologna tools. In Montenegro, as reported from the NUS, they do automatically recognize diplomas issued before 2008 from Yugoslavia and Serbia, Austria according to our NUS automatically recognizes degrees from EU, EEA and Switzerland. As seen from the answers, the most popular are bilateral agreements, as 38% of the respondents have replied to have them in place. The diversity between the countries across the EU is pretty evident when it comes to automatic recognition, as each of them found different ways to subtly implement some form of automatic recognition in place. However, it is essential to add that this Bologna commitment is already in place through various regional agreements that exist in some European regions, e.g. Estonia-Latvia-Lithuania, Benelux, Nordic agreement.

Main barriers for implementing automatic recognition

As seen in Figure 7.2, one of the substantial barriers students see to automatic recognition is the fact that not all EHEA countries have fully implemented Bologna tools and reforms (49% of respondents), this is closely followed by the lack of trust between EHEA countries (41% of respondents) and is undoubtedly directly connected to the first reason. Furthermore, one of the main barriers on the way to automatic recognition are also concerns regarding regulated professions (46% of respondents), lack of transparency and information within the EHEA (19% of respondents) and lack of interest by the government to make automatic recognition a reality (35% of respondents). Besides the main given options, a barrier has also been highlighted by NUS from Luxembourg, stating that the lack of engagement of different stakeholders is harmful while they [the stakeholders] would help in the demand of automatic recognition of diplomas at national level. 6 out of 37 (16%) unions have stated that they do not understand why automatic recognition is not implemented yet in their countries and 3 out of 37 (8%) have stated cultural differences as the main problem on the way to it.

NUSes from Austria and Poland pointed out that automatic recognition could, besides obvious easier accessibility, also mean less stress for students, as they wouldn't need to encounter time-consuming and bureaucratically complicated recognition procedures. Besides, NUS from Luxembourg strongly believes that automatic recognition should be prioritized at national level, as this would also immensely benefit students to avoid precarity and easily and quickly access the job market after graduation in their home countries, as they wouldn't need to wait for unnecessary long and complicated recognition procedures. NUS from Bulgaria has also supported this thesis, as they would like to see changes in the simplicity of the process.

According to your NUS, what are the main barriers for implementing automatic recognition of degrees within EHEA?
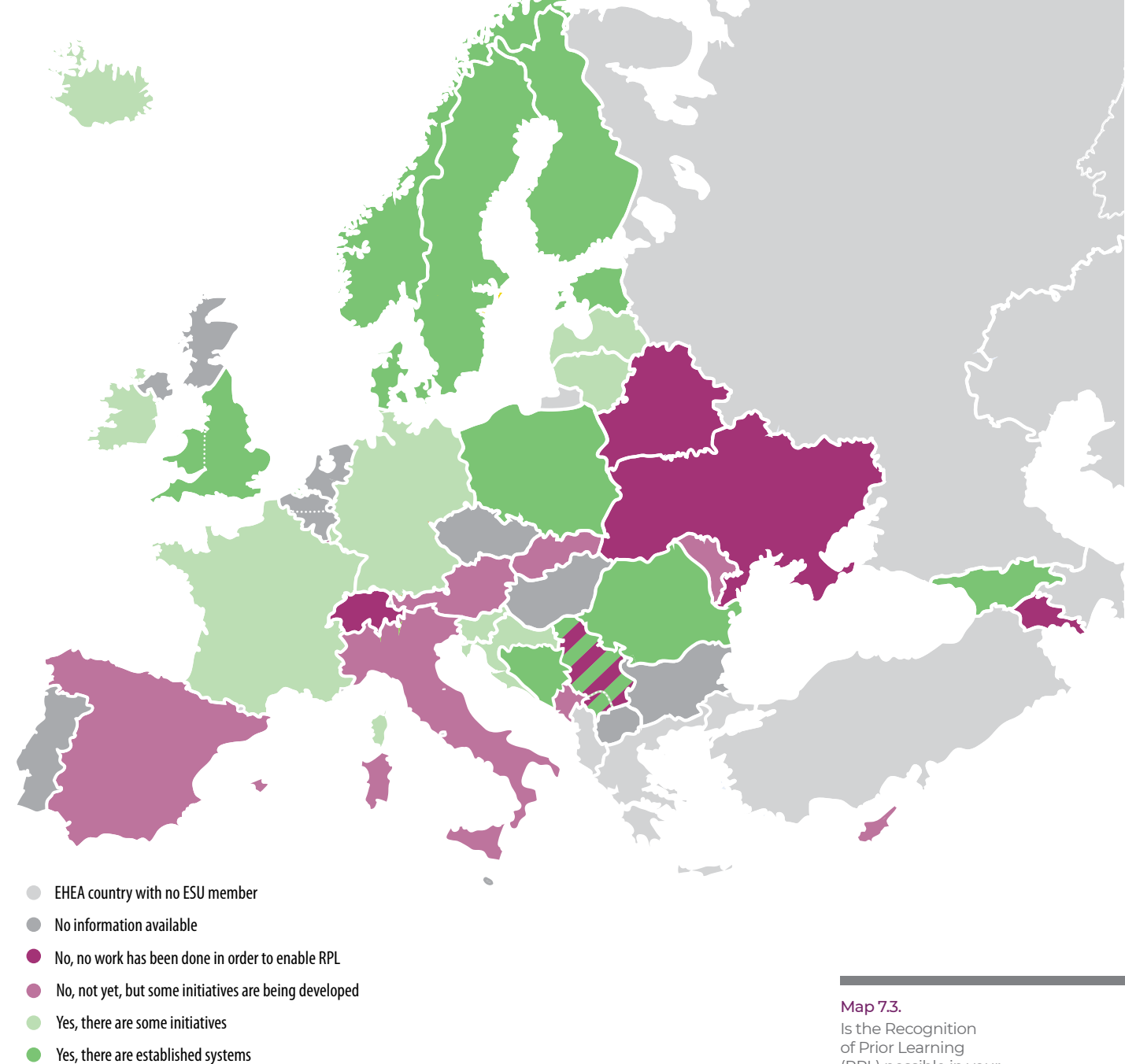

Barrier	Percentage
Not all EHEA countries have a consistent implementation of Bologna tools/reforms	48.65%
Some concerns regarding regulated professions	45.95%
Lack of trust between EHEA countries	40.54%
Lack of interest by the government in making this happen	35.14%
Lack of transparency and information within EHEA	18.92%
None, we do not understand why it is not in place yet	16.22%
Other	10.81%
I don't know	8.11%
Cultural differences	8.11%

Figure 7.2.
According to your NUS, what are the main barriers for implementing automatic recognition of degrees within EHEA?

Successfully implemented automatic recognition would also positively affect the mobility of students, as this would allow the accessible and smoothest possible transfer between different HEI across Europe, as stated by NUSes from Georgia, Ireland and UK. This would, as highlighted by NUSes from Iceland and Romania, also result in a more diverse student population and a valuable change of atmosphere in the academic environment. NUS from Croatia has expressed some concerns, since they don't have a policy on substantial differences, which would make the entire process more transparent and set the quality standard for the recognition.

Recognition of prior learning

Recognition of prior learning has become important in the Bologna Process in 2005, when it was mentioned as one of the important goals in the Bergen Communiqué. Later it was again set as a commitment in the Yerevan Communiqué in 2015, stating that obstacles to recognition of prior learning should be removed in order to improve the accessibility to HE, besides higher education institutions as central stakeholders should improve their capability and mechanisms to recognize skills and competences that students have gained through formal and informal prior learning. In the latest communiqué, Paris Communiqué

- ⬤ EHEA country with no ESU member
- ⬤ No information available
- ⬤ No, no work has been done in order to enable RPL
- ⬤ No, not yet, but some initiatives are being developed
- ⬤ Yes, there are some initiatives
- ⬤ Yes, there are established systems

Map 7.3.
Is the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) possible in your country?

in 2018, ministers have committed to adopt transparent procedures also when it comes to recognition of prior learning.
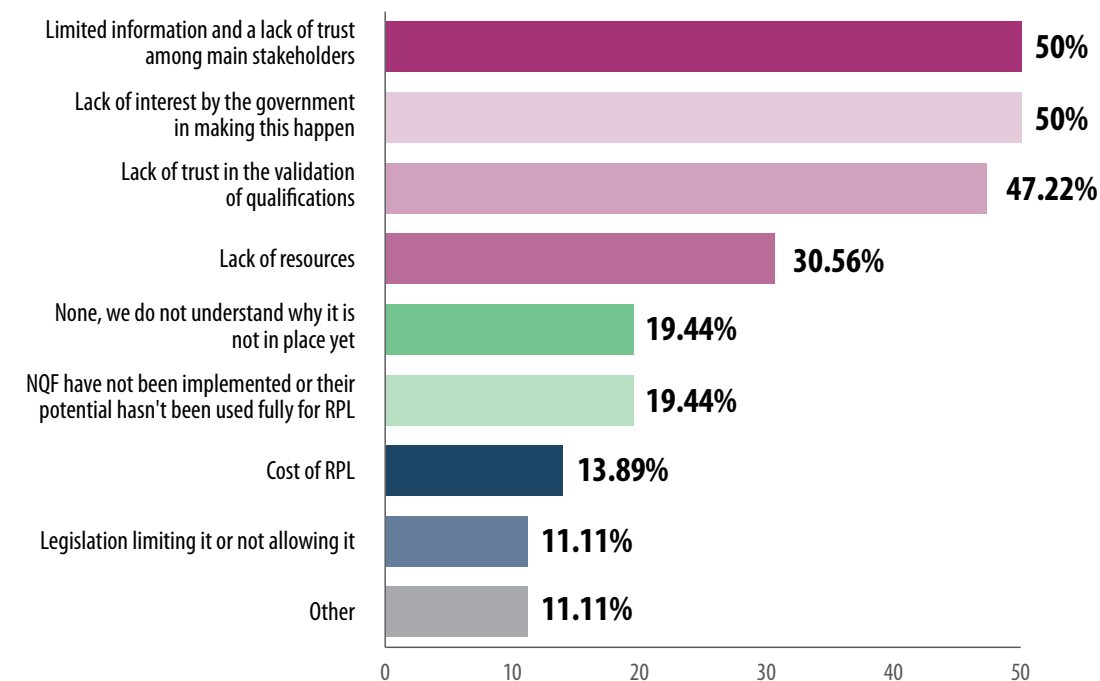
Undoubtedly, the recognition of prior learning is of extreme importance for students, since it can have an immense impact on achieving desired educational goals. That is why ESU has always shown great support for this manner, besides recognition of prior learning should not only be done for the purpose of accessibility or entering the labour market, but should be also seen as an additional and supportive part of the academic knowledge gained through higher education.

However, the results from the survey are again not that optimistic. As seen in Figure 7.3., only 7 out of 37 unions are reporting of having well-established systems in the area of recognition of prior learning and 12 out of 37 have some initiatives in place on the national level, but not yet fully developed. Even though this measure was set as one of the Bologna goals almost 15 years ago, there are still 17 respondents that have reported that their countries do not possess at the moment any kind of structure that makes the recognition of prior learning possible, among those 17, only 7 mention a slow start with few initiatives towards RPL. The result is pretty discouraging on its own already, however adding up the fact that the number of the positive feedback has decreased from BWSE in 2018 makes it absolutely disappointing, since in the previous BWSE report 62% (27 NUSes out of 43) of the respondents have reported to have either well-developed systems or well-developed initiatives in place, when this time only 51% of the respondents have reported of positive changes. It is quite obvious that some well-planned actions and strong collaboration between essential stakeholders will be needed in order to achieve what was set in Yerevan Communiqué in 2015.

In countries where recognition of prior learning is in place and well functioning, it is mostly used either to cover part of the studies (56%), or to gain access to higher education (40%) or to proceed to the next cycle in education (40%). Three countries, to name Croatia, Luxembourg and France have stated that recognition of prior learning is also used to obtain a full degree. NUSes from Italy and Armenia report that RPL is also used for the purpose of lifelong learning.

Based on the reports of our unions, Figure 7.4. shows that the three biggest barriers to the recognition of prior learning are (1) limited information and a lack of trust among main stakeholders (50%), (2) lack of interest by the government in making RPL a reality (50%) and (3) lack of trust in the validation of qualifications (47%). Inability of tight cooperation between stakeholders at the national level on the topic of recognition of prior learning seems to be problematic and reflects a lack of trust among stakeholders. Since higher education institutions and other important stakeholders are apparently not involved enough, this also reflects on the government who lacks interest to regulate this area. Another important barrier acknowledged by the students is the lack of resources, as 31% of the unions have stated this still being a problem, together with 17% of the participants answering that the cost of recognition of prior learning is also an obstacle. Besides, 19% of the unions have replied that one of the

According to your NUS, what are the main barriers for barriers for recognition of prior learning?

possible obstacles may be also the fact that National Qualification Frameworks (NQF) have not been implemented or their potential hasn't been used fully for RPL, additionally 11% stated that limited or non-existent national legislations add to the problem.

Not much has changed, when comparing it to the results from the BWSE 2018 survey as lack of trust is still predominating in this area and keeping recognition of prior learning from becoming a reality for all students across EHEA. However, surprisingly, trust in governments to focus on this problematic area in HE has decreased, as already half (50%) of the respondents replied of not trusting their authorities to be doing a sufficient job, which is surely very discouraging since in 2018 only 12 unions out of 38 (32%) have stated this as problematic. This is a very worrisome trend. As stated in the latest Paris Communiqué, special focus should be paid to the transparency of the recognition procedures for prior learning. This is why it is even more worrisome that our NUS from Denmark reports that procedures of prior learning tend to be biased towards benefiting students from more privileged social backgrounds, as they seem to present previous experiences in better ways and have more developed social networks, giving them more options to get accepted into desired programme.

Successful and unsuccessful best practices

There are, however, also some good examples of successful systems of recognition of prior learning. NUS from Croatia has highlighted the example of the University of Rijeka as supporting student motivation through engaging them in additional learning modules outside HEI, which is being recognized as a valuable additional education, consequently supporting the importance of extracurricular work as an addition to formal education. Similarly, NUS from Germany reports about a good-working framework for RPL established by some universities of applied sciences, whereas universities are often declining any form of RPL. They report that many students do not even try to get RPL as it seems impossible and very bureaucratic. NUS from Ireland has highlighted Cork Institute of Technology as a great example of best practice in this field as they have a well-established system of RPL and have just recently celebrated 20 years of practice. Another arising concern tends to be the lack of possibility for recognition of PL for non-EU citizens or refugees. NUS from Switzerland reports that since RPL is done autonomously by universities, this can mean different approaches and criteria for asylum seekers or student refugees, giving them unfair circumstances when entering HE. Besides student refugees, who do not get prior education recognized, have to undergo an additional exam to prove learning outcomes. Likewise, NUS from Iceland also reports difficulties in the area of recognition of qualifications for non-EU students while entering HE. However, NUS from Italy reports that there are already some initiatives to use Refugees Passports as an efficient tool to enroll refugees and asylum seekers in HE.

What could be done in order to remove those barriers

As stated from NUSs from Georgia, Slovenia Germany, Poland, Italy and Austria there is a great need to raise the awareness of the importance and benefits of RPL for HEI and students themselves and to encourage universities to implement these procedures as a constant. NUS from Luxembourg has highlighted that extracurricular work, such as voluntary work is not recognized as valuable education and there is a need for this area to become more visible and regulated. Besides it is necessary to change the approach and perspective on what education means and how and where knowledge can be gained. This could be done through tighter collaboration of key stakeholders, as NUS from Iceland is reporting, there is a need to increase cooperation between Recognition of Prior Learning institutions, the government and the higher education institutions in order to remove those barriers on a way to RPL.

NUS from Serbia is planning to start and support a national legislative creation process. Similarly, NUSes from Italy, Romania and Poland feel that their higher education system is lacking decent procedures and guidelines to introduce and promote RPL among HEI. NUS from Switzerland is putting the highlight on the creation of fair and efficient recognition procedures for refugees and asylum seekers, as this is at the moment not done in a proper way, consequently holding these students from enrolling into a quality tertiary education. NUSs from Croatia and Armenia are demanding more flexibility, as the HE system in

general still seems very rigid and unwilling to recognize any other form of gaining learning outcomes. Another important point that has been brought up from NUS from Ireland, it is mandatory to adapt the language terminology in order to increase the accessibility of the information on RPL for students. NUSes from Luxembourg and Estonia are also calling for more financial aid, that could help make RPL easier, more accessible and overall more visible on national HE level. NUS from Armenia reports that they expect some major changes in the area of HE, therefore they believe there will be positive changes in the recognition field as well.

7.3. CONCLUSIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Throughout the main findings presented above, we see that there are multiple differences and challenges in how the recognition as a key commitment of the EHEA is being implemented —depending on both the level/authority of decision-making for recognition, as well as conditioned by the essence of the credentials (qualifications, prior learning, credits, etc.) that need to be recognized.

It is concerning to see that for the diploma supplement we still receive reports about missing national legislation for it. National authorities bear the responsibility to give a common framework for the universities to use it while issuing the diploma supplement to students. National legislation should guarantee the right of students to receive the diploma supplement after graduation and free of charge, as well as it should be a reference point for students when they have problems either with the reception of the diploma supplement or with its content.

