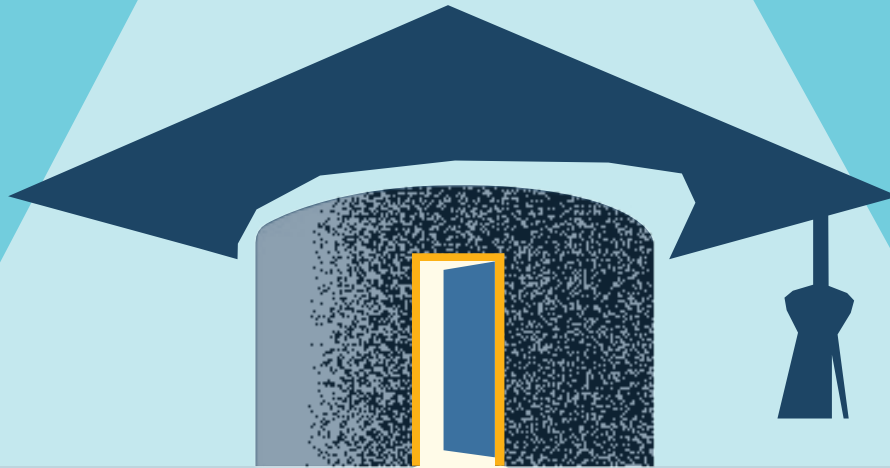


The European Students' Union



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

Bologna With Student Eyes 2020



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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.

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.

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.

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.

1. STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE

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.

The main areas for evaluation and analysis in BWSE 2020 included:

- *Legislation vs. enactment*
- *A declining Bologna effect*
- *Lack of democratic student representation*
- *Student representatives in the preparatory, decision-making and monitoring processes of higher education*
- *Standard of students representation*
- *Differences between national and institutional levels*
- *Financial impact on autonomy of student representation*

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.

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.

2. 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.

The main areas for evaluation and analysis in BWSE 2020 included:

- *Data collection*
- *National strategies for widening access*
- *Recognition processes*
- *Public student support systems*
- *Student retention measures*
- *Financial support schemes*
- *Housing and transport*
- *Mental health and well-being support*
- *The social dimension of student mobility*

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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.

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.

3. 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. 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. 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.

The main areas for evaluation and analysis in BWSE 2020 included:

- *Governance of QA agencies and national decision-making*
- *The purpose and focus of quality assurance*
- *Internal QA*
- *External QA*
- *Expert pools*
- *Obstacles to student involvement in QA*

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.

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.

4. 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.

The main areas for evaluation and analysis in BWSE 2020 included:

- *Recognition of qualifications and credits: European Diploma Supplement (EDS)*
- *Assessment and final decision on foreign diplomas/qualifications/credits*
- *Transparency, simplicity and non-discrimination*
- *Time limit*
- *Automatic recognition*
- *Main barriers for implementing automatic recognition*
- *Recognition of prior learning*

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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.

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.

5. 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.

The main areas for evaluation and analysis in BWSE 2020 included:

- *Financing mobility and internationalization*
- *Internationalisation strategies*
- *Barriers for implementing internationalisation strategies*
- *Internationalisation at home*
- *Measures for students returning from mobility*
- *Language learning and intercultural understanding*
- *Treatment and situation of students on mobility*
- *Tackling mobility obstacles*
- *Balanced mobility*

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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.

6. 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.

The main areas for evaluation and analysis in BWSE 2020 included:

- *Qualification frameworks: Comparability across the EHEA*
- *The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)*
- *3 Cycle System*
- *Part-time studies*

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the past 17 years, the majority of the EHEA countries have developed NQFs in compliance with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). 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 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.

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.

7. 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.

The main areas for evaluation and analysis in BWSE 2020 included:

- *Student support services*
- *Public funding of financial student aid*
- *Tuition fees*
- *Education as a public good vs. tuition fees*
- *Public funding*
- *Commodification*

CONCLUSIONS 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 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.

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.

8. 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.

The main areas for evaluation and analysis in BWSE 2020 included:

- *Student-centred learning and the Bologna Process*
- *How to enable the implementation of SCL?*
- *SCL and internal quality assurance (QA)*
- *SCL and external quality assurance*
- *ECTS, learning outcomes, and general considerations*

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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. 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 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.

9. 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.

The main areas for evaluation and analysis in BWSE 2020 included:

- *Implementation of Bologna commitments between countries/regions/institutions*
- *Mixed success of internationalisation in different countries*
- *Building trust in automatic recognition*

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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. 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.

Key commitments and fundamental values

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.

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.