

New Challenges for a wider perspective on the future of the European Higher Education Area

Preamble

ESIB – the National Unions of Students in Europe has existed since 1982 to promote educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at a European level, and towards all relevant organizations and institutions. ESIB currently has 47 member organizations from 35 countries. Through its member National Unions of Students, ESIB represents more than 10 million students – the majority of students in Europe.

Introduction

This policy paper focuses on the new challenges that HE is facing in the creation of a wider common European Higher Education Area. It is primarily concerned with promoting the student opinion of and within this process. It considers the present situation and offers a common student vision on the continuation of the process of creating this European Higher Education Area.

ESIB feels very strongly that any development in this process must genuinely involve all areas of the continent and all stakeholders.

Stakeholders in the creation of a European Higher Education Area

Students were excluded from the initial evolution of the creation of a European Higher Education Area and whilst this has been rectified to an extent they should be seen as one of the key driving forces of the process. ESIB must represent student interests at a European level while students' interests at a national level must be represented by the relevant NUS.

Other stakeholders on a European level should be involved as well and these should include, but not be limited to; the Council of Europe (COE), European University Association (EUA), European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA) and the European Commission (EC) through to mobility programs, teachers, trade unions and employers. Stakeholders are responsible for ensuring that all levels of education are properly considered within the creation of a European higher education area.

The first important step on answering to this new challenge consisted on the joint declaration signed in Bologna by the Ministers. It must be recognized that higher education institutions have an important role to play in the implementation of the Bologna Process. As autonomous bodies the HEI's have a responsibility to ensure that their procedures and structures adhere to the spirit of the Bologna Declaration. The Bologna Process should be co-ordinated at a national level by the appropriate governmental structures.

Signatory countries are responsible for bringing the process to a truly European level. These countries must recognize that involvement of non-signatory countries is necessary. The non-signatory countries should be able to participate in the discussions and express their opinions and proposals must be taken into consideration.

There are many challenges posed to students' representative groups within the framework of the Bologna process. They must address issues such as Life Long Learning and increased mobility of students within a wider European Education Area, and that will impose its' own particular problems to the unions. It will be important that ESIB actively involves all national student representatives whose countries are going to be affected by this process. ESIB must be to the forefront of ensuring that this transition for its member unions is accomplished with as much ease and thought as possible.

Multi-dimensional mobility in the wide concept of Europe

ESIB hereby reaffirms its conviction in the benefits of proper systems of mobility for students in higher education. These benefits apply to both horizontal and vertical mobility.

The active participation of representatives from central and Eastern Europe in mobility programs has made it possible to make Europe popular with a wide variety of education players, but central European countries are under-represented in certain actions. Among detailed analysis of student mobility flows shows an uneven distribution by country. For example in 97/8, the UK, Ireland and the Netherlands in particular received more Erasmus students than they sent. (From "Final Commission report on the implementation of the Socrates Program 1995-1999)

The flow of student mobility at the moment is clearly directed towards Western Europe. There is also a need to redirect the flow towards Eastern Europe. This can be achieved both through developing courses given in commonly spoken foreign languages and cultures of the Eastern Europe. It is also necessary to clarify what will be the status of qualifications earned in such countries when the student returns to his country. This will make the entire area more attractive to all students.

There is also a huge lack of information concerning possibilities for studying in Eastern Europe available to students in HEI's in Western Europe. Prejudices based on ignorance and lack of knowledge of the quality of education also restricts students from studying in this region.

Social benefits must be made available for all students in order to facilitate further exchanges. ESIB reiterates that foreign degree students should be as much as possible allowed to benefit from the welfare support of the hosting country and All forms of domestic support must be fully transferable to abroad. (ESIB "Student Rights – Human Rights" policy paper)

Western students studying in Eastern European HEI's will play a major role in attracting more students to enroll in these HEI's, Eastern European students must also themselves be aware of the value of their own higher education system as they too will play a major role in promoting it.

