

Resolution: ESU's message towards the 2024 Tirana Ministerial Conference

As ministers and heads of delegations gather in Tirana for the Ministerial Conference 2 of EHEA, we will mark the 25th anniversary of the Bologna Process, arguably the 3 world's most successful intergovernmental process of cooperation in higher education. Through perseverance, continuity, ambition and skillful determination of common tools, the Bologna Process has achieved much more than could have been imagined in 1999. Its 6 positive results have impacted all higher education communities in Europe through better comparability and compatibility of higher education systems, promoting transparency, mobility, and enhanced quality of higher education provision.

To a large extent, this is the result of embracing meaningful stakeholder participation at the EHEA level, maintaining the process connected to the needs of the higher education community and its reality on the ground. While in 1999 students have been left outside the decision-making room, both conceptually and practically, since then we have been able to take progressively new responsibilities and roles in the Bologna Process. However, this creates an even more contrasting picture with the manifestation of the Bologna Process at national level, where in several cases stakeholders are barely engaged, consulted, or co-opted in the implementation of the commitments taken through ministerial communiqués.

This leads to and is a result of a greater phenomenon of increasing incongruity between the postulated ambitions of the EHEA Communiqués and its lack of impetus at national level. It reaches the point where the desire itself to meaningfully progress and transform into practice the much-needed, holistic vision of EHEA of what higher education in Europe should become stands questionable. Our recent 2024 edition of the Bologna with Student Eyes publication has shown that commitments in the Bologna Process lack not only implementation and resources to achieve it, but sometimes even the intention to implement them overall. This seems to be a symptom of believing that the voluntary nature of the Bologna Process, instead of referring to the commitments taken through consensus and lack of legal enforceability, implies that 'anything goes' and political commitments have no meaning, which is disturbing. We call for comprehensive, more in-depth

monitoring of EHEA implementation, as well as for consequences for those countries which consistently fail to respect their promises, for example through additional reporting and peer review.

In terms of policies, the lack of full and adequate implementation applies to commitments old and new, even those considered key. While significant progress has been achieved through thematic peer groups, challenges to fair recognition persist, as well as restrictions in fully using the potential of EHEA tools in quality assurance. Despite student participation being the norm in external quality assurance, disparities for internal quality assurance are large. Apart from kick-starting the revision process of several tools, the EHEA should focus more on revisiting in more depth the backbones of the system, including the adequate use of learning outcomes and the flexibility and coherence of the study programmes within the cycles of the qualification frameworks.

The Tirana Communique will not fall short of enunciating the societal challenges that would both impact higher education and call for its response, from geopolitical conflicts, democratic backsliding, and polarization, also affecting academic freedom, to demographic changes and migration, increased digitalisation, sustainability challenges or rising inequality. The ministers should not only commit to tackling these by supporting students and higher education institutions, but it should also be a wake-up call that more, rather than less European cooperation and internationalization is needed. Recalling our ESU statement on the future of Bologna adopted last year, EHEA must remain the main fora for European cooperation in higher education. To do so, it must be forward-looking, rather than living off the ambitions of its first decade, which would make it weary. Ministers must show that the days of transformative change in EHEA are not behind us.

In 2020, ministers agreed to making an inclusive, innovative, and interconnected EHEA a reality by 2030. ESU is fully committed to support this aspiration, and to contribute to EHEA tools and policy that are taken up by public authorities to ensure the overarching priorities do not turn into an empty shell. This also requires that the 'three Is' are prioritized in the next work programme of EHEA. The achievement of an inclusive, innovative and interconnected EHEA has as its premise the common fundamental values that ought to bind us together. These values have been increasingly challenged in recent years in many European countries, but most blatantly through the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with the complicity of Belarus. We call on ministers in EHEA to continue the ongoing Ukrainian resistance, as well as the reconstruction efforts, avoiding brain drain, and express our disappointment that the Russian Federation is poised not to be excluded from EHEA. We urge the ministers to adopt the statements on defining our fundamental values, completing the process started

through the Rome Communiqué, and operationalise them in their systems. In particular, we call on member states to ensure that:

- student and staff participation are meaningfully present in all decision-making in all governing-bodies at institutional, national, and transnational level (for example in European University Alliances), including through independent student unions, and that student can protest freely, without fear of reprisal;
- public responsibility for higher education ensures at least full core institutional funding for learning and teaching, shies away from commodification tendencies and ensures access to higher education for refugees and students at risk;
- Current antidemocratic and extremist tendencies do not take a toll on academic freedom and limit higher education's role in preserving democratic processes and critical reflections.

We ask the ministers to adopt the Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of Social Dimension in EHEA as a building block to make EHEA more inclusive. The adoption of the Principles and Guidelines on strengthening the social dimension of higher education in EHEA ('PAGs') in 2020 marked a turning point by creating the first comprehensive set of high-level political commitments from member states for boosting the social dimension of higher education. There is no time to waste in implementing them: access to quality, inclusive higher education is a human right that Europe must defend and that is necessary for Europe's future. Since the last Ministerial Conference and the adoption of the Principles, student condition in many most parts of Europe has seen steep deterioration: rising tuition fees and cost of living due to inflation and energy prices fees, coupled with underfunded and insufficient support services and amount of grants lagging, severe housing unavailability and unaffordability, mental health challenges or persisting discrimination of minority groups. While most of these challenges are expected to be acknowledged in the Communiqué, public authorities must be accountable to students and society in swiftly and transparently addressing them. The Bologna Process must continue working on social dimension through adequate monitoring of the implementation of the PAGs and the use of the indicators, impact assessment and mainstreaming social dimension in its work.

An innovative EHEA requires built-in flexibility by design, and a student-centered ecosystem that gives students agency to pursue their aspirations. A new ministerial communiqué that repeats the same adages on promoting student-centered learning, transversal skills, critical thinking, flexible learning paths, new modes of learning or assessment and recognition of prior learning with no specific commitments at national or EHEA level would do no justice to students and their expectations to a higher education that prepares them for future challenges. We expect ministers to take swift action in implementing the

Recommendations to National Authorities for the Enhancement of Higher Education Learning and Teaching in the EHEA through national policies and funding and to have a test of student-centeredness of current provisions. At EHEA level, the commitments should translate in more transparency on national initiatives and elaborating further authoritative guidance on how to operationalise student-centered learning.

While ensuring complementarities with other initiatives, such as the EU's Artificial Intelligence Act, the EHEA should be a space for agreeing on a European approach to AI in education, that is humanistic, qualitative, and forward-looking, able to empower students and teachers rather than take away their agency. While national authorities and EHEA itself have paid some attention to digitalisation issues, supporting the drive for sustainability and competencies for sustainable development through higher education has received less systemic funding or even attention, to the detriment of current and future generations. The new communique may turn into yet another missed opportunity.

To achieve an interconnected EHEA, our message to the ministers is clear: we need more physical mobility, and to respond to the needs for a more balanced mobility, the solution is also more mobility. In recent years, despite long standing benchmarks, the objective of promoting mobility was more postulated than addressed. We support the calls for an EHEA plan on mobility, which should also address, among others, making mobility more inclusive and the (automatic) recognition of qualifications and credits.

We need an EHEA with evolving commitments and approaches for an evolving society, and this includes better ways of working and communicating about EHEA. Our message today, as yesterday and as tomorrow, is that we need an inspiring EHEA, which reaches the grassroots and impacts communities: a process of systems, beyond a process of ministers and ministries. And this should be evidenced in Tirana as well, through ambition, open dialogue between ministries and with stakeholders, fruitful exchanges and a sense of common pursuit based on trust and shared responsibility.