When we look at the assessment of foreign qualifications and foreign diplomas, embracement of different approaches among countries is visible and that is an understandable reality. The priority is to have less bureaucratic, more accessible and efficient procedures that will support students rather than create extra hurdles for them. Most importantly, there should be no discriminatory approach in place conditioned by the different bodies that implement recognition procedures.

We see that the recognition of foreign credits is being mainly done by the higher education institutions, which hopefully makes the procedures more easier for students. The recognition framework should work equally well and fair for all students in a certain country—independently from which university they are.

When we ask about transparency and non-discriminatory approaches, we see that only half of the respondents think the recognition procedures are transparent and exactly only half of them consider the approaches to be non-discriminatory. There is also still a big share of respondents who consider the recognition procedures to be complex and time-consuming. These all are worrying realities as such a perception among the student community means they not only face issues but are mostly sceptical to trust and apply for recognition procedures as they are aware of the complexity and lack of transparency. More difficulties persist when it comes to the recognition of credits earned outside of the

Erasmus mobility experiences which signifies that such higher education institutions do not have a well-developed recognition procedure but rely only on the framework given by the ERASMUS+ programme. We are sad to see this picture as in this area there was little if any improvement tracked during the recent few years.

Next, looking into the timeframes that apply for the recognition procedures, we see a lack of clearly defined timelines that would help students understand what are the stages of procedure they are involved in. This adds up to the issue of transparency and doesn't enable the most accessible information about recognition procedures. Recognition timeframes become extremely important when they are combined with admission deadlines for students who want to continue their studies. Artificially prolonged and bureaucratic procedures may result in a situation where a student has to wait for a whole year to meet the next admission deadline. All these aspects need to be taken into account by recognition authorities/offices while developing the procedures. There should be at least an individualized approach to understand the needs of students in relation to the timing.

We also see much longer procedures being applied for refugee students or non-EU students. The authorities should do their utmost to ensure swift and efficient recognition procedures for all students utilizing the potential of the ENIC-NARIC network and other European networks where applicable, as well as proactively contacting relevant authorities from third countries.

All these issues are being reflected in the automatic recognition processes of course. Some countries have bilateral or regional agreements to ensure that automatic recognition is in place. However, the whole purpose of the Bologna Process is to ensure trust and automatic recognition, and it is concerning that in order to achieve this goal countries are setting up agreements with a few others. All the EHEA countries should be carefully looking into how they are implementing the Bologna tools to enable automatic recognition. Most importantly, we see a need to make automatic recognition a political priority on national levels.

We see a discouraging regress when it comes to the recognition of prior learning. Only a minority of the unions report initiatives that support the RPL procedures, which extremely hurdles the flexibility of the learning process damaging a possible student-centered approach, as well as access to further education for those from disadvantaged backgrounds who for some unfortunate reasons do not possess formal qualifications or credentials. It is also concerning to see that the lack of trust is one of the main barriers for RPL and there is a major lack of trust among our respondents towards how well the governments are dealing with this. This lack of trust has unfortunately increased during the past years.

Recommendations

- National legislations should define a framework for diploma supplement for it to be issued free of charge after graduation. This framework should be well-communicated among students and serve as a reference point for any time when they have issues with the diploma supplement

- Recognition procedures should never be used to discriminate against students from a certain country or other backgrounds. Furthermore, national authorities should guarantee that within their country students from different universities have the right to undergo the same recognition procedures. Higher education institutions should be provided with platforms where such information can be exchanged and discussed to ensure all students are treated equally well

- Transparency, accessibility and time-efficiency of recognition procedures should be under constant review of respective bodies/authorities

- Steps of procedure and respective time frame should always be clearly communicated to students by recognition offices/national authorities. The individual needs of students should always be inquired and taken into consideration while implementing the procedures

- A robust exchange of information should be developed among recognition bodies. The information and communication technologies of the 21st century should be fully utilized to make more efficient and less bureaucratic recognition procedures

- The implementation of Bologna tools should be a priority to make automatic recognition happen. Furthermore, automatic recognition should be a political priority

- RPL should be seen as a strong enabler of student-centered learning and access to formal education for those who have been disadvantaged

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8. INTERNATIONALISATION AND MOBILITY

8.1. INTRODUCTION

"Internationalisation can be a tool for achieving higher quality education, personal development and intercultural competences of students, social cohesion and peaceful coexistence of people, as well as national and global sustainable development. It is important to keep in mind that internationalisation is a tool for increased added value of education, not an end in itself."

A lack of financing for internationalisation and mobility remains the most pressing issue in this year's edition of BWSE. It is important to remark though that students do not equally feel the consequences of underfunding in the sector. Mobility remains a privilege for students that enjoy the necessary financial support from other sources, leaving prospective mobile students from lower socio-economic backgrounds behind. Increased funding for the Erasmus+ programme is desperately needed in order to finally overcome the gap and make mobility a reality for all. In order to achieve this goal, however, a policy change is needed not only when it comes to finance. As this chapter shows, the Bologna Process still has a long way to go to make mobility truly inclusive.

8.2. MAIN FINDINGS

Financing mobility and internationalisation

Increased funding is crucial to ensure more equal access for a larger group of beneficiaries from all ages and different educational purposes in order to respond to the high demand of smaller organisations and individual citizens, especially those from disadvantaged groups who still struggle to access and be successful in the current programme.

The clear majority of all respondents indicated that financial difficulties are the number one consideration for students who would like to undergo a learning mobility period but ultimately decide against it. On the European level, funding for education within the Multiannual Financial Framework should be increased so that the funding allows for a realistic realisation of the set goals. This entails promoting and supporting individual mobility, providing capacity building opportunities for all levels and stakeholders involved in education and safeguarding the functioning of international organisations. Within the Erasmus+ programme, targeted grants should be offered to students from underrepresented groups to widen participation. This

Spending a semester or a year abroad is a driver of academic, social and intercultural skills development but can only live up to its full potential when accessible to everyone. ESU firmly believes that continued investment in the Erasmus+ programme is needed in order to reach the European wide target of 20% mobile students. Increased investment in the Erasmus+ programme will contribute to societal progress by promoting shared civic values and active citizenship through mobility, volunteering and cooperation projects.

Is your NUS satisfied or dissatisfied with the resources allocated towards reaching the target goals?

Very satisfied **0%**
Satisfied **8.7%**
26.09% Neither
4.35% I don't know
52,17% Dissatisfied
8.7% Very dissatisfied
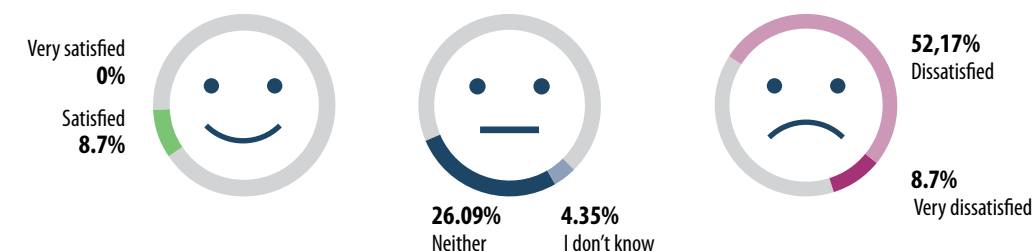
Figure 8.1.
Is your NUS sattisfied or dissatisfied with the resources allocated towards reaching the target goals?

When being asked whether national unions of students are satisfied with the current resources allocated towards reaching targeted mobility goals, only 2 countries indicated that they are happy with the given provision of funding. As seen in Figure 8.1., 60% of all respondents made clear that they are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. The data clearly shows that there is a pressing need for countries to rethink current models and prioritise effective measures to reach the targeted goals.

Internationalisation strategies

The picture concerning national strategies for internationalisation of HE in Europe is mixed. While national strategies exist in 18 countries, only one union considered them to be well implemented and working, with the rest citing deficiencies. In 5 countries, a national strategy is in the process of being developed, with 2 NUSes being directly involved in its development, 1 NUS being somewhat involved, and most worryingly, in cases of Moldova and Ukraine, both NUSes not being involved in this process at all. In the case of Romania, there has been a deadlock in developing a national strategy, which the NUS has been criticising for years. The government's unwillingness to develop a comprehensive system has led to piecemeal implementation by some HEIs which are attempting to increase mobility and are granted additional funds based on their success, but this outcome is considered very much lacking by the NUS. In some countries, such as Iceland, Norway, Czechia and the UK, internationalisation targets have not been set nationally, but are being pursued by HEIs and collectives of HEIs individually - in many cases very effectively. This

shows another approach to strategic internationalisation, which can work especially well in very autonomous or decentralised HE systems, but which can also result in big disparities in the results between different HEIs, thus leaving some students behind.

In the case of Croatia, an increased push to internationalise HE has led to overextension in terms of competence of teaching staff. With new programmes and courses opening up in foreign languages, for example, there is a lag in assessing the quality of teaching in these courses, for example the language skills of the respective teaching staff.

Barriers for implementing internationalisation strategies

Lack of resources and lack of given priority by the stakeholders were identified as the main barriers with respectively 47 and 45% of respondents pointing to them. We cannot hope to move forward with high-quality internationalisation of education as long as almost half of the student unions experience is that not enough funding is being allocated to it. The underlying reason for the apparent lack of stakeholder interest in internationalisation are from some reported to be a political or ideological lack of will to internationalise but may also according to others be caused by education institutions being busy dealing with the effects of budget cuts, digital transformation or other major challenges.

Another major barrier for internationalisation strategies is that the needed steps are not being taken from the national level. 34% of respondents identified a lack of continuous assessment and follow-up of the process and 32% identified a lack of effective measures for fostering mobility. This shows that there continues to be a significant gap between the internationalisation ambitions of governments and the concrete actions they take to make it happen in reality. Furthermore, 29% of respondents report that there is a lack of guidance from the national level to the education institutions and 26% report a lack of consistency in the initiatives taken. Thus, there is room for improvement in the actions taken to follow through on the ambitions, to ensure that education institutions experience sufficient guidance and clear consistent signals in the policies.

It is also important for the successful implementation of internationalisation strategies that students are motivated and all stakeholders are engaged. 26% of respondents reported that there is a lack of interest from domestic students in internationalisation which shows that there is room for improvement in designing the internationalisation initiatives in a way that is beneficial and attractive for the student body. 16% of respondents reported a lack of interest from international students. These are important barriers to address since motivated students who feel a positive impact of mobility and internationalisation on their studies and spread this motivation to other students are a key factor in making the internationalisation strategy a success.

Regarding setting effective targets for internationalisation, there is also some room for improvement. 13% of respondents reported that no target is set in their country while 5% report that the target does exist but is unrealistic. 8% of respondents report that the

National Union of Students in their country is not familiar with the target. This should be improved since ESU believes that a meaningful partnership with students' unions is an important step towards ensuring a successful internationalisation process.

Among other barriers identified were: Lack of collaboration from university faculty, high administrative burdens, and specifically in the case of the United Kingdom a perception from international students that they are not welcome, likely fostered by the negative political discourse we observe about foreigners. The Bologna with Student Eyes publication in 2018 explored in some details how the British and Irish students' unions experience Brexit as a major problem for internationalisation and student mobility to and from their countries. This is both due to the direct practical and financial impact of Brexit-related policies but also importantly the indirect impacts of the sheer uncertainty felt by prospective mobile students and the negative political rhetoric. These problems described in the previous Bologna With Student Eyes publication remain largely unsolved with students' rights and good conditions for universities being left behind in the process.

Internationalisation at home

While mobility is an essential part of internationalisation, internationalisation at home is also an important factor. Internationalisation at home can not replace the transformative experience of being mobile but it does add value in its own right by making the daily life on campus more diverse and putting the education activities into an international context. The Bologna with Student Eyes surveys have been used to monitor internationalisation at home initiatives for years by asking the national unions of students *"What tools of internationalisation at home are most commonly used by higher education institutions in your country?".*

Comparing the survey from 2020 with the one from 2018, results are close to stagnant for most of the internationalisation initiatives. However, a few stand out. Some progress has been made on education institutions offering modules or programmes taught in foreign languages with 71% of respondents perceiving this as common in 2020 compared to 49% in 2018. Progress has also been made on the focus on integrating international students with domestic students with 63% of respondents perceiving this as common in 2020 compared to 51% in 2018. This is, however, a focus area where there is still room for improvement. Ideally, a focus on integrating international students with domestic students both socially and academically with their domestic peers should become common in all countries.

Regarding domestic teachers teaching in foreign languages, there has been a very modest improvement with 55% of respondents perceiving this as "common" in 2020 compared to 49% in 2018. It should, however, be noted that this number does not say anything about the quality of teaching in the foreign language or whether teachers are supported to develop their competences in teaching in another language than their mother tongue. There is still some room for improvement in this regard, since 45% of respondents do not perceive it as one of

the most common internationalisation initiatives that domestic teachers teach in a foreign language, even without having to take into account the quality of teaching.

For one aspect of internationalisation at home, there has been a significant deterioration since 2018: Diversification of language courses. In 2018, 37% of respondents perceived this as common while in 2020 it was only 21%. Reasons for this decrease can be different according to the students' unions: Some courses have closed or restricted access due to budget cuts, in other cases tuition fees have been increased or national policies have restricted the students' right to take the courses. For example, in Denmark a fee on language courses was implemented in the fall of 2018, which caused a significant drop in participation. After the fee was implemented, 45% fewer learners enrolled for the language courses overall, and 73% fewer among international students in particular. According to the experience of teachers, the dropouts were often caused by learners being unable to cover the fee on already tight student budgets. This drop-in participation rates led to major layoffs of staff and courses closing in several cases. This development caused concern among the student organisations but also the employers' organisation who pointed out that this would hurt the possibility for internationals to fully integrate into the local labour market. After pressure from students' and employers' organisations, the fee is planned to be removed again in 2020.

Measures for students returning from mobility

Students who return from mobility hold an important potential for being partners in the successful internationalisation of their education institution. The Bologna with Student Eyes surveys have been used to monitor which initiatives are taken to utilise this potential for years. This has been done by asking the national unions of students "*Are any of the following measures being taken for returning students in your country?*".

The results have been almost stagnant between 2018 and 2020. The only significant progress is that now 79% of respondents experience that returning students are giving feedback on their mobility compared to only 63% in 2018. This is a positive development as the feedback from mobile students is an important part of quality assurance of the mobility programmes being offered.

Language learning and intercultural understanding

Access to language learning is a key issue in internationalisation both for mobile and non-mobile students. Language learning has an obvious important role as a practical tool in the internationalisation toolbox, enabling learners and local communities to get more out of mobilities. Furthermore, language learning is also seen by some scholars, as well as by the students' unions, as an important goal in itself, and as a part of fostering intercultural understanding and global citizenship

Language learning in connection with higher education is also an important part of the puzzle if we are going to achieve increased European integration culturally, in academia, and in the labour market. This has been emphasised both in the Council of the European Union and as a central ingredient in the European Commission's efforts to build a European Education Area. For mobile students, learning a high level of academic English as well as the basics of the local language in the country they are visiting, is crucial for their success academically but also socially. Understanding a bit of the local language and culture makes a big difference for successful integration of mobile students into the communities they visit, as well as enhances the intercultural learning by decreasing the tendency for international students to only socialise with each other rather than with local students. Furthermore, learning the local language increases the opportunities for mobile students to get part-time jobs where knowing the language is a requirement. Having access to part-time employment is for many students a financial necessity and furthermore a way of integrating into the local community. Feeling welcome and integrated as well as knowing the local language and having experience with the local labour market are all very important factors when international graduates decide if they can see themselves living and working in the host country. Thus, these aspects are important to keep in mind if we want to move away from a situation where international mobilities are mostly a project of self-development for a privileged few, towards a situation where the circulation of students to a larger extent contribute to the circulation of workers and the strengthening of intercultural understanding.
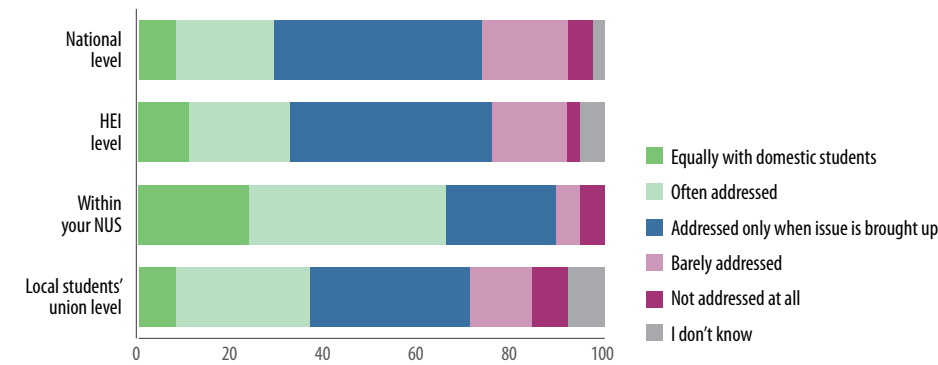
Treatment and situation of students on mobility

The rights of international students and how often they are talked about differ quite radically from country to country. Roughly 44% of the respondents indicated that international students' rights are only brought up when concrete issues are being discussed on the national level or within higher education institutions, while only around 10% discuss the rights of international students as frequently as the rights of domestic students. 5% of the National Unions indicated that international students rights are not being talked about on the national level at all while around 3% submitted that such issues are not broad on the table at higher education institution level.

