



***The National Unions of Students in Europe***

## **Bologna With Student Eyes**

### **Draft Executive Summary**

For the third time, ESIB is presenting an analysis on the progress of the Bologna Process at European and national level to the Ministerial Summit. "Bologna With Student Eyes" portrays the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) as seen by students and the involvement of students in shaping the EHEA. National unions of students from 36 countries have contributed to this survey with their views, policies and experiences. As compared to the 2005 edition of "Bologna With Student Eyes", a couple of additional countries are covered in this report. However, some countries covered before could unfortunately not be included in this edition.

One of the key findings of "Bologna With Student Eyes" 2005 is still completely valid two years after. There is a worrying "à la carte" approach to implementing the Bologna Process in a significant amount of countries. Besides most Nordic countries, only few others possess a satisfactory overall progress in all action lines. Looking at most parties to the Bologna Process the findings suggest that specific action lines are implemented with a higher motivation and passion than others. The Bologna Process is not a pick-and-choose supermarket, but a comprehensive package. Each action line is in some way interlinked with and builds upon several others. Ignoring this, the chances and opportunities of the Bologna Process will not be fully reached in the national implementation. Even more worrying, it seems that the social dimension is still the most neglected action line at national level.

Within the EHEA there seems to be a gap in pace emerging. Whereas some countries are already "reforming the reforms", as for instance the debate about a reform of external quality assurance in some countries, others are still in the process of implementing the two-cycle Bachelor and Master structure. This might lead to more diverging views in the future, for instance in the Bologna follow-up structure, on what are the issues of utmost importance. Interestingly, this gap in pace is not (only) connected to "old" and "new" signatories. Countries being signatories since 1999 in some cases clearly lag behind as compared to countries that joined the process rather recently, in 2003 or 2005.

The survey further reveals that in many countries reforms are only implemented superficially. Quite often a look at the surface suggests that reforms have been done, and only a closer look discloses that many problems are still to be solved. The implementation of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is a very prominent example of this phenomenon.

The Social Dimension has not received the same attention at national level as at European level yet. Only very few national unions of students reported that the social conditions for students have improved, and the vast majority reports that no progress has been made since 2005. Quite worrying, in a couple of countries the social situation of students has worsened due to a lack of adopting financial support schemes to cover increased living costs or due to the introduction of tuition fees.

Adequate data on the social and economic conditions of students is available only in some countries. Although some other countries are currently taking efforts to establish such data, in a clear majority of countries no data exists. This underlines the urgent need for reliable data on social and economic conditions of students as a basis to identify problems and for better policy-making regarding the Social Dimension.

With regard to mobile students, financial obstacles are still the biggest hindrance to student mobility in Europe. The portability of loans and grants for studies abroad has improved since 2005, but mostly for short-term mobility for up to one year. When studying a complete cycle abroad, the portability of loans and grants still involves major obstacles in most countries, or is not possible at all in quite some countries. Furthermore, only in some cases, students are eligible for top-ups to cover higher living costs, travel expenses or (higher) tuition fees when studying abroad. Sometimes national grant and loan schemes are portable but simply not sufficient to meet the costs of studying abroad.

Foreign students are hardly treated equally to domestic students in their host countries, with the exception of EU citizens within the European Union. Often foreign students have to pay higher tuition fees than domestic students and experience significant problems in receiving residence and work permits. In a worryingly large group of countries that do not charge foreign students (higher) fees yet, such ideas are currently debated.

Joint and Double Degree programmes are increasingly offered throughout the EHEA, but they are still targeting only a rather small proportion of students. It is obvious that such programmes are not a means to allow mobility for the masses, and often Joint/Double Degree programmes bear the risk of being even more socially exclusive than traditional programmes, as far as additional fees and other top-up costs are concerned.

The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance are a driver of reform of national quality assurance systems. They are broadly known amongst students' unions throughout Europe. However, there is still a need to further promote them and spread in-depth information about them. The European Register for Quality Assurance Agencies is widely supported by the national unions of students, as a means to create transparency and reliability in quality assurance.

Some progress has been made regarding the involvement of student in quality assurance during the past two years. Yet, students are not involved in quality assurance activities at all levels in most countries of the EHEA, and they are not always recognised as full and equal partners.

Although there has been some progress regarding the student involvement in quality assurance, the participation of students in shaping the EHEA and in higher education governance in more general terms is still far from being sufficient and well-established in most Bologna countries. The findings reveal that since 2005 there has hardly been any improvement on the involvement of students. In some cases, the situation even worsened as compared to 2005. Management approaches to higher education governance are seen as a threat to student participation.

