

ESIB and the Bologna Process- creating a European Higher Education Area for and with students

Preamble

ESIB- the National Unions of Students has existed since 1982 and seeks to promote the social, cultural, political and economic interests of students in Europe towards decision makers and partners at national, European and international level. ESIB currently has 50 members from 37 countries and thus represents more than 11 million students in Europe.

Introduction

Beginning with the Sorbonne Declaration in June 1998, a discussion has been emerging about the setting up of a European Higher Education Area on the continent. In 1999 the group of countries signing the Bologna Declaration had already further increased from the four that signed the Sorbonne Declaration to 29 countries, and at the first follow up meeting in 2001 in Prague the group increased to 31 countries. While students had to invite themselves to the Bologna conference, they were included in Prague and ESIB has been actively and constructively participating in the follow-up to this process and has adopted a large number of policies on various aspects of the Bologna objectives. At this point, where almost half of the time dedicated towards reaching the goals of Bologna has passed, ESIB aims at providing an overall position on the various aspects of the process, also evaluating the reforms that have already taken place in the Bologna signatory countries.

This paper should be seen in the context of existing ESIB policy papers.

The international trends surrounding Bologna

In recent years, the world has seen an overall trend of privatisation and deregulation of higher education systems throughout the world. The massification of education has not been met by a sufficient increase of public funding. Rather, HEIs have been pressured to engage in commercial activities, selling research and education products to customers and thus generating an increasing proportion of their income through these activities. This trend involves the establishment of governance structures that abolish collegial bodies in favour of streamlined corporate governance models, where the power is located in the hands of a few managers rather than all students, staff and researchers in HEIs.

The introduction of various forms of fees for studying is another trend that is to be observed in Europe throughout the last years. ESIB considers education a human right and calls upon governments to meet their obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights, Article 13, which calls for a progressive introduction of free education rather than an introduction of fees.

On a global level, trade in education becomes more and more relevant and generates an increasing profit. The ongoing negotiations about the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) about liberalising trade in education services are a further step along the privatisation agenda. However, increasing public pressure and protests have resulted in a growing interest of governments and reluctance to go any further in this trade. ESIB has clearly stated its objection to trade in

education services on several occasions and pointed out clearly that education is not a commodity from our point of view.

UNESCO and other UN agencies have been increasing their work in recent years to safeguard education as a public good and have called upon governments to ensure that trade in education does not jeopardise existing commitments of governments under international human rights legislation. UNESCO has furthermore developed frameworks for recognition of qualifications and codes of good practices for transnational education.

Lastly, the European Union has set the goal of becoming the most competitive knowledge-based economy by 2010 in the Lisbon Summit in 2000 and has since been working on the future objectives of the education and training systems in Europe in a number of working groups, which involve national governments and NGOs representatives.

On the other hand, a number of reforms have been implemented in European countries and have led to big changes in the systems of higher education. The mobility programmes of the EU have been successful in significantly increasing the number of mobile students. Curricular reforms as well as more flexible programmes have allowed for a larger number of students from non-traditional backgrounds to enter HE. Lastly, by implementing ICT in the universities and other HEIs and implementing pedagogical reforms, more learner and thus student centered patterns of learning and teaching have evolved.

All these European and global trends form the context in which the Bologna process has started and is continuing in Europe and these trends have to be taken into account when evaluating the outcomes and objectives of Bologna and forming a student opinion.

The Bologna Process and ESIB's positions towards the objectives

ESIB generally welcomes the increasing co-operation in Higher Education in Europe and supports the idea of establishing a European Higher Education Area. When it comes to the general rationale behind the process, ESIB would like to stress that we see co-operation in Europe and beyond, based on core academic values as the main driving factors of the creation of the EHEA and its relation to other regions of the world. The strong focus on the competitiveness of Europe in the world is a twoedged sword. It can on the one hand lead to an increase in quality and transparency, can on the other hand further the privatisation agenda and brain drain, which are trends which ESIB clearly and heavily opposes. Therefore, the inclusion of attractiveness in the Prague communiqué and the shift towards this more co-operative approach is very much welcomed by ESIB. ESIB would also like to stress that a clear pursuit of the objectives of the Bologna process is essential for reaching its aims and that the Bologna process must not be abused to carry out other reforms which are only on the national agenda in the name of the Bologna process. A number of countries seem to be abusing the Bologna Process for these kinds of reforms and ESIB strongly condemns these attempts of governments to hijack the process. Such hijacking jeopardises the creation of the European Higher Education Area, because stakeholders will oppose the process and the implementation will become increasingly difficult.

The strong focus on economic goals in the Bologna process has been counterbalanced by the inclusion of the social dimension and the reaffirming of HE as a public good in the

Prague communiqué. However, more work will need to be done to ensure that these objectives do not remain empty formulas but are met to ensure social inclusion and equity in the EHEA.

However, ESIB strongly believes in the potential for positive change in the Bologna