When it comes to international students' rights and how they are being tackled within the structures of national or local students' unions the situation looks different. As seen in Figure 8.2., on the national level international students' rights seem to be more of a prominent topic than on the local level with more than 42% of the NUSes indicating that international students' rights are often addressed or as much addressed as issues related to domestic students (24%). On the local students' union level, the discourse on international students rights is less dominant with only 8% of the respondents suggesting that international students' issues are addressed equally in comparison with domestic students and 29%% showcasing that such issues are addressed often. In conclusion we can say that international students' rights are a more important topic to students' unions than to policy makers and university leaders based on how often they are being discussed in the respective frameworks.
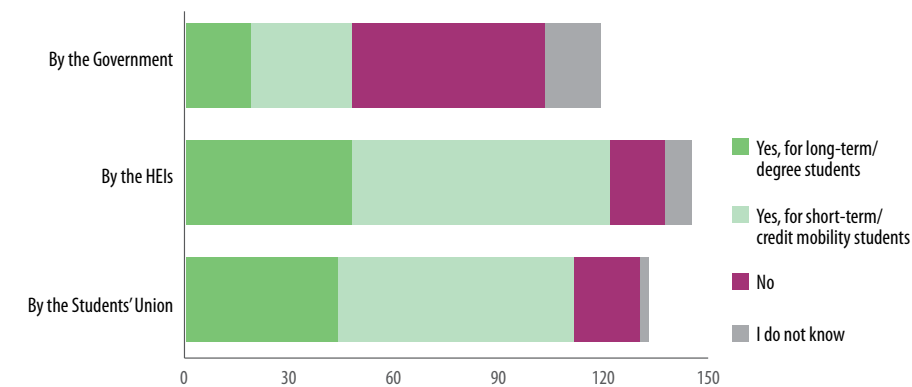
How often and how thoroughly are issues regarding international students' rights being discussed/addressed at the following levels?

Legend:
- Equally with domestic students
- Often addressed
- Addressed only when issue is brought up
- Barely addressed
- Not addressed at all
- I don't know

The social integration of incoming students is crucial for a successful course of studies in the host country. It gives international students a feeling of belonging and enhances their academic performance as much as their individual wellbeing. It is therefore even more disappointing that more than 55% of the governments, around 16% of the higher education institutions as well as 19% of the students' unions do not have any programmes in place to enhance the social integration of incoming students.

For those countries where programmes are being offered, the data clearly shows that short-term and credit mobility students are favoured over long-term and degree students when it comes to which kind of initiatives are being provided. While 29% of governments, 74% of higher education institutions and 68% of student unions offer programmes that aim at enhanced social integration for short-term students, only 19% of governments, 47% of higher education institutions and 43% of student unions do the same for long term mobility and degree students.

Are there any effective programmes or initiatives to enhance social integration of incoming students?

Legend:
- Yes, for long-term/degree students
- Yes, for short-term/credit mobility students
- No
- I do not know

According to your NUS, are administrative staff sufficiently trained to assist international students? (Do they speak foreign languages, are they trained to help international students, etc.)

- 29.73% Yes, in some institutions
- 35.14% Yes, in most institutions
- Only in a few institutions 21.62%
- I don't know 2.7%
- 10.81% Yes, in all institutions

Another vital part of fostering the academic success of international students and their individual sense of belonging is the provision of well-trained administrative staff within higher education institutions, This includes staff members that speak foreign languages and personnel that is equipped with the necessary skills to work with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.

On the positive side, as seen in Figure 8.4., the underlying data shows that 10% of our respondents implied the presence of sufficiently trained administrative staff in all of the higher education institutions in the respective countries while 35% indicated that this is the case in most of the institutions. 30% of the national union of students suggested that well-trained administrative staff in relation to the needs of international students can only be found in some institutions while 22% submitted the disappointing response that this is the case in only a minority of higher education institutions. In conclusion the analysed data suggests that increased investment in staff training is necessary in order to create fair, equal and welcoming environments for incoming students.

In many European countries, international students frequently suffer from structural discrimination, unequal treatment, xenophobia and exclusion. Cases of racial discrimination are reported from countries such as Slovakia or Malta, whereby in Malta the issue seems to be quite common and stems from a general behavior from certain parts of the local population. One of the most common forms of uneven treatment in European higher education systems derives from unequal tuition fees where non-EU/EEA students pay considerably higher fees. This is the case in Austria, Germany, Finland and many more countries.

NUS UK states that international students sometimes face a rather unwelcoming environment when attempting to pursue their education in the UK due to hostile government measures and problems when it comes to obtaining the necessary visa

permits that would allow students to study in the country. The national union of students in Switzerland reports that international students from non-EU/EEA countries barely have the possibility to legally work while studying since the Swiss student visa permit does not allow that. In Finland it is difficult for international students to find employment due to structural problems in the labour market. The working language is often Finnish, even in international companies. Studies also show that racism and xenophobia prevent people with foreign names to find work. Non-native speakers in Poland and Iceland frequently experience issues caused by the language barrier while Italy reports discrimination in the housing market to be one of the most pressing forms of discrimination.

Tackling mobility obstacles

As national unions of students were asked to describe the most important barriers to both incoming and outgoing mobility, the financial burdens for students were cited as by far the most common ones in both cases. This tracks the same information from 2018, and the ever-growing disparities between rising costs of living and studying, and grants which are chronically insufficient and stagnant in comparison. Without major increases in funding given out as Erasmus+ grants, lowering or mitigating the cost of living (especially for students studying in urban centers), decreasing the cost of moving and studying abroad, and widening access to other support systems, it is likely that this situation will persist.

Another major obstacle to mobility across Europe is the lack of sufficient language skills and the low number or quality of education offered in English or other foreign languages. Students often don't obtain a sufficient skill in English during their secondary education, or even the first part of their tertiary education, thus leaving them unable to engage in mobility and leaving mobility disproportionately more available for those with privileged backgrounds. On the other hand, HEIs regularly fail to offer enough (or sometimes, any) programmes in English, and those that are offered often lag behind in the quality of their content and teaching.

A common set of obstacles that were cited can be summed up as failures of support systems to accommodate students that would engage in mobility. This ranges from students not being assisted in finding housing for their mobility period or a lack of proper communication channels with sending/hosting institutions, to students facing discrimination or exclusion while on mobility and not being engaged in social or cultural programmes as part of their mobility.

A final major barrier to mobility is uncertainty around or unavailability of recognition for studies conducted abroad. This was cited widely as a struggle facing students, especially those outside the Erasmus+ programme. Not only are there often exorbitant bureaucratic procedures needed to get recognition for ECTS credits obtained abroad, but HEIs and governments also bar mobility in more subtle ways. Some cited examples include study programmes which don't allow for a period of mobility, struggles in continuing their education for students who have engaged in mobility, and challenges or barriers in accessing support systems.

When national unions of students were asked if there were effective measures or programmes in place to tackle obstacles to mobility, mixed answers were presented. It was more common to have such programmes at the HEI level than at the national level, but at every level less than half of the responses claimed that such measures were in place. A low level of information sharing was also noted, as nearly a third of respondents didn't know whether such programmes were in place at the HEI level. Reassuringly, almost all of those who responded affirmatively to this question also felt that the programmes or measures that were in place were effective in their results, although in more than a third of the cases their effectiveness had not been monitored.

Balanced mobility

The idea of a balance in outgoing and incoming mobility flows being a sign of a healthy environment for educational mobility is not a new one, and is one upon which the ERASMUS mobility programme is founded. However, imbalances in mobility are a persistent concern when it comes to degree mobility, and tend to be a sign of barriers to mobility that adversely affect the freedom for students to engage in mobility, especially in cases with very low incoming or outgoing mobility flows. The core argument from the European Students' Union is that balanced mobility as a goal should be sought, but should never be used as an excuse to restrict domestic students from going abroad to study, or to restrict access for incoming students from other countries.

As mobility flows have been increasing between EHEA countries as well as EHEA and non-EHEA countries, we are seeing an intensifying discussion about balanced mobility across Europe take place. 11 out of 38 respondents said that the issue of balanced mobility is an important issue in their country, compared to 6 in 2018 who were aware of national initiatives to move towards balanced mobility REF. Individual responses also reveal a crucial factor of this issue, which is the imbalance between certain regions within Europe with regards to incoming and outgoing mobility, especially degree mobility. Countries such as Croatia, Montenegro, and Slovakia are facing brain drain as they work to attract comparable numbers of students to study in their HEIs as they are going abroad. At the same time, governments in Denmark, Sweden, and Israel are discussing ways to encourage outgoing mobility among their students. This reflects a wider and longer-term issue of countries in Central and Eastern Europe experiencing low levels of incoming degree students (especially from wealthier and Western European countries), while many go to study and work abroad.

Being asked whether there are mobility quotas for international students in place, Figure 8.5. shows that 35 out of 38 respondents answered that they do not have such quotas in their countries for students from EU/EEA countries while 33 respondents answered that such quotas are also not in place for non-EU/EEA students.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina there is a minimum mobility quota in place for both EU/EEA and non-EU/EEA students while in Cyprus only a minimum mobility quota for non-EU/

In your country, is there a mobility quota for a maximum/minimum number of students not from your country that are allowed/should study in your country per year?

Students outside the EU and EEA

86.84%
No

Yes,
maximum
quota
5.26%

Yes,
minimum
quota

I don't know
2.63%

Students from the EU countries

92.11%
No

5.26%
Yes, minimum
quota

2.63%
Yes, maximum
quota

Figure 8.5.
In your country, is there a mobility quota for a maximum/minimum number of students not from your country that are allowed/should study in your country per year?
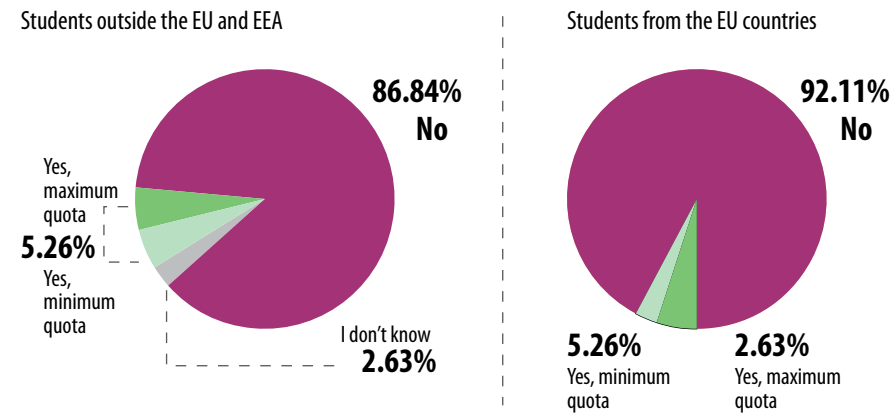
EEA students exists. In Spain and Italy, there is a maximum mobility quota enacted for students from outside the EU/EEA. In Italy quotas for non-EU students are established each year by the Ministry for the admission in the same decree that regulates the total amount of places available for certain regulated studies. In Denmark, where there are no official quotas applied, on the other hand, there is a quota on how many study places in the English language are being granted, which indirectly enforced a quota on the maximum number of international students. Other countries limit the amount of non-EU/EEA students by (not) issuing visas for potential incoming students as it is the case in Slovakia. While in Germany there are no national quotas in place, some higher education institutions have a target quota in their performance and service agreements with the state.

Overall it is clear that the very broad majority of countries does not rely on mobility quotas in order to regulate incoming and outgoing students, but rather uses other official or unofficial means to regulate the rush of international students, while other countries downforce the reglementation to higher education institutions as it is the case in Croatia where maximum quotas for students outside of the EU/EEA are determined by study programmes and universities but do not apply universally.

Something similar can be observed in Austria where there are quotas for studying medicine, whereby a certain % age of the study places is reserved for students from Austria, from the EU/EEA and non-EU/EEA students.

Looking at the level of satisfaction of the national unions of students when assessing the current mobility quotas in their respective countries, we observe an overall positive result, with 10% of the respondents indicating that they perceive the quota regulation as very positive and 50% as positive. as seen in Figure 8.6.. 20% of the respondents have a neutral position towards the quota system in place while another 20% are unhappy with their current national solution in this regard.

How positive or negative does your NUS assess the current quotas to be?

Very positive
10%

Positive
50%

20%
Neutral

0%
Very negative

20%
Negative
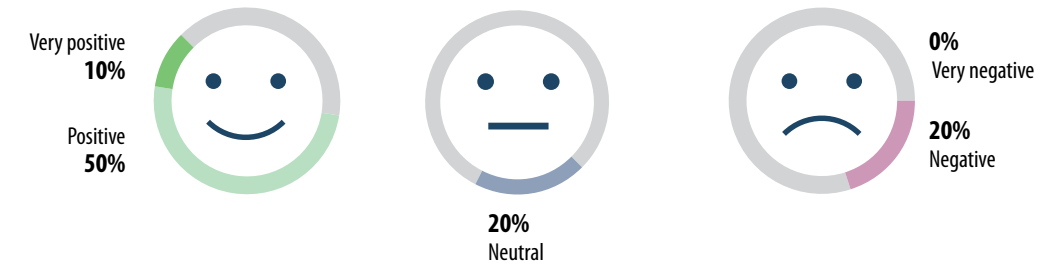
Figure 8.6.
How positive or negative does your NUS assess the current quotas to be?

The national unions of students in Austria, Germany and the Czech Republic indicated that they are not in favour of any maximum quotas for international students since they do believe that there should not be a limit to the number of talented students who want to take on studies in the respective countries, while emphasizing that incoming students should face as little barriers as possible when they chose to educate themselves in the respective countries.

In Croatia there are not many incoming students, except in cities such as Dubrovnik where foreign students come to study due to the touristic features such as the display of the city as one of the main scenes known from the popular TV show Game of Thrones. In the UK, the latest actions by the government, such as legislation that introduced payment for health services for international students and the removal of post-study work visas together with the uncertainty over Brexit is seen as harmful for the future of students mobility. In countries such as Italy, where a numerus clausus system is regulating access to higher education, quotas are seen as vital to give non-EU students the chance to access universities. The reason for this is that admission tests are the same for Italian and international students and contain a majority of logical/general knowledge questions that penalise foreigners in the final score on the basis of which admission rankings are formed.

8.3. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The internationalisation goals cannot be achieved as long as crucial aspects of internationalisation remain underfunded
- It is recommended to increase Erasmus grants to lower the barriers for students to participate, especially for students from underrepresented groups. Concretely, ESU recommends increasing the general rate for all Erasmus grants to 500 EUR per month to make the system simpler, more transparent, and more accessible especially for students who have to work to cover their living costs
- Student grants as well as state support for covering tuition fees should be made portable in all countries
- Language courses in academic English, the local language as well as other languages should be made free both for international and local students. This will make it accessible

for all students regardless of their financial situation and significantly increase the intercultural learning aspect of internationalisation

- Clear and realistic goals for internationalisation in all countries should be set and partnership with the students' unions should be established to achieve these goals. It is recommended to make sure that strategies for achieving these goals are well anchored locally in the education institutions and sufficiently supported with guidance and resources, otherwise the goals will not be achieved

- It is necessary to continue the tendency of increased efforts for social integration of international students in the local communities to increase the impact of student mobilities on intercultural understanding. There is need to partner with the local student unions to identify the barriers and achieve this goal effectively

- HEI teachers should be given training on teaching in English and on confronting western-centric bias in curricula to ensure that all students get access to learning a satisfactory level of academic English and broaden their horizon with a truly international curriculum

- It is recommended to ensure all HEI staff are well-equipped to understand international students' needs and trained in cultural awareness and non-discrimination

- Discriminatory practices towards international students included in tuition fees, access to health care, housing and social services should be dismantled

- Internationalisation is not just about the quantity of mobile students but also about quality. There is a need to make good use of the experiences of students returning from mobility to improve the experience of others. The increasing tendency of gathering feedback from international students to improve the quality of internationalization should be continued
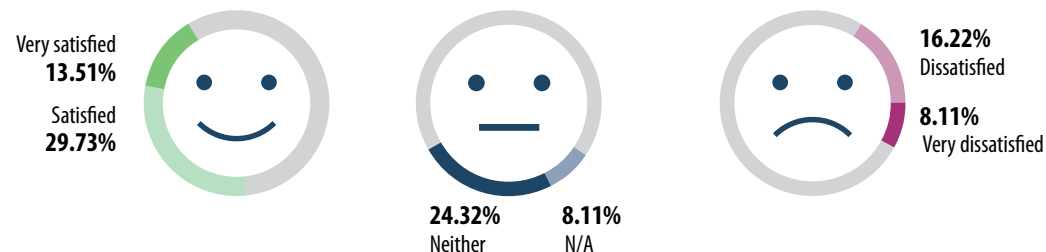
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9. STRUCTURAL REFORMS

9.1. INTRODUCTION

"In order to unlock the full potential of the EHEA and ensure the implementation of Bologna key commitments, we are adopting a structured peer support approach based on solidarity, cooperation and mutual learning. In 2018-2020, thematic peer groups will focus on three key commitments crucial to reinforcing and supporting quality and cooperation inside the EHEA: a three-cycle system compatible with the overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA and first and second cycle degrees scaled by ECTS—compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention—and quality assurance in compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area."

Even though there are continued efforts on the ground to improve the implementation of the key commitments of the Bologna Process not much has changed when it comes to the state of play in Europe since 2018. The following chapter deals with the perceptions of the implementation of the National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs), the European Credits Transfer System (ECTS) and the Three-cycle system by the national unions of students. For further reading about implementation in the field of Quality Assurance, see Chapter 6.

9.2. MAIN FINDINGS

Qualification frameworks: Comparability across the EHEA

Through the adoption of the Berlin Communiqué in 2003 (Berlin, 2003) Qualification Frameworks (QF) have been on the Bologna Process (BP) agenda. Qualification frameworks are a tool to strengthen the comparability of degrees and create trust between institutions both nationally and on the international level. Over the past 17 years, the majority of the EHEA countries have developed NQFs in compliance with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). Two years ago in Paris, ministers once again committed themselves to elaborating national frameworks for qualifications compatible with the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA. Despite the implementation of NQFs in most EHEA countries, students are still facing difficulties getting their qualification recognised.

Learning outcomes as a description of what learners are expected to know, be able to do and understand, at the end of a learning sequence are playing an increasingly important role in enhancing the quality of education and training in Europe. It is vital to establish well-designed programmes with clear intended outcomes, which are easily understandable and transparent for applicants, students, teachers and the assessors. Learners are not well aware of the QF in many countries. Raised awareness would improve their understanding of the educational landscape. But it is not necessarily the goal that all students can state the

- ○ EHEA country with no ESU member
- ● No information available
- ● There is an NQF BUT it is not used at all
- ● There is an NQF BUT it is used quite rarely
- ● There is an NQF and it is being used quite often
- ● There is an NQF and it is always being used

Map 9.1.

Is there a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in your country and if so, how often is it being used?

EQF level of their degree. Students should be well-informed about the intended learning outcomes of their programme, and of where they can find more detailed information if need be, in order to fully use the potential of the Bologna system.

Looking at the existence and usage of National Qualifications Frameworks in ESU's member countries we can see that 91% of the respondents indicated that there is a NQF in place while 11% suggested that they are not aware of such. Only in about 16% of the respondents'

How satisfied or dissatisfied is your NUS with the development and introduction of the NQF in your country?

Very satisfied
13.51%

Satisfied
29.73%

16.22%
Dissatisfied

8.11%
Very dissatisfied

24.32%
Neither

8.11%
N/A

countries the NQF is not being used at all (11%) or used quite rarely (5%). Roughly 40% of the national unions of students affirmed that the NQF is always being used while 32% suggested that the NQF is used quite often.

A lack of national qualification framework in place drastically hinders the transparency and comparability of academic achievements obtained, creating a dilemma for mutual trust both between the higher education institutions within a country and even more so when it comes to mobility abroad. National unions of students in the the Czech Republic, Moldova, Serbia and Israel indicated that even though the NQF is in place, it is never used.

When it comes to the development, introduction and enactment of National Qualification Frameworks, 13% of the respondents made clear that they are very satisfied with their country-specific situation. Another 30% feel satisfied with the state of play while 24% indicated that they are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. With just about 24% of the national unions of students being either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied, we can see an overly positive trend when it comes to the perception of the NQF implementation in Europe. More than half of all respondents are either satisfied or dissatisfied, which might stem from the fact that there is a lack of involvement and co-ownership regarding the development and implementation process as well as the enactment of qualification frameworks in Europe.

Going more into detail, national unions of students raised a broad variety of points linked to the best and worst practices seen on the ground. On the positive side, the NUS of Georgia expressed its appreciation towards the fact that the Georgian quality assurance agency periodically holds meetings and trainings for higher education institutions linked to the NQF. In Malta, the NUS is convinced that although some improvements could be made, the national qualifications framework facilitates the understanding and review of Maltese qualifications, guaranteeing transparency at the national and international level. ESU's member union in Luxembourg indicated that the new system (updated in 2016) lays the foundation for a more advanced operational QF that improves the overall consistency of education and training provision in the country. The data also indicates that the NQF system in Ireland, Iceland and Estonia is fit for purpose and satisfactory from a student's perspective.

Criticism towards the development and introduction of the NQF in Serbia comes from SKONUS, which was not involved enough during the initial period of setting up the framework, unlike ESU's member from Croatia who helped with developing the QF and is satisfied with the outcome. The national union of students in Germany mourns about the fact that the implementation of their NQF brought a lot of additional bureaucracy with accreditation and less freedom in learning overall. In Switzerland, the present draft of the NQF is perceived to be too general. Greater specialisation and more specific points would have been favourable. To the regret of VSS-UNES-USU, the topic of informal and non-formal learning is not reflected upon sufficiently. As an important instrument for enabling flexible learning pathways, the NQF should therefore necessarily be accompanied by a chapter on non-formal and informal learning. The social dimension was also not taken into account and the Swiss NUS misses the link between the NQF and the federal law on the promotion of the universities and coordination in the Swiss university sector. Other members such as the Slovakian NUS criticise the accessibility of information on the NQF, stating that only a very few number of students are aware of its existence and the way it is structured. The only country that indicated to have no NQF in place is Belarus.

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)

"In order to further develop mobility and recognition across the EHEA, we will work to ensure that comparable higher education qualifications obtained in one EHEA country are automatically recognised on the same basis in the others, for the purpose of accessing further studies and the labour market. To this end we renew our commitment to ensure full implementation of ECTS, following the guidelines laid down in the 2015 ECTS Users' guide".
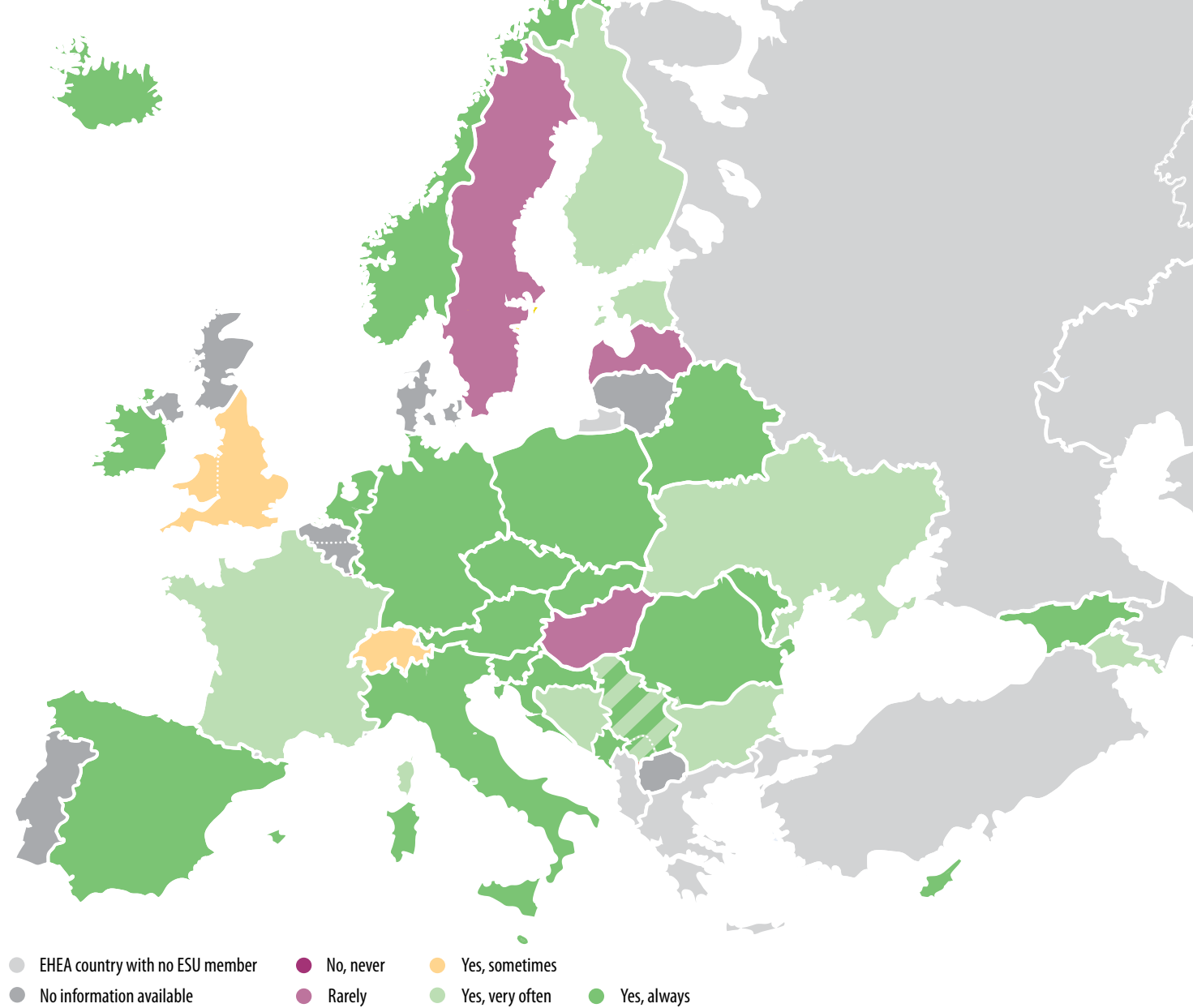
As one of the foundations of the Bologna Process the ECTS is crucial for facilitating recognition of academic achievements in and out of mobility. It guarantees transparency and helps students to evaluate the workload they take on themselves throughout the course of studies. In order for the system to work proper implementation needs to be ensured in all EHEA countries.

In 2020 most study programmes, modules and individual courses are being constructed by using the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System. 71% of the respondents indicated that this is always the case while another 16% suggested that the ECTS is used very often but not always. Roughly 10% of the countries use the ECTS only sometimes or rather rarely. According to the national unions of students, there is no country that does not use the ECTS at all. This might seem like a satisfactory state of play but

Are study programmes, modules and individual courses constructed using the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)?

71.05%
Always

15.79%
Very often

Rarely
5.26%

Sometimes
5.26%

I don't know
2.63%
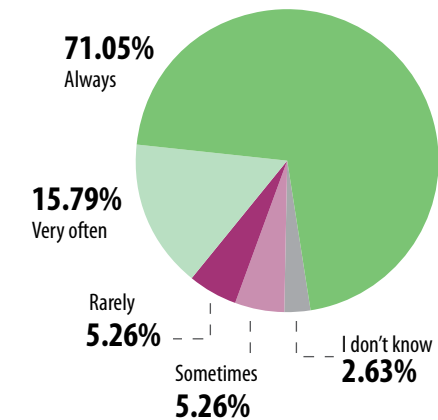
Map 9.4. Does the allocation of ECTS happen on the basis of an estimation of the workload?

Legend: EHEA country with no ESU member; No information available; No, never; Rarely; Yes, sometimes; Yes, very often; Yes, always

keeping in mind that the ECTS is one of the key commitments of the Bologna Process, these results are rather disappointing.

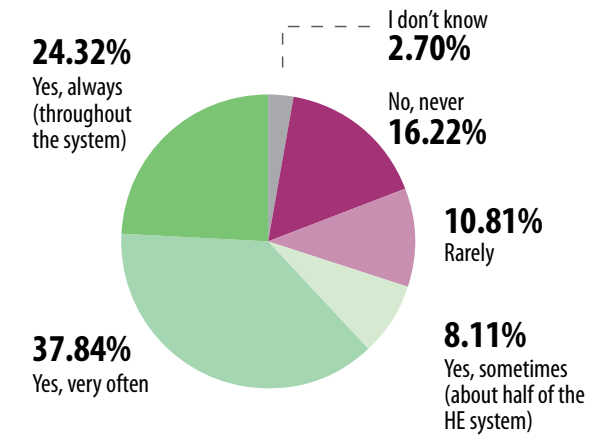Another key feature of the European Credit Transfer System is that the allocation of ECTS points should be based on a workload estimation. One ECTS point usually equals 25 to 30

working hours. Unfortunately this is rarely or not at all common practise in 10% of the countries. In 76% of the countries the workload based allocation of ECTS is always or at least very often the basis of awarding credits. This shows that there is clearly a need for further improvement in order to guarantee a fair distribution of workload and comparability of students academic records.

The allocation of ECTS happens on the basis of the formulation of learning outcomes and it is a common practice throughout the continent. Countries where it happens rarely are Slovenia, Latvia, Hungary and Czechia. However, the national unions of students in Israel, Sweden, Italy, Serbia, Belarus and Austria indicated that this is not the case in their higher education systems. In 9 countries (24% of the replies) the allocation of ECTS points happens on the basis of the formulation of learning outcomes while in 14 countries (38% of replies) it is implemented very often. Compared to the findings of BWSE 2018, the number of countries where the amount of ECTS is always based on the formulation of learning outcomes has risen from 7 to 9 which is a positive trend.

When it comes to the satisfaction of NUSes with the ECTS implementation in their respective countries, the same number of NUSes as in 2018 indicated that they are either satisfied or very satisfied with the implementation of ECTS (19 NUSes - 50%). Seven unions stated they are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the situation linked to ECTS in their country. This illustrates that even though all EHEA countries use ECTS as a way to structure the national credits system on some level, it is not well-organised across Europe. The students' reasons for dissatisfaction with the system are of a wide range. One union less than in 2018 stated

Does the allocation of ECTS happen on the basis of the formulation of learning outcomes?

- 24.32% Yes, always (throughout the system)
- 2.70% I don't know
- 16.22% No, never
- 10.81% Rarely
- 8.11% Yes, sometimes (about half of the HE system)
- 37.84% Yes, very often

Figure 9.5. Does the allocation of ECTS happen on the basis of the formulation of learning outcomes?

How satisfied or dissatisfied is your NUS with the implementation of ECTS in your country?

- Very satisfied 15.79%
- Satisfied 34.21%
- Neither 15.79%
- N/A 2.63%
- Very dissatisfied 13.16%
- Dissatisfied 15.79%
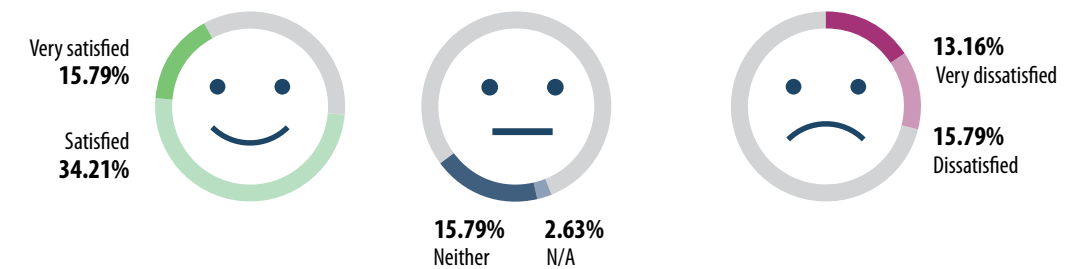
Figure 9.6. How satisfied or dissatisfied is your NUS with the implementation of ECTS in your country?

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that they are either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the implementation (in 2018 there were 12 NUSes being dissatisfied, in 2020 there were 11 NUSes). Compared to 2015, the level of students' satisfaction with the ECTS has not risen but remained at the same level. However, the number of dissatisfied unions has slightly lowered.

When it comes to problems with the ECTS implementations, SSU states that in Slovenia ECTS points rarely mirror the actual workload of students. One of the biggest problems is the valuation of all courses with the same number of ECTS within a study programme - e.g. all courses are rewarded with 5 ECTS points. In Italy it is also common practice that all exams are allocated the same amount of ECTS, but in reality the amount of workload drastically varies from one exam to the other, thus not reflecting the actual students' workload. This results in a heavier workload than indicated by the given ECTS points. Another problem pointed out by NUSes is the complicated recognition process when it comes to ECTS obtained in the scope of mobility programmes. Higher education institutions do sometimes not follow the guidelines that foresee one foreign ECTS point to be equal with one local ECTS point.

The national union of students in Sweden states that the Swedish rectors' conference has made it clear that ECTS implementation is not a priority for them. Slovakian NUS SKRVS states that ECTS points reflect the actual workload only on paper and not in practice, as they often do not take into consideration work conducted outside the classroom. Some students then have 15 courses a semester, with 2-3 credits, which is unbearable. Although being generally satisfied with the ECTS implementation, ANOSR states that in Romania one ECTS point is estimated to equal 25 working hours but in reality credits are not awarded based on a specific calculation of the hours required, rather on the basis of how relevant the HEIs consider the subject to be for the respective programme. Similar cases are reported from Croatia, Czechia and Austria where CSC, SKRVŠ and ÖH believe ECTS points are well implemented in theory but in practice do not always represent the actual workload of the student.

In Switzerland, the biggest problem is the lack of information on how the ECTS system is facilitated at the respective HEIs. The institutional and departmental coordinators have to advise and counsel students on the ECTS. Information should also be accessible via the institutions' website but this is not always the case. Another problem is mutual recognition, since higher education institutions do not trust each other, they are looking at the content of a module instead of trusting in the value of the allocated ECTS points. SKONUS reports that in Serbia the process of awarding ECTS credits is based on the principle of deemed importance of the respective professor. There are no realistic criteria for awarding ECTS at almost all HEIs. Most HEIs are constantly sabotaging the process of re-evaluating the ECTS credits, which is one of the most important activities of both NUS and local student unions. SKONUS states that at various faculties over 90% of students cannot score 60 ECTS in one year.

Good examples of ECTS implementation can be found in Ireland, where USI states that ECTS is well recognized and embedded within the Irish HE sector. LIS, the national union of students in Iceland states that the ECTS system in the country is very evolved and that they

are not aware of any problems. The same positive conclusion was put forward by KSU from Malta and GSOA from Georgia. In Luxembourg, the NQF and the HE law state that learning outcomes and ECTS based on workload should be the common practice. Higher education institutions are defining learning outcomes for more and more courses and are working on implementing them. Thus, in general students are satisfied with the government's and HEIs efforts to implement and adapt the ECTS systems. The Polish NUS, PSRP states that the adoption of ECTS has had a very tangible impact on the assessment of the student's workload. UAS from Ukraine and ASM from Moldova see the implementation of ECTS as being helpful to make programmes more transparent and to ease mobility.

ESU believes that a well implemented ECTS ensures fairness and reliability for all the stakeholders within the higher education systems. In order to truly make the EHEA work countries and higher education institutions need to further prioritise the implementation of workload and learning outcome based ECTS. It is also crucial to ensure the periodical re-evaluation of the estimated ECTS point allocation towards study programmes and courses. Even though substantial progress has been made in this regard, further action is needed in order to fully unleash the potential of the EHEA.

3 Cycle System

The three-cycle system is determining the amount of credits a student should obtain for a Bachelor-, Masters-, and PhD degree across the EHEA. Initially only BA and MA degrees were considered but in the scope of the ministerial conference in Berlin (2003) the third cycle (PhD level) was recognised as the last addition to what we know as the three-cycle system today. Since then the structured three-cycle degree system has been firmly established. However, although the commitments have mostly been met, the significant differences remain in some degree structures across the EHEA

The results of this year's edition of BWSE show that in most of the countries subject to this analysis, the three-cycle system is implemented well, either always or in most of the cases (95%) although a very small minority of countries needs to put further effort in ensuring that degree programmes are truly comparable with similar qualifications of other EHEA member states.

The state-of-play of the three-cycle system has not been seen as a developing process throughout the last 2 editions of the publication. The reality of the current higher education landscape in most of the countries has not changed significantly. 28 out of 38 respondents stated that they are satisfied with the level of implementation. However, some NUSes expressed different opinions about the advantages of the three-cycle system not being exploited enough. While analysing the results, a certain level of criticism was put forward with regards to how "old" degrees have been poorly translated into the three-cycle system. The issues range from difficulties in changing the location of studies (Germany), designing three-cycle studies as a block that offers little flexibility of changing between the cycles

(Slovakia), or finally, the cheeky move of the labour market demanding an MA degree from students in order to be considered employable (Italy).

Soley completing the first cycle in Italy is still often considered as an insufficient level of qualification when it comes to being ready for entering the labour market. A similar situation is occurring in Slovenia – due to the inappropriate implementation of NQF, a master's degree is too often needed to enter the labour market, which opposes its initial goal. The Romanian NUS expressed the opinion that master programmes, which main focus should be specialising students in more restrained fields, are usually pursued as a prolongation of studies without any consideration of changing the field or place of study. In Poland, the development of the three-cycle system had a good impact on the effectiveness of higher education. However, PSRP believes that in some fields of studies (e.g. philology, cognitive science) programmes should be adapted to long-cycle studies (5 years), due to the observed lack of quality of the second cycle. The last example, visible both in 2018 and 2020, challenges the initial intention of the Bologna Process by the labour market demanding a higher level of qualification for a job that might actually require a lower qualification. This trend is not solely detected by NUSes; the 2018 Bologna Implementation Report suggests the same worrying trend.

Part-time studies

The mode of study, whether full- or part-time, has been put forward as a tool for either an increase or decrease in widening participation to higher education. Flexible learning paths and part-time studies enable education mainly for adult learners, students with children and working students due to the need for an income to cover their living costs and tuition fees.

According to this year's responses, the majority of NUSes (34 out of 38) stated that it is possible to study part-time in their countries. Thus, the total number remains the same compared to the last edition of BWSE. There are certain differences when it comes to the possibilities of part-time studies during the different cycles. Among all NUSes, exactly 50% stated that there is full access to part-time bachelor studies. In comparison to 66% when it comes to master studies. The specific circumstances vary in this regard, depending on the field of study, type and tradition of the institution, work restrictions, suspension of student loans and other specific regulations.

In Bulgaria, a limit of a maximum of 20 working hours per week is in place for doctoral students willing to study part-time. This regulation does not apply to bachelor students who are free to work but face problems combining a part-time job with their part-time studies due to the extensive workload of their programmes. In Germany, students are not entitled to receive the federal student's loan (BAföG), while working part-time. The example of Italy shows that the individual situation depends on regulations as set out by the respective institutions. In some cases, university students are allowed to study part-time, while other HEIs require the provision of supporting documents that prove the employment of the

Is it possible to study part-time in any of the cycles?
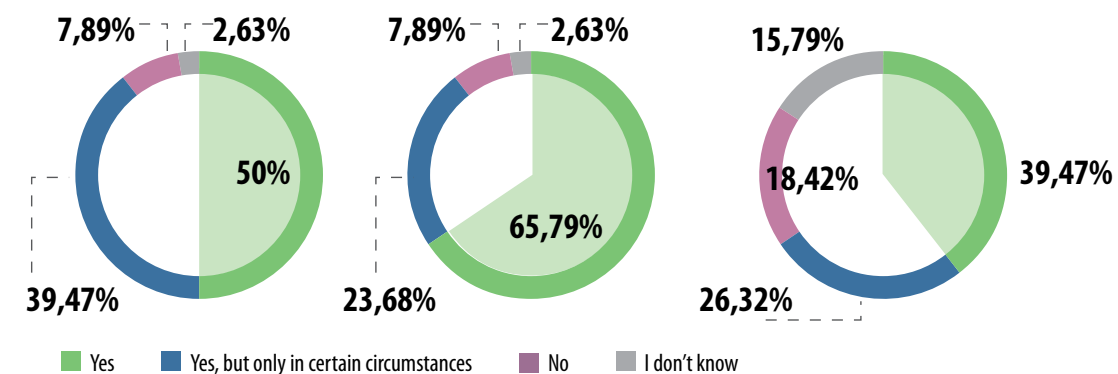
Figure 9.7.
Is it possible to study part-time in any of the cycles?

student. In order to receive the student's financial support in Finland, students need to prove that they are earning less than the maximum allowed income of up to 696 Euros. The allowance is also connected to the prerequisite of obtaining a minimum of 45 ECTS points per academic year. Also in Denmark, the majority of HEIs demand students to acquire a similar yearly amount of ECTS. This means that it is possible to study part-time, but only to a very limited extent. There are exceptions to his rule, but they are only applied in extreme and very rare cases, for example in the case of elite athletes, entrepreneurs or a president of a voluntary organization under the Danish Youth Council.

Flexibility within the cycles is often ensured with the possibility of shaping individual learning paths. This sometimes requires to plan on extending the minimum amount of semesters. More than 80% of the member organisations replied that there are restrictions regarding how many semesters/terms a student can take to complete each cycle, stating that mainly cases of illness or parental leave may be exempt.

61% of the respondents replied that too many restrictions exist in completing the 1st cycle later than planned, resulting in the situation that 55% cannot complete their studies and 48% face financial problems forcing students to choose between education and personal basic welfare. These restrictions apply to the few countries that do enable the 2nd cycle (51%) and the 3rd cycle (42%) as well.

In Georgia we face a situation where no government funding is granted to students if they exceed the maximum amount of semesters while FAGE reports that in France students are being expelled if they are not progressing fast enough within their studies. In Austria and Slovakia and Romania tuition fees have to be paid if the regular study time plus 2 additional tolerance semesters are exceeded. Sweden reports that there are no explicit consequences for students who do not progress fast enough in their studies. However, the indirect consequences such as loss of student loans and grants as well as student housing represent real threads to students that need more time for the completion of their studies

Are there exceptions following some delays? If so which ones?

Figure 9.8.
Are there exceptions following some delays? If so which ones?
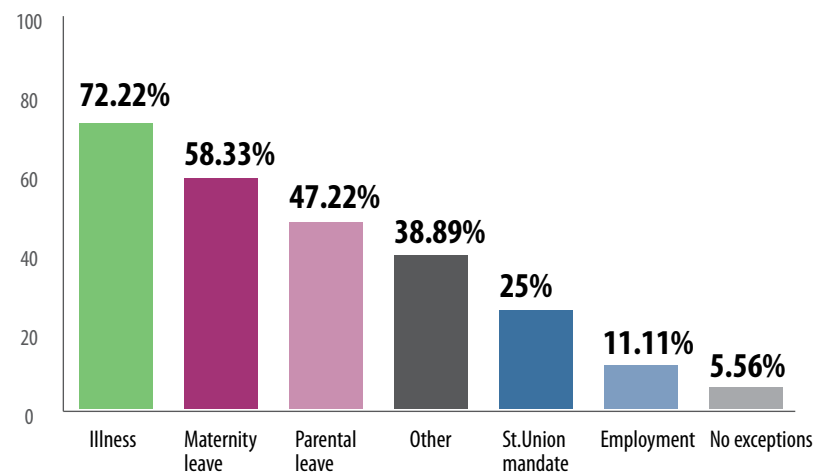
compared to the average. Students in Finland even face expulsion if they do not provide a detailed roadmap for completing their studies in due time.

The positive exceptions that do enable student delays are very narrow and strict, including mainly illnesses (72%) or parental leave (47%). In fewer institutions student representation (25%) is seen as a legitimate reason to justify delays.

ESU strongly condemns the concerning fact that financial reasons for slow study progress and the necessity for students to work next to their studies is only recognised in 11% of the respondents' countries as a legitimate delay, creating social gaps and reducing opportunities for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

In Malta, HEIs may allow students to extend their studies by up to twelve months, irrespective of whether the student is registered on a full-time or part-time basis. In special circumstances and on the recommendation of the university board, the Senate may allow a further extension of up to two years of study. HEIs may allow students, for a good and sufficient reason, to suspend their studies for a maximum period of twelve months. In countries such as Hungary, Switzerland or Armenia military service is accepted as a reason to delay or suspend studies. Estonia sets a positive precedence with civil service, academic leave and participation in mobility programmes as a recognised reason for interruption of studies.

In order to reduce delays in completion, only a few measures have been taken for faster completion; in some areas (33%) the measures are taken both on the HEI level and on the national level (Czechia, Malta, Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Cyprus, Switzerland, Italy, Estonia, Finland, Denmark and Slovenia). Four NUSes indicated that measures are being taken independently by HEIs (Hungary, France, Ireland, Sweden) Seven NUSes replied that

If yes, which measures are taken for faster completion?

Figure 9.9.
If yes, which measures are taken for faster completion?
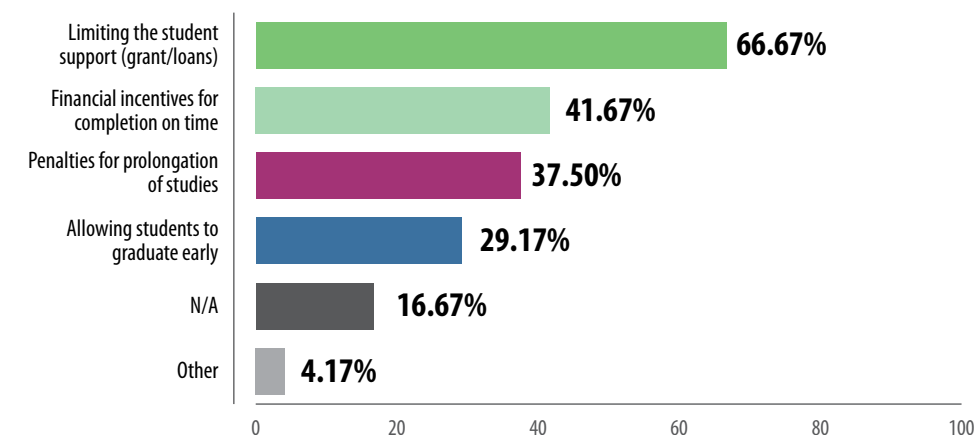
no supporting measures are being taken on the national and HEI level. This is the case in Georgia, Austria, Republic of Moldova, Belarus, Slovakia, Norway and Romania.

There are very few measures taken in order to reduce delays in completion. Those measures can mainly be divided into; Limiting the student support (grants/loans) (67%), financial incentives (e.g. stipends) for completion on time (42%), penalties for prolongation of studies (38%), allowing students to graduate early (29%), these figures are extremely low, and should alarm stakeholders as a proof for poor and unsatisfied support measures in place.

9.3. CONCLUSIONS

The Yerevan Communiqué stated in 2015 the following:

"By 2020 we are determined to achieve an EHEA where our common goals are implemented in all member countries to ensure trust in each other's higher education systems; where automatic recognition of qualifications has become a reality so that students and graduates can move easily through out it; where higher education is contributing effectively to build inclusive societies, founded on democratic values and human rights; and where educational opportunities provide the competences and skills required for European citizenship, innovation and employment"

Over the past 17 years, the majority of the EHEA countries have developed NQFs in compliance with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The NQF's are a well recognized and implemented tool for fostering mobility, raising interconnectivity and transparency of qualifications provided by higher education programmes to foster the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, including students. It is important to better communicate the reasoning and benefits which come from full implementation.

HEI's across the EHEA should promote and inform learners to boost wide acknowledgement of the fact that education can be more effective within the three cycles by creating more flexibility. This involves ensuring part-time studies, granting exceptions for delays in students' studies for parental leave, employment, student representation, illness and disabilities, and by providing the guidance and support students' need in case of delays in their studies. The flexible approach is more and more relevant in current times in comparison to traditional full-time studying. Higher education should provide the possibility for everyone to gain the necessary education at every stage of their life which should be boosted by providing fit-for-purpose solutions that facilitate lifelong learning.

The full implementation of the ECTS should give the basis for extensive facilitation of mobility and the recognition of learning outcomes in EHEA. The allocation of ECTS credits has been often based on a mathematical calculation from the country's previous credit systems. The ECTS system of credits can be considered as successfully implemented, only when based on learning outcomes and learner's workload.

Recommendations

- Review the quality of the National Qualifications Frameworks to ensure full compliance with EQF
- Implement the whole of ECTS reliably across Europe. The implementation must be according to the ECTS Users' Guide. This includes basing ECTS on workload and Learning Outcomes, not other characteristics
- The three-cycle system should enable flexibility, not constrain it. Enable students on an individual basis to decide when and where the next cycle should be started
- Develop more flexible cycles for students to be able to study part-time without certain circumstances for exceptions
- The time restrictions for completing one or all cycles should be abandoned, taking into consideration not only the achievements but also the barriers faced by the learners

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10. FINANCING OF HIGHER EDUCATION

10.1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a public good, a public responsibility, and should be publicly funded. Higher education is a good that contributes to the general interest of all people However, it is still too often portrayed as an expense. The value of higher education should not become subject to economic speculation or prey to the ideologies of privatisation and the shrinking of the state. Based on its belief that access to education shall not depend on a student's socio-economic background, ESU, therefore, calls on all stakeholders to commit to this leading principle and for it to be taken into consideration in all their decisions.

The quality, accessibility, equality and form of higher education is highly dependent on financing. Higher education should never be considered solely as a means for improving economic competitiveness. Education has other aims and consequences, among them the formation of a foundation of tolerance, democracy, critical thinking, and personal fulfilment. These objectives must be taken into account when allocating funds to higher education. In this respect, funds allocated to the higher education sector should not merely be considered an expense, but a provision of public good and public responsibility. Higher education institutions produce not only new research and highly skilled graduates but also have the responsibility to communicate their knowledge and collaborate with businesses, public institutions, and other organisations and movements in their surrounding community. It is important that education institutions are financed sufficiently to fulfill their multiple missions and that this funding is given in a way that ensures the independence of the institution so they can focus on performing their activities with integrity and high quality.

10.2. MAIN FINDINGS

Student support services

"Before even tackling the issues related to costs and affordability of higher education, and as mentioned with regards to widening access to Higher Education, there is a strong need for adapted guidance systems and accurate information. This is crucial from the point of view of accessibility: the diversity of prospective students' backgrounds needs to be fully understood and taken into account by HEIs, especially when communicating about their programmes, in order to include as many potential students as possible and maximize the likelihood of completion."