National unions, with the support of ESIB, ought to commit themselves for an information campaign to highlight the opportunities of education in Eastern Europe for students from the west.

Freedom of movements vs. national needs

ESIB thinks that a wider perspective on the Future of the European Higher Education Area should be imposed. There are problems and challenges with the approximation between East and West in Europe and the migratory fluxes created by uneven social conditions and lack of information about HE in different regions in Europe.

Demanding then for a wider European Higher Education Area, at a time when considerable social differences still exist among countries in Europe, exist is an objective that possesses great challenges towards the development of better quality of life in Europe.

ESIB identifies “brain drain” as the process whereby a country loses its most talented and educated people to other countries because there is a lack of opportunities in their own. This process, if unbalanced, can have a significant negative impact on the social, economic and structural development of the sending country and in this way in Europe as a whole. But, in the other hand, brain gain could also be an effective way of bringing in different perspectives and stimulating the educated sectors of a country’s population.

Nevertheless ESIB is strongly opposes countries aggressively recruiting the top graduates in another country at any cost. This unbalanced and systematic removal of the most talented graduates is highly reprehensible and compounds the effects of “brain drain”.

Furthermore, there must be a real and concerted effort on the part of all governments in Europe to ensure that there are no restrictions placed on any student wishing to travel to another country for the purpose of study. This includes but is not limited to finance, information, rights to travel, access and bureaucracy.

ESIB encourages that solidarity among countries and institutions be used as a tool to a better resolution of the gaps existing within the European Higher Education Area as we see it. Bilateral co-operation between institutions from east and west and also among east could provide a fast but nevertheless appropriated solution for the low mobility flows of students, while they wait to become full participant members of wider mobility schemes.

Solidarity, responsibility, diversity and co-operation should be the main concerns in the development of the European Higher Education Area, creating the necessary balances and impulses towards the reunified concept of Europe.

Lifelong challenges for higher education

Lifelong learning is going to play an important role in the future European Higher Education Area. Lifelong learning within the European context must be provided in a

way that it enhances equality throughout European society. In doing this, lifelong learning will help to promote a wider understanding of what is meant by the European higher education area. It must recognize that there has to be a civic and social element to lifelong learning and as such ought to be based on ethical principles. It ought to be “person-centered” and must not be solely concerned with third party interests. In this way lifelong learning will develop into a commendable and viable option of higher education.

Lifelong learning is going to play an important role in any future European Higher Education Area. Thus it is very important that it must develop in a manner applicable to the whole of Europe. The Bologna Process should therefore reinforce the discussion on the role of HE in the developments in lifelong learning in a wider European Higher Education Area. Students see this process has the way for a wider and maybe even “borderless in every sense” European Higher Education Area.

The Future of Higher Education

In order to facilitate a step into the future of Higher Education it is necessary that current restrictions and problems of HE be solved. Students’ needs towards a transparent, fair and reachable HE must become a reality in the shortest time possible. A European system of higher education should be distinguished by its diversity. This includes diversity of courses in different HEI’s and different countries. This implies for more co-operation in between HEI’s and governments. As an ambitious approach this should later include the rest of the rest of the world and not just Europe.

Conclusions

ESIB feels the need to look into the future in a visionary way. But unfortunately that vision is still clouded by the fact that the present necessities for an open and fair HE system have not yet been satisfied and in this way are still a demand for the future.

The appraisal of new educational concepts and tools and reaching out to new sections in society HE through lifelong learning and the advancement towards a reunified Europe is a new and enormous challenge for HEI and student organizations.

It is very important that lifelong learning must develop in a manner applicable to the whole of Europe. In the light of the European tradition of humanistic and international education, eastern and western HEI’s can inspire each other.

A redefined concept of HE must not forget the irreplaceable role of HEI’s in promoting the cultural and civic values of each nation, contributing for the education of better citizenship.

Widening the space for HE in Europe is not about enlarging an isolated island but about building a continent with safe passages in all directions for everyone.