In terms of independence of students' unions the faculty level has proven to be rather problematic. More than that, in some countries student representatives are not

regarded and treated as equal partners by governments, institutions and other stakeholders. Some actors even principally regard students as troublemakers, no matter what they actually say or do. Only in few countries, a sustainable partnership culture exists.

The Bologna three-cycle system is widely in place throughout Europe, if one just looks at the surface. Most countries have put in place the necessary legal provisions, and a significant amount of students is enrolled in Bachelor, Master or doctorate programmes. However, there is a substantial lack of real curricular reform throughout the EHEA. An alarming number of national unions of students report that the old, long programmes in their country have been simply “cut” into two, with the new first cycle qualification having an unclear value to students and to the labour market.

In many countries, the accessibility of a Master programme for graduates holding a first-cycle qualification presents a major problem. Only in few countries, all Bachelor graduates who wish to study a Master programme have that opportunity. Often Bachelor graduates from the same institution are positively discriminated regarding admission to Master programmes, putting students from other institutions or countries in a worse position. There seems to be a risk that limited access to Master programmes lead to increased gender inequality. At Master level, the proportion of women amongst students is significantly lower than at Bachelor level in most countries.

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is formally in place in the vast majority of Bologna signatory countries. However, its key features are not properly implemented and used yet. No country uses ECTS for accumulation and transfer, with a full implementation of the learning outcomes approach and ECTS credits being linked to properly measured student workload. Few countries have only minor problems still to be solved, but the dominating majority of countries still have significant problems which need to be addressed.

The recognition of prior learning is a rather new concept in the Bologna Process, introduced only at the Bergen summit 2005. It is fully and widely used only in few countries. Most countries in the EHEA recognise prior learning for the purpose of credit within higher education and/or for access to higher education, but usually only in some institutions or in particular sectors, and not as a national policy or approach. Only in very few countries full awards are available through the recognition of prior learning. Some countries still do not recognise prior learning in any way.

National qualifications frameworks (NQF) have been setup in very few countries so far, and even fewer countries have implemented an overarching NQF that embraces not only higher education but also vocational education and training (VET), for instance. In most cases the national union of students has been involved, or is currently involved, in the implementation of a NQF for higher education, in line with the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). However, with regard to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF-LLL) as proposed by the European Commission, students are hardly involved in setting up an overarching NQF. There is hardly any inter-linkage of the recognition of prior learning and the debates on qualifications frameworks, although this is commonly seen as a prerequisite for full success of qualifications frameworks.

Most of ESIB's members also represent doctoral students in their country and deal

with the reform of the third cycle in their day-to-day work. However there remains a need of further capacity building on third-cycle reforms. The way of organising the third cycle still varies strongly across Europe. Whereas some countries regard doctoral students the same way as other students, some regard them as somewhere in between a student and an employee. In yet other countries, doctoral students are always employed by the institution to carry out research. In the latter case their social status is rather secure and stable, whereas in other cases the social situation of doctoral students is often difficult.

The European Dimension of higher education is mostly understood in a very narrow sense. Provision of language courses and offering study programmes in foreign languages (mostly English) are widely considered as the “European dimension”, whereas the introduction of a European perspective into curricula is rarely on any agenda.

The external dimension of the EHEA is often understood as an agenda for world-wide marketing of European higher education. The relation of European higher education to other parts of the world is rather seen from an economical perspective than from a cooperative perspective. This leads to the situation that the social and economic conditions of non-European students have not been improved so far. In some cases, for instance with regard to stricter visa regulations, conditions have even worsened. It seems that most countries want European higher education to be attractive only to a small share of students who can afford studying in Europe.

A brain drain to Europe (and mostly to Western Europe) is accepted and often even facilitated by many countries, ignoring the risks such a brain drain bears for less developed countries. Only two Nordic countries have put measures in place to actively counter-balance a brain drain from less developed countries through some financial incentives.

A summarised view over all action lines suggests that there is some correlation between student involvement and good progress in the national implementation. Those countries which in general have decent student participation in governance of higher education, usually also have better progress in the implementation of most action lines. This correlation underlines the importance of the Bologna Process' partnership approach, one of its hallmarks. Only if this cooperative approach is taken seriously also at national level, a successful implementation and broad agreement on reforms might be reached.