Over the last 2 years, the financial situation of students has become worse in 28% of the European countries subject to the ESU's analysis as shown on Map 10.1. For roughly one-third of the countries, the situation remained the same, while 29% of the respondents

Legend:
- EHEA country with no ESU member
- No information available
- Become a lot worse
- Become a bit worse
- Stayed the same
- Improved somewhat
- Improved a lot
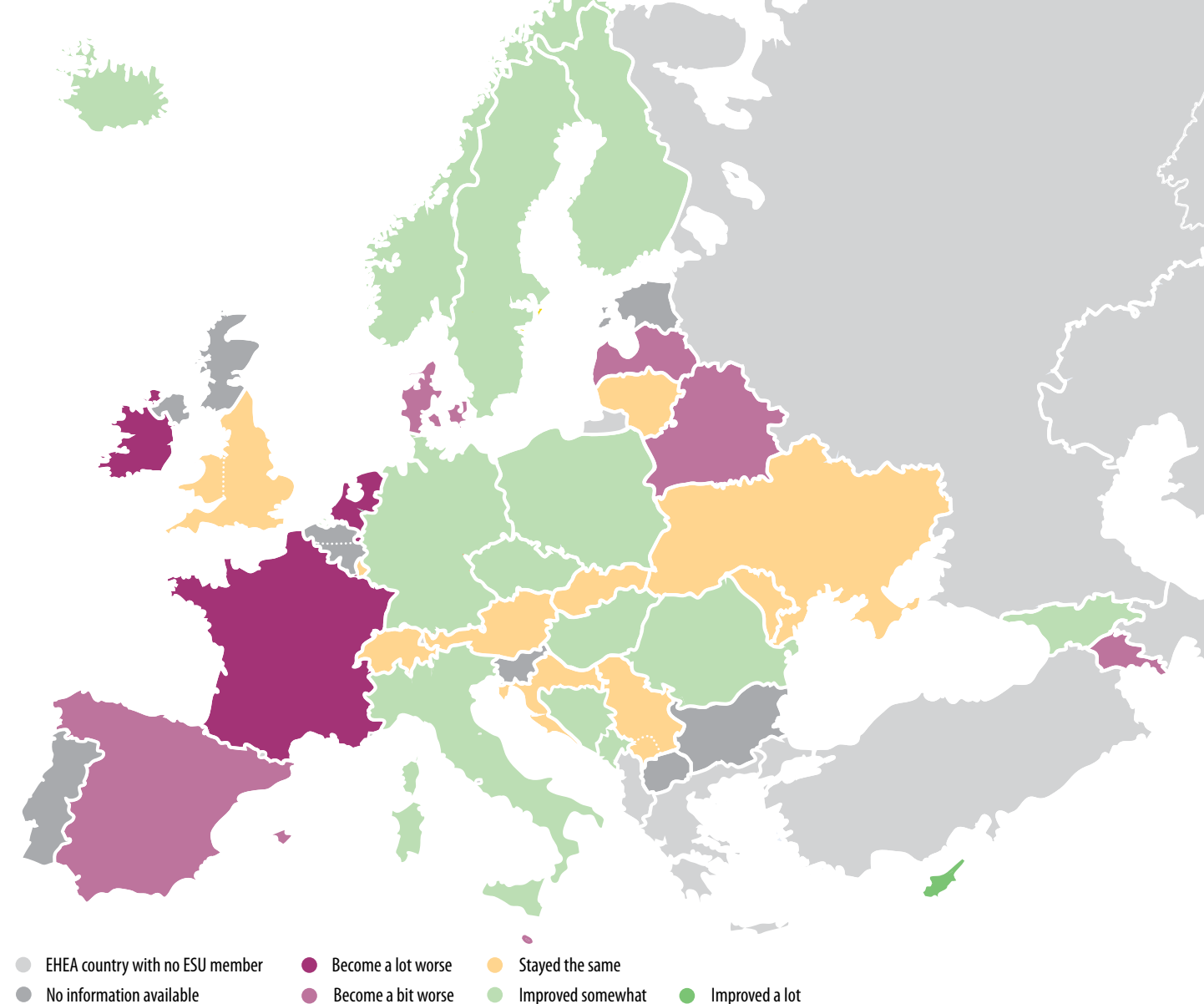
indicated that the situation of students somewhat improved. The financial situation of the students has improved a lot compared to 2018 in only one of the countries.

The national unions of students in Malta, Latvia, Ireland, Israel, and France indicated that the ongoing increase of living costs is becoming a burden for students in those respective countries. Ireland, for example, reports that there has been no significant improvement in funding of higher education over the past two years. Student grants, which were reduced in 2011 and 2012, remain at the same level as when they were cut, in spite of the fact that

Map 10.1.
Over the last two years students' financial situation in your country has...

the cost of living has risen sharply during this period, especially when it comes to housing. In Germany, the federal student loan system "Bafög" was increased for the first time in five years, but the NUS considers the increase to be insufficient in light of rising living and rental costs in bigger cities. Estonia also reports a dissatisfying situation due to the fact that the need-based allowances have remained the same since 2013; and relative to rising costs, the allowance has decreased over time. In the Netherlands, the basic student grant system (270 Euros per month) was abolished in 2015 and disappointingly never reintroduced.

Other countries have seen fluctuation in the relationship between public funding and living costs. In Finland, according to the member union, the state's student financial aid was cut extensively as a part of the last government saving plan in fall 2017. The non-repayable part of student support was reduced from 330 Euros to 250 Euros a month. As a part of the same student aid reform, the student loan portion of the student aid was raised from 400 Euros to 650 Euros a month, and the specific housing benefit for students was terminated and integrated into the general housing benefit system. Students with families were granted a small increase in their student allowance from the start of 2018. This was an increase of income for parents but did not compensate for the bigger cuts to the student allowances made earlier in 2017. In 2019, the newly-elected government increased this benefit to 100 Euros. Because of the changes, students are taking more student loans. Since 2020, the student allowance has been bound to an index, keeping the student allowance tied to the inflation rate.

On the brighter side, the national unions of students in Sweden, Latvia, and Croatia reported an increase in student grants and stipends. In Poland, the student union also reports that financing in the area of material assistance has also significantly increased. A zero tax was also introduced for persons up to 26 years old who undertake contract work. The NUS, furthermore, indicated that numerous additional scholarship programmes from both university and external organizations are being provided.

Public funding of financial student aid

Since 2018, 43% of the countries have increased the public funding of financial students' aid while another 43% did not facilitate any changes according to the survey results seen in Figure 10.2. Only three European countries, namely Slovenia, Belarus, and the Netherlands decreased public spending onstudents' financial aid in the past two years.

The national union of students in Finland stated that when it comes to public funding, in 2019, the newly-elected government increased the additional benefit for students with minors from 75 to 100 Euros per month. In Sweden, the government decided to increase the student grant by 300 SEK, which equals around 28 Euros. In Israel, there has been a growing number of private funding opportunities; while in Slovenia, the Ministry of Education grants concessions to private companies for teaching activities in certain higher education institutions.

In Estonia, the level of public funding has remained the same since 2015. The budget of 2020 had foreseen an extra 5 million Euros, which is not considered to be a substantial increase by

the NUS, since relatively speaking the inflation outweighs the added funds. In Iceland, there has been a dramatic decrease in students taking loans from the national student loan fund. Even still, the loan fund has been getting its regular share of public funding. Therefore, as there were a lot of funds left over in the system due to the decrease of students taking loans from the national fund, the government has decided it does not need to replenish the fund and subsequently lowered the amount allocated to the fund. Poland is one of the rare countries where an increase in private funding of financial student aid has occurred. Institutions have also been provided with more funding from the Ministry of Higher Education and Science, especially those HEIs which perform well when it comes to research. These institutions will receive 10% more funding in the upcoming 6 years. Regarding the implementation of the new "Law of Higher Education and Science", a lot of HEIs also received treasury bonds and money from grant programmes supporting the further development of the respective institutions. In Romania, the public funding of financial student aid increased from 2018 to 2019 by 24% from 700 million Euros to 868 million Euros, an increase of nearly 170 million Euros. Switzerland increased its overall funding for students' financial aid. However, since the number of students is on the rise, only a smaller percentage of students are able to profit from the offered grants.

Moldova, Czechia, and Malta have also registered a slight increase in their higher education budgets over the past two years. However, in the case of Malta, the increase is practically insignificant as it stands at only 2.33 additional Euros in stipends per student. As for the loans offered by the private banks, they are more lenient.

When looking at the developments in the private student aid sector since 2018 a mildly positive picture is revealed. There has been no decrease of private student aid in any of the analysed countries. However, 30% of the respondents suggested that the status quo is prevalent and the level of private funding remained the same over the past two years. Increases have been registered in 5 countries (Israel, Poland, Luxembourg, Switzerland, and Malta) although a quite significant number of replies (60% or 21 NUSes) imply that NUSes either do not know or do not have information on available private funding of financial student aid in their country.

There is no private funding of student grants in Italy in public universities. As for the public funding (the so-called Fondo integrativo statale - FIS), it has increased by 45 million Euros in the last 2 years. However, since the amount of money needed to cover student grants for all eligible students is much higher than the actual available funds, many students that fulfill

Did an increase or decrease in public funding of financial students' aid ocurr since 2018?
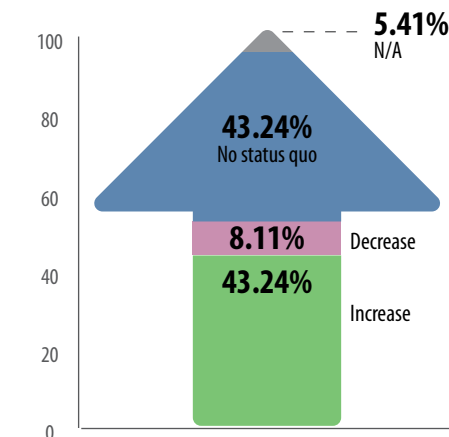
Figure 10.2.
Did an increase or decrease in public funding of financial students' aid ocurr since 2018?

the criteria do not receive the student grant due to the underfunding of FIS. To fund the grants for all eligible students, an additional 100 million Euros would be needed.

Tuition fees

The role of higher education towards the social, economic, and cultural development of our societies is certainly unquestionable. In that sense, synergy and mutual dependence of higher education and society is a constant in modern times. However, it must be acknowledged that this relationship is very often highly affected by economic policies and financial matters. The influence of individual socio-economic conditions and financial pressure on the accessibility of higher education is evident.

In times of limited financial resources, countries have been implementing several measures to ensure the financial sustainability of their higher education systems. The most widely represented measure is the implementation of tuition fees, which results in increased financial obligations of students to pay for being enrolled in higher education while higher education institutions profit from this additional source of income. In this context, it is obvious that tuition fees are a significant financial burden for students, especially bearing in mind the heterogenous socio-economic background of students. Consequently, this means that tuition fees are highly socially selective and one of the most severe barriers to overcome when accessing and taking part in higher education.

The Berlin Communiqué (2003) stresses the commitment of the ministers to make higher education equally accessible to all. Unfortunately, what students have been witnessing is that in 2020, the average level of tuition fees still differs quite radically from country to country and does not apply in the same manner to domestic and international students. In around 30% of European countries that are a part of this survey (see Figure 10.3), local students do not need to pay tuition fees, while only 9% of those same countries offer the same tuition-free education to international students. About 35% of the countries do charge domestic students tuition fees that fall between 0 and 1,000 Euros. The average amount of tuition fees for international students ranges between 1,000 to 3,000 Euros in nearly half of the countries subject to this analysis. When it comes to the countries where students have to pay the highest level of tuition fees (more than 6,000 Euros per year), we again see an enormous divide between the domestic and non-EU/EEA students. While only 3% of the countries charge 6,000 Euros or more in tuition fees to local students, 15% of the respondents indicated that their country charges 6,000 Euros per year or more to international students.

In Czechia, study programmes in the Czech language are free of charge, but participants of programmes taught in a foreign language need to pay tuition fees regardless of their nationality. In Austria, domestic students at universities do not have to pay tuition fees as long as they meet the minimum requirement for the time of studying. At the universities for applied sciences, students have to pay tuition. This is also the case for private universities where the level of tuition fees varies drastically. The Swedish system foresees that higher

Figure 10.3.
What is the average level of tuition fees in your country (annual in EUR)?

education institutions decide independently how much they charge in tuition. The average tuition fee there is around 12,000 Euros per year of study. In Romania, domestic students pay between 500 and 1,000 Euros in annual tuition fees. For international students there, the costs vary between 3,000-6,000 Euros for programmes within the field of health (medicine, pharmacy, etc.) and 1,000-3,000 Euros for other fields of study.

The data clearly shows that international students are facing widespread unequal treatment when it comes to the application of tuition fees in almost all European countries in this survey. The fees paid by non-EU/EEA students are significantly higher than the ones paid by domestic students, leading to the conclusion that studying abroad is still a very costly endeavor for international students and, therefore, not accessible to those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Education as a public good vs. tuition fees

Attempting to bridge the public funding gap in higher education, governments tend to turn to students as a resource in order to quickly resolve funding issues. In this way, introducing or raising tuition fees becomes an easy solution to a complex problem, when the money available within the higher education sector remains insufficient for ensuring an adequate level of quality.

The Bergen Communiqué back in 2005 reflected the commitment of different authorities to "*uphold the principle of public responsibility for higher education in the context of complex modern societies*". Fifteen years later, students still face economic problems to access HE. In addition to other commodification policies which will be discussed, many countries have not decreased tuition fees but rather increased them or in the "best" cases maintained the status quo since 2018.

Even though the economic crisis came to an end, students still feel the consequences of austerity policies implemented post-2008. In the case of Armenia, many students have substantial problems with paying their fees according to the ANSA. One of the most alarming cases is Italy, where tuition fees in the last five years have been continuously growing and subsequently have increased by 25%, with a maximum value in the last academic year amounting to 1,341 Euros as stated by the UDU.

Overall, in addition to sufficiently and publicly-funded student support services, the ESU believes in the abolishment of any tuition fees as the first and most important step in order to move towards higher education systems that are truly accessible to everyone. This will require a shift in mentality underlying the political decisions taken, moving from the perception of the funding of higher education as an expense, to the consideration of this budget as an investment into the future of the country and its citizens.

Public funding

In 2012, through the Bucharest Communiqué (2012), ministers committed to "*securing the highest possible level of public funding for higher education and drawing on other appropriate sources, as an investment in our future*". When asked if this formal commitment had any impact on the higher education system in the respective countries, only 16% of the respondents answered with a yes, while half of the national unions of students indicated that the commitment had no effect on the actual public spending on higher education in their countries at all. Similar to many other issues for which the ministers committed to the implementation of policies and tools in the scope of the Bologna Process, the enactment of these commitments lacks tangible outcomes. The ESU continues to stress the importance of governments ensuring that higher education institutions have sufficient and sustainable resources to deliver high quality teaching and research and meet broader educational, social, cultural, and economic goals.

Georgia is a very positive example of a government that has increased education funding from 10% to 25%, which the NUS considers as an appropriate investment that can lead to the future sustainable development of higher education in the country. A more conservative increase can be observed in Croatia, with an increase in the number and budget for grants since 2012, according to the member union. However, the NUS also pointed out that there are still no grants available for PhD students. The ESU considers that in order to have accessible and stable research, public funds should be allocated as much as in other programmes; otherwise research activities will remain a privilege instead of a way to contribute to progress.

Unfortunately, there have been several negative developments in other countries such as in Latvia, which has seen multiple attempts to decrease the funding for higher education. In Romania, the "Law of National Education" that was adopted in 2011 states that at least 6% of the GDP has to be invested in education, and at least 1% of the GDP must be invested in research. However, for 8 years, the implementation of the article has been postponed. As a consequence, according to the member union, education in Romania is underfunded with only 2.21% of GDP being allocated for education in 2018 and only 2.76% in 2019. In Finland, cuts to public funding for higher education have been made by two consecutive governments. The current government is overturning those trends, but the investments to HE and HEIs are minimal compared to the previous cuts made since 2012. In Denmark, according to the member union, public funding has decreased, especially since 2015 when the government began cutting 2% of public funding for education each year. The ESU has taken an unwavering stand, as stated in the past edition of the BWSE 2018, that Europe should see free higher education as a long-term goal.

Commodification

Commodification describes the process of quantifying education in order to attach an economic value to it. This tendency often results from a cut in public funding to education, and as institutions are less and less able to financially sustain themselves, new sources of financing are explored. The danger resides in the fact that such sources of income for institutions can become a threat to the independence and the integrity of teaching and research. The ideal of education as a public good and a public responsibility is, thus, slowly but surely being dismantled and becoming a private and limited commodity. This creates challenges to the inclusivity and accessibility of all, favouring a self-described "elite" made up by the more privileged.

The NUSes have reported various examples of governments promoting policies that increase the commodification in higher education. The UDU reports that one of the main factors contributing to the commodification of education in Italy is the consistent underfunding of higher education in the country as a whole. The underfunding directly led to HEIs imposing and increasing tuition fees. Due to the high costs, not all students can afford to enroll in higher education which makes it instead of a public good, a private and limited commodity that only a certain number of students can afford.

One of the most notable examples of commodification is visible in Croatia where HEIs are implementing the same study programmes for both local and international students but are charging the international ones up to 3 times as much in tuition fees. The classes are being held by the same professors and are of the same quality but charged for differently based on citizenship of the student, which evidences the profit-oriented approach of those institutions. Similarly, Finnish NUSes report that the last two governments of Finland have developed initiatives towards education export and internationalisation, which can be seen as linked to the increased commodification and competitiveness of HE.

Figure 10.4.
According to your NUS, does the government promote policies to increase commodification in higher education?

According to your NUS, does the government promote policies to increase commodification in higher education?

18.92% N/A
5.41% To a great extent
13.51% Not at all
37.84% Somewhat
24.32% Very little
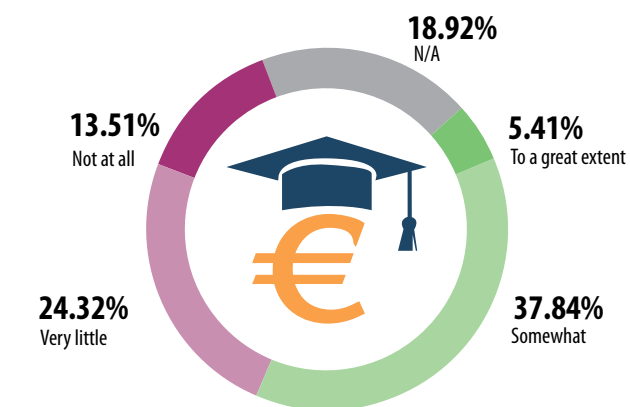
In Slovenia, the SSU is troubled by the decision of the government to award concessions for teaching activities to private universities. The NUS is worried about the policy to strengthen private HE with public funds instead of investing them in high-quality public institutions.

In the past edition of the BWSE 2018, a subchapter regarding commodification tendencies was added for the first time. Once again, the ESU sees the necessity to tackle commodification tendencies rising in higher education policy making across the EHEA. One of the direct consequences of commodification is the design of programmes solely for the sake of fitting the labour market's current needs. As a matter of fact, 24% of our members have noted an increase in commodificative policies since 2015, when less than 3% reported a decrease (see Figure 10.5.). The majority of NUSes have not seen any change since then (44%).

The DSF, our member union from Denmark, points out that part of the public funding to higher education there is based on employment rates. Therefore, university courses are designed with the very specific purpose of getting students employed, which puts aside the other goals of higher education and limiting its scope to being an economic variable. Another example is Ireland, as reported by the national student union USI, the Irish government has greatly emphasised the concept of continued education and higher education having to meet the needs of employers, large multinational companies, and the "skills economy", ultimately shifting the role of higher education from something hybrid to a mere economical field, leaving aside any social responsibility.

Even though none of the past communiqués addressed this topic, it is important to keep describing and analysing the commodification processes in order to safeguard the multiple aspects and roles of higher education. The París Communiqué 2018 showed its commitment to "developing policies that encourage and support higher education institutions to fulfil their social responsibility and contribute to a more cohesive and inclusive society through enhancing intercultural understanding, civic engagement and ethical awareness, as well as ensuring equitable access to higher education". The next step needs to aim at making these words a reality for all students across the EHEA.

10.3. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the past decades, the number of students in the EHEA has increased significantly, while the amount of public funding for higher education has not. As a matter of fact, in the last years public funding has been cut in nearly half of European countries, resulting in a gap in financial resources. This makes

Figure 10.5.
Have your NUS observed increase or decreae of commodification policies in the HE sector (in connection to national economic policies) since 2018?

Have your NUS observed increase or decreae of commodification policies in the HE sector (in connection to national economic policies) since 2018?

education a more elitist project rather than an accessible public good. Apart from that, we have seen developments that have dramatically influenced the level of required financial support, such as the internationalisation of higher education and research, the desire for quality and new teaching methods, and the increasing different economic interests in higher education. Not addressing these developments can have tremendously negative long-term effects. Therefore, governments must prioritise higher education and increase public investment in it to ensure accessible and high-quality higher education.

The ESU believes that it is of vital importance that public funding guarantees stability and sustainability in the development of higher education. The allocation of public funding must ensure that the development of education and research is based on wider goals and not on short-sighted financial benefits.

Recommendations

- Tuition-free and accessible higher education needs to be understood as a long-term goal for all EHEA member states
- The availability and funding of student support services need to be improved while working on a shift from loan to grant provision of financial support in order to ensure students' access to higher education and acceptable living conditions
- Better provision of information on funding opportunities for students is needed
- More funding needs to be allocated to PhD studies and research to foster the achievement of the sustainable development goals
- Governments must monitor and contain commodification policies in higher education

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11. STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING

11.1. INTRODUCTION

Student-centred learning (SCL) has been one of the core topics of the ESU's advocacy work since the 2010s. From 2012 ESU has been advocating for student-centred learning as a broader concept which is to be applied to all elements of higher education and not only to pedagogy in a narrow sense (ESU 2012).

The ESU's core understanding of student-centred learning is defined as "both a mind-set and a culture within a given higher education institution and a learning approach which is broadly related to, and supported by, constructivist theories of learning" (ESU, 2015). It is not a method in itself, but is characterised by innovative methods of teaching, which aim to promote learning through communication with teachers and other learners, and which take students seriously as active participants in their own learning, fostering transferable skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking and reflective thinking (ESU, 2015).

A very recent definition of SCL can be found in the research paper *Mapping and Analysis of SCLT practices: Usable knowledge to support more inclusive, high-quality higher education*, by Klemenčić et al. (2020). This research is pushing forward the discussion on SCLT and comes with an overarching definition that encompasses all elements of SCLT in the perception of ESU. They define SCLT as:

an overarching approach to designing learning and teaching in higher education, which is founded on the concept of student agency. SCLT primarily concerns the capability of students to participate in, influence and take responsibility for their learning pathways and environments, in order to achieve the expected learning outcomes. […] SCLT as an approach […] moves beyond the classroom practice to construct inclusive and supportive learning and teaching environments within the higher education institution and its subunits, as well as in broader higher education systems at regional, national and supranational levels. (Klemenčić et al., 2020, pp. 33)

Firmly establishing the SCL approach in an institution or higher education system doesn't merely imply implementing new methods of learning and teaching for students, but requires shaping a mindset and atmosphere where students are co-creating their own learning experience. For student-centred learning to be successful, it must be part of the university's overall purpose and can require a change of culture. Student-centred learning, including active learning and flexibility, can also only be established if students take the responsibility and initiative in being active learners, and it is up to the institution to provide the right environment for this.

The student-centredness of an institution can also be examined through the lens of quality assurance procedures as the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for quality assurance require a student-centered approach in a programme's delivery and assessment (ESG, 2015).

Today, SCL has a prominent presence in European higher education policy discussions and is included in different forward-looking and action-setting documents, most importantly by the BFUG working group recommendations for Learning and Teaching that will be part of the new Rome Communiqué. It is questionable though how far the European level policy measures trigger actions and promote a change at national and institutional levels within Europe. This uncertainty becomes more obvious when we compare the results of ESU's Bologna with Student Eyes (BWSE) survey from 2018 to this current data of 2020. The improvement of this period is not significant as the subchapters below show.

11.2. MAIN FINDINGS

Student-centred learning and the Bologna Process

Where are we now?

The concept of student-centred learning was first mentioned in the Bologna Process in the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué in 2009, where it became one of the future goals of the Bologna Process (EHEA, 2009). This was reaffirmed in the 2012 Bucharest Communiqué (EHEA, 2012), the 2015 Yerevan Communiqué (EHEA, 2015) and the 2018 Paris Communiqué (EHEA, 2018) as well.

Looking into this more than 10 year history and the students' perspective, the *Bologna With Student Eyes 2018* report of the ESU concludes that the implementation of SCL is happening, but is extremely slow, uneven across the EHEA, and the issue of misimplementation presents a significant danger. "*The unevenness of implementation of SCL is problematic to such a degree that it makes questionable whether EHEA level policies even influence national levels to any significant extent*" (BWSE, 2018, pp. 115).

In a recently published article *Bridging the Policy-Practice Gap: Student-Centred Learning from the Students' Perspective*, Šušnjar and Hovhannisyan clearly outline the use of and reference to SCL in the Bologna discussions and policy documents and show at the same time that translation of those guidelines to the practice level is scarce and most of the time very challenging to implement (2020).

An important step towards acknowledging this gap has been the formation of the Learning and Teaching Advisory Group within the BFUG 2018-2020 cycle, in which the ESU is a member. During these past two years, the group has worked on drafting a set of recommendations addressing in detail the national/governmental support that is required around the EHEA for the enhancement of learning and teaching. One of the three main chapters of the document addresses the implementation of SCL and will hopefully serve as good guidance for national level policymakers to make SCL a reality. The ESU suggests

that the work of this Advisory Group should be followed up by setting up a peer/support structure during the next BFUG cycle where the EHEA countries will be able to learn possible enhancements for SCL from each other.

How to enable the implementation of SCL?

Looking at the current state of the implementation of SCL in the EHEA, it is essential to reflect on the implementation of the other Bologna tools and measures that serve as enablers for SCL. The functioning of the ECTS system, and the use of learning outcomes, for example, allow students to choose their own learning paths and to take more ownership over their individual learning programmes, which is essential in the SCL approach. The shift to outcomes-based educational policies is needed for student-centred learning to become a reality.

SCL and internal quality assurance (QA)

The involvement of students in internal QA is also an important indicator for SCL, as this involvement is a prerequisite for students to be co-creators and monitors of their education. Ninety-four percent of the student unions that participated in the survey state that their students are involved in internal QA, which compared to the results reported in the BWSE 2018 indicates an 8% increase.

Almost half of the unions state that the students are involved in internal QA as full-members (voting rights) within the bodies of internal assessment processes (45.95%). Approximately 19% of the student unions indicate the students are only involved as a source of information, whereas in 2018 this was 26%, which indicates some improvement.

Many unions also state that the level and form of involvement highly differs per institution and is, therefore, difficult to generalise. This generally applies to internal QA processes, whereby the student involvement highly differs per institution and even per programme.

We asked our NUSes to what extent SCL is considered as a factor in the internal QA process in their countries. Unfortunately, almost half of the unions answered that it is perceived as below average in terms of importance (29.73%) or as of very low importance (13.51%) (see Figure 11.1.). This has not improved very much since 2018, but the number of unions that see it as low importance has decreased from around 20% (2018) to 13.51% (2020), which is a positive development.

SCL and external quality assurance

Surprisingly, the results are very different when we look at SCL in external quality assurance. We

To what extent is SCL considered as a factor of the internal QA in your country?

- 2.70% Very high
- 13.51% Above average
- 40.54% Average
- 29.73% Below average
- 13.51% Very low/not at all

asked the NUSes how important is the ESG2015 standard 1.3 perceived to be by the QA agencies compared to other standards. Approximately 32% of the unions responded that it is perceived as very important (or equally important as other standards), and 26.32% responded it is seen as important. Approximately 8%% of the unions (3 unions) see it as fairly important and also about 8% of the unions (3 unions) only as slightly important. About 13% of the unions (5 unions) responded that it is perceived as not important and another 13% of the unions (5 unions) didn't know (see Figure 11.2.).

Even though these responses give a very positive picture on the importance of SCL in external quality assurance, it is still worrisome that 5 countries respond that it is perceived as not important.

ECTS, learning outcomes, and general considerations

Implementation of ECTS and learning outcomes is one of the key Bologna tools that can enable a functioning SCL. If ECTS is properly used for allocating the student-workload based on well-defined and clear learning outcomes, we have one of the cornerstones of SCL implementation. Many countries don't have this cornerstone according to our member unions, as the numbers show. This is also strengthened by the academic research where uneven implementation of the so-called 'key commitments' including the full adoption of ECTS is identified across EHEA (Damiani, 2019).

Where 71% of the members answered that all credits are obtained using the ECTS system and the majority of the systems use student workload as the basis of allocation of ECTS credits, only 9 respondents (24%) stated that the amount of ECTS credits is always based on the formulation of learning outcomes (See Map 11.3) Compared to 2018, there has been little progress in this regard as only 2 more countries in 2020 indicate that ECTS credits are always based on the formulation of learning outcomes. Moreover, only approximately half of the respondents are either satisfied or very satisfied with the implementation of the ECTS system, which is a very disappointing number so many years after the implementation of the system. If we are not managing to meaningfully integrate the ECTS as a structured tool into higher education systems, implementing SCL with all its abstractness and all encompassing characteristics becomes extremely difficult if not impossible.

On a more general note, in their elaborations about SCL, many of the member unions highlighted the need to see the SCL approach as strongly connected to the social dimension of higher education and student well-being. Implementation of SCL that

According to your NUS, how important or not important is the ESG2015 standard 1.3 seen by the QA agency/ies in comparison with the other standards?

- 31.58% Very important
- 26.32% Important
- 7.89% Fairly important / Slightly important
- 13.16% Not important / I don't know

Map 11.3.
Does the allocation
of ECTS happen
on the basis of the
formulation of learning
outcomes?

Legend:
- EHEA country with no ESU member
- No information available
- No, never
- Rarely
- Yes, sometimes (about half of the HE System)
- Yes, very often
- Yes, always (throughout the HE System)

benefits every learner, also means ensuring prior learning recognition procedures that will support integrating into HE those from diverse learning backgrounds. As another example, it also means creating flexible pathways so working students or those with care responsibilities can find a way to combine studies and other obligations. And finally, SCL also means creating engaging, student-friendly, and innovative learning environments that regularly support the improvement of pedagogical skills of teachers and apply creative and new learning technologies - both through digital tools, as well as through human interaction.

11.3. CONCLUSIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

As it becomes visible throughout the chapter, implementation of student-centred learning is highly dependent on the implementation of other Bologna tools, and through those tools we try to measure and see if any progress has been made in the implementation of SCL.

We see that SCL has been present in the European level policy discussions for more than a decade now, and the affirmation of its importance is present at the supranational level policy - initially through the statements in different communiqués and currently also through the work of the BFUG's Advisory Group on Learning and Teaching that has been working during the 2018-2020 period and has produced a set of recommendations to the EHEA governments for the implementation of SCL. On the national level policy, however, it's difficult to see if the SCL implementation is embraced or not.

When we look into the practical side of implementation, such as through the Bologna tools identified in this chapter, we clearly see the gap between the European policy and national practice from the perspective of the member unions. There are still many cases in which students are considered as mere sources of information for internal QA rather than as full members of the processes, which prevents a mutual understanding of co-creation that the SCL approach strongly advocates for. More than 40% of the respondents indicate that from their perspective in internal QA, SCL as a priority is considered to be of below average importance, which clearly indicates that the institutional level policy is still not aligned with the members' perception of SCL as a priority.

Regarding external QA, we see some progress as around 65% of the responding unions say the external QA processes in their country consider SCL as very important/important/fairly important. For more than 20% of unions, though, its importance is considered to be either only minor or not at all important. These numbers serve as another example of uneven implementation of EHEA tools among the member countries.

And finally, the reflection on SCL through a focus on the implementation of the ECTS and learning outcomes shows how far behind we are from a student-centred way of building our curriculums and study programmes. Not only do we fail to involve students as co-creators of their study paths, but we also do not put their needs at the center of defining the learning outcomes and linking them to their workload through the ECTS.
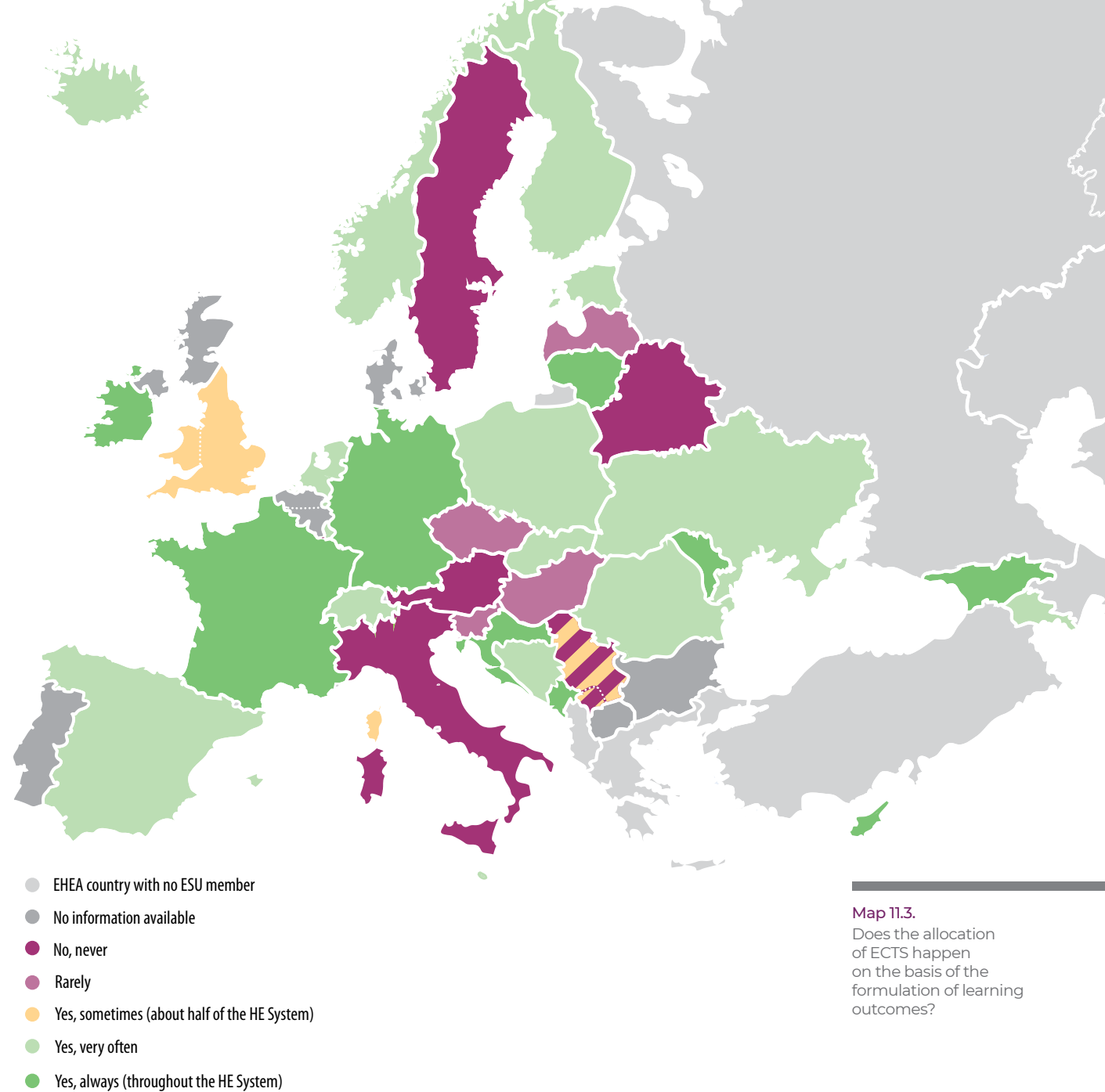
There are many more aspects of SCL implementation that were not evaluated through this chapter due to limitations of our methodology. However, advocacy for flexible pathways, student well-being, teacher training, and learning innovation are also seen as a priority for our membership for meaningful and successful SCL implementation.

Recommendations

- Develop a structure which will follow up on and monitor the implementation of the recommendations produced by the BFUG's Advisory Group on Learning and Teaching in order to guarantee that the policy discussions on SCL extend from the European to the national level
- Internal QA should enhance the involvement of students and promote their meaningful participation, seeing them as full members of the processes. The institutional policy of European HEIs should incorporate this active student approach in relevant policy documents and make sure its implementation actually happens at the level of departments and programme
- Retrain those involved in the curricula development with the aim of communicating the importance of well-defined learning outcomes and the justified connection of those with the allocated ECTS credits. In parallel, allocate resources for building the capacity of students to be involved in the development of the learning outcomes and the ECTS credits allocated to study programmes and courses
- From the European to the national level, external QA should focus on prioritising the assessment of those accreditation standards which are linked to SCL. Our aim should be to communicate the importance of SCL through external QA to all the QA agencies and HEIs in the EHEA

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12. THE FUTURE OF THE BOLOGNA PROCESS

12.1. INTRODUCTION

The Bologna Process started in 1999 to create more coherence between higher education institutions in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in order to facilitate student and staff mobility, to make higher education more inclusive, accessible, attractive and competitive worldwide. Engaging in discussions regarding higher education policy reforms is key to building the necessary trust for overcoming obstacles and successful implementation of these reforms. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has already forced HEI to shift and develop their activity online, will continue to have some effect on the higher education field. Therefore, now more than ever is the time to rethink the future of the EHEA, and truly foster innovation, digitalisation and inclusion.

The 2020-2030 decade should be a decade of completion, testing and perfecting members' compliance with the agreed commitments. Achieving effectiveness and efficiency in higher education depends on mutual support amongst the members of the EHEA in order to avoid implementation at different speeds.

Although the key commitments remain of utmost importance to achieve the aims of the Bologna Process, it is crucial to recognise that the EHEA is not static. A shift in attitude and commitments has to remain up to date with the latest developments in different higher education systems. It is important to point out the risk of non-implementation and superficial implementation on the national as well as the local level. This could fragment and have a negative impact on the developments within the EHEA.

12.2. MAIN FINDINGS

Implementation of Bologna commitments between countries/regions/institutions

For another working period of the BFUG, ESU once again notices that the NUSes have highlighted huge differences in the level of implementation across Europe, but also across regions and institutions within the same country. Whilst understanding that the implementation of the commitments may vary from one country to the other, blatant disregard of them should not be ignored within the EHEA but rather new mechanisms should be explored to improve implementation and level differences between countries, across regions.

When it comes to the differences at regional and institutional levels, ESU fully understands that autonomy comes into play, however, indicators and benchmarking mechanisms should be introduced to ensure that the work of the BP goes beyond mere words on papers. With the introduction of the ESGs, for instance, we have seen a drastic improvement in the QA processes. Similarly, with the adoption of the Principle and Guidelines on Social Dimension, one would expect that a set of benchmarks will now be set, to ensure effective monitoring of their implementation. In this regard, country thematic peer reviews enable an honest review of checks and balances and should ensure student participation as a major target group impacted by Bologna commitments.

Prioritization of the social dimension

There is a growing perception that positive developments on the social dimension are taking place all across the EHEA, with ESU's responding NUSes perceiving the social dimension to be considered a moderately to highly important subject on both the governmental and HEI levels in ⅔ of the countries that participated in the survey, while being assigned no importance in only 10% of cases in relation to governmental prioritization and slightly less than 10% in relation to HEIs. However, NUSes report that only 6 out of 39 countries have national targets in place to enhance participation of underrepresented groups in HE, with another 9 countries having targets in place which are not being followed.

Financial troubles and the rigidness of education systems that lack flexibility for working students to keep up with their studies are the most commonly mentioned problems that, according to the NUSes, need to be tackled to reduce dropout rates in the EHEA.

The situation remains far from perfect, and work on the social dimension of higher education is far from complete. The Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA give a solid ground to start concretely improving the situation. Once the PAGs are adopted by Ministers, a long, uphill journey needs to start, which will closely follow the implementation of this document. The social dimension requires more peer support at this point, as we still see significant discrepancies in the level of policy development and implementation within the EHEA. It is crucial that the BFUG enables the establishment and work of the Advisory Group for Social Dimension in the next BFUG Operational Programme 2020-2023. The main objective for the new mandate of the Advisory Group for Social Dimension should be (a) the development of a system of monitoring of the Principles and Guidelines and (b) defining indicators and benchmarks for the principles for SD.

Full potential of student centered learning and student participation neglected

ESU has been advocating for better student involvement for many years and student-centred learning is very high on ESU's political agenda. Unfortunately, we have to conclude that the implementation of student-centred learning in practice is still lacking, as we can see in the 2018 'Bologna With Student Eyes' report and this year's BWSE, as well as in an article by ESU Expert Aleksandar Susnjar and Vice President Gohar Hovhannisyan

titled 'Bridging the Policy-Practice Gap: Student-Centred Learning from the Students' Perspective', forthcoming in the Routledge International Handbook on Student-Centred Learning and Teaching in Higher Education in July.

Achieving a student-centred approach demands a transformation of the mindset and power relations we hold within the institutions. Both teachers and students need support in order to enhance their understanding about a student-centered approach to education. HE authorities should support students to take this attitude from the very beginning of the learning process. Unfortunately, the policies of higher education institutions rarely consider the need for students to be prepared for student-centred learning and to perceive student participation as something beyond official involvement in governing bodies and quality assurance.

The survey shows that students are willing to be a part of governance, decision-making and improvements, but they do not perceive their roles as being relevant. Moreover, 50% of students' unions reported in the survey that students do not feel that they are seen as full members of their academic communities.

There is a lot of room for educational systems to prioritize student support structures (e.g. mentoring, professional orientation, elective courses from diverse disciplines, etc) to help them find the most suitable learning path. If the university environment would provide students with more flexibility and ownership over the programmes, students would be more eager to take an active approach and perceive their involvement as relevant.

Reforms must guarantee students' rights to participation in order to ensure partnership and possibilities for real involvement. It is important to include students in discussions about learning and teaching, to have a constant dialogue about their learning process.

Mixed success of internationalisation in different countries

Increased mobility is one of the main accomplishments of the Bologna Process. More and more students have the opportunity to participate in mobility programmes because of the Bologna Process. However, this increased mobility does not have the same outcomes for every country. Mainly countries in Eastern Europe are struggling with 'brain drain' while the northern countries like the Netherlands and Denmark are currently creating measures to decrease the high influx of international students.

ESU is aware of these challenges and promotes cooperation between the different European countries to turn brain drain into brain circulation. European institutions should not be competing with each other for the best students but rather should work together to facilitate diversity in mobility. Whilst the European Universities Initiative can be a great programme for achieving transnational alliances and strengthening strategic partnerships, it brings the risk of excluding students from non-EU countries. Therefore, such initiatives should be designed carefully in order to prevent segregation and the creation of elitist networks.

Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a significant obstacle to mobility programmes, and ESU is concerned with the increased emphasis on virtual mobility as "mobility for all". ESU reiterates that whilst this form of mobility was ideal during the emergency situation, it should not replace physical mobility that truly demonstrates the ability for building intercultural competencies amongst students. Ministers should have a continuous commitment to continue increasing the inclusion of all within mobility programmes, and should only see virtual and blended mobility as accompanying the physical mobility.

Building trust in automatic recognition

The guarantee that credits from abroad will be recognized is a very important prerequisite for mobility that often leaves uncertainties about the recognition of qualification and learning periods completed abroad, especially for students in a different mobility programme than Erasmus+.

A majority of our NUSes (61%) support the idea of automatic recognition in the future, however, others point out that the inconsistent implementation of Bologna tools (49%), the concerns regarding regulated professions (46%) and the lack of trust between EHEA countries (41%) give reason for automatic recognition not to be accepted yet.

Throughout the various chapters it becomes clear that implementation of the key commitments is crucial for automatic recognition as obviously without QA there is no trust between the systems to automatically recognise credentials; without ECTS there is no common framework for automatic recognition; and without the Lisbon Recognition Convention there is no strong commitment to make the automatic recognition legally possible.

12.3. CONCLUSIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Structures: 'A permanent secretariat'

The idea of having a permanent secretariat for the Bologna Process is not a new one and is an establishment that ESU is in favour of. For the consistency and continuity of the Bologna Process, we believe that it would be beneficial to appoint a permanent secretariat. In the current system a lot of time and knowledge gets lost by the change in secretariat. However, before this can be fully implemented, a number of questions need to be answered, especially about the permanent seat of the secretariat, the financing and budgeting as well as the staff of this secretariat.

We strongly believe that the next cycle of Bologna should carefully analyse questions that thus far remain unanswered through the creation of a Working Group. The group should specifically analyse the meaning of 'permanent' and how to ensure that all governments involved in the process maintain ownership of the intergovernmental process itself. In ESU's opinion, it is important that the Bologna Secretariat operates in a neutral manner and remains independent from one particular country that takes the lead for the secretariat

and the hosting of the next ministerial conference and that it executes no political role whatsoever. It is therefore important to (s)elect people in the secretariat on a personal title instead of in the name of their respective countries.

Key commitments and fundamental values

In the Bologna Process all countries have committed themselves to the implementation of the three key commitments (three-cycle degree structure, recognition of qualifications and quality assurance) in higher education to boost cooperation and compliance. Fulfilling the promises made by governments and achieving the key commitments of the Bologna Process remains essential and lays the foundation on which we can build stronger mutual understanding and peer learning to achieve sustainable, inclusive, high-quality education all over Europe. Improvements have been seen but in many countries, however, other countries are lagging behind in implementation. Especially regarding the three-cycle and ECTS systems, differences are still large, and despite the strong developments in Quality Assurance, more work still has to be done to achieve the automatic recognition of degrees in the whole EHEA by 2030.

Higher education plays a pivotal role in ensuring a fairer, sustainable and more equitable world. For this, more cooperation is needed within the EHEA to create innovative synergies and alliances among universities. Synergies between the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the European Research Area (ERA) and the European Education Area (EEA) are extremely crucial to concentrate efforts on achieving common goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should take their societal role more seriously to search for and provide solutions to the challenges our societies face today. This requires HEIs not only to embed sustainability in our education systems but to also involve the entire higher education community and society at large in higher education. This will only work if it is built on a foundation of trust, continued commitment by governments and full implementation of the already agreed commitments.

Fundamental values including academic freedom, institutional autonomy, participation of students and staff are crucial to the protection of students' rights such as access to quality public education, freedom of expression and association, and personal safety. As seen in parts of Europe, especially in Belarus, such rights are alarmingly disregarded and violated. ESU emphasizes the importance of the continuation of the BFUG's Task Force on Fundamental Values and the need to develop a monitoring framework that takes into account both de jure and de facto realities linked to protecting and promoting fundamental values in the EHEA. Commitments to human rights and democracy as the foundation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) are a prerequisite for educational systems that aim to contribute to the forthcoming of our society as a whole.

The BFUG needs to be visionary in the way it looks at the Bologna Process, and in order to do so, it must keep the relevance and connectivity to the end-beneficiaries of the process at its core. In this regard, it is also crucial that the BFUG avoids losing time on creating new terminologies that create confusion, while instead working upon ensuring that common fundamental values and commitments are given adequate resources for implementation and are well communicated to all those involved in the process.

Recommendations

- It is crucial that the BFUG enables the establishment and work of the Advisory Group for Social Dimension in the next BFUG Operational Programme 2020-2023 to define indicators and benchmarks for the principles and guidelines of the social dimension and to develop mechanisms of monitoring and peer support for implementation in the EHEA
- Greater focus on student-centred learning is necessary to provide students with flexibility and sense of ownership of their education. This will enable them to successfully navigate through, and critically engage in this rapidly changing world. It requires flexible learning paths with recognition of non-formal and short-cycle education of which a certain degree of quality can be assured on a European level
- It is important to note that the higher education sector is existing in a digital age. Digitalisation of education has to be perceived as a useful addition to the current existing solutions and tools in enhancing student-centered learning and accessibility of education. This, however, is only the case if all necessary precautions are taken to make sure it is implemented in the right way
- Better communication and peer support need to be available to tackle issues that exist at the local and institutional levels that are still hindering the implementation of commitments and respect to fundamental values

APPENDICES

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LIST OF COMMONLY USED ABBREVIATIONS

BA	Bachelor's Degree
BFUG	Bologna Follow-up Group
BP	Bologna Process
BWSE	Bologna with Student Eyes
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENIC	European Network of Information Centres
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for higher education
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
ESU	European Students' Union
EU	European Union
HE	Higher Education

HEI	Higher Education Institution
LLL	Lifelong Learning
LRC	Lisbon Recognition Convention
MA	Master's Degree
NARIC	National Academic Recognition Information Centres
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NUS	National Union of Students
PAG	Principles and Guidelines for Social Dimension
QA	Quality Assurance
QF	Qualification Framework
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SCL	Student-Centred Learning
SD	Social Dimension
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF BWSE 2020 DATA COLLECTION

The dataset of BWSE 2020 is based on answers from NUSes marked with "x" for the respective chapter. Unions marked with "o" did not provide data to the referred chapter.

In total, the answers cover the perception of implementation in 40 member countries of The European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

NB. For some countries with more than one NUS as members of ESU, the answers for that country were provided by one of the two unions (Belarus, France, The Netherlands). For others, two separate sets of answers were provided for that country (Belgium, Serbia).

Country	NUS	Ch. 1	Ch. 2	Ch. 3	Ch. 4	Ch. 5	Ch. 6	Ch. 7	Ch. 8
Armenia	ANSA	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Austria	ÖH	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Belarus**	BOSS**	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Belarus	BSA	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Belgium	FEF	x	x	x	o	o	o	o	o
Belgium	VVS	x	x	o	x	o	o	o	o
Bosnia & Herzogovina	SURS	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Bulgaria	NASC	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Croatia	CSC	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Cyprus	POFEN	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Czechia	SK RVŠ	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Denmark	DSF	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Estonia	EÜL	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Finland*	SYL & SAMOK*	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
France	FAGE	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
France**	UNEF**	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Georgia	GSOA	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Germany	fzs	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Hungary	HÖOK	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Iceland	LIS	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

Country	NUS	Ch. 1	Ch. 2	Ch. 3	Ch. 4	Ch. 5	Ch. 6	Ch. 7	Ch. 8
Ireland	USI	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Israel	NUIS	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Italy	UDU	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Latvia	LSA	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Lithuania	LSS	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Luxemburg	UNEL	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Malta	KSU	x	x	x	x	o	x	x	x
Moldova	ASM	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Montenegro	SPUM	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Netherlands**	ISO**	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Netherlands	LSVB	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
North Macedonia	NSUM	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Norway	NSO	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Poland	PSRP	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Portugal	FAIRe	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Romania	ANOSR	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Serbia	SKONUS	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Serbia	SUS	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Slovakia	ŠRVS	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Slovenia	SSU	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Spain	CREUP	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Sweden	SFS	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Switzerland	VSS-UNES-USU	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
UK	NUS-UK	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Ukraine	UAS	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
TOTAL	**45**	**40**	**40**	**39**	**39**	**37**	**38**	**38**	**38**

* SYL & SAMOK answered all parts of the survey together

** Surveys for these countries were filled out by the other union from that country

Bologna with Student Eyes is a reality-check of what has been agreed upon by national governments within the Bologna Process and what the actual situation is for students. The data for this edition was collected by surveying the European Students' Union's national unions of students in the following areas: student participation in governance, the social dimension, quality assurance, recognition, mobility and internationalisation, structural reforms, student-centred learning and financing of higher education. The questionnaire also included general questions about the Bologna Process and its future. In total, between 37 to 40 NUSes from 40 EHEA countries responded to the questionnaire, from Norway to Malta and Iceland to Armenia.

The European Students' Union (ESU) promotes students' interests at the European level towards all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, Bologna Follow-up Group, Council of Europe and UNESCO. Through its members, ESU represents almost 20 million students in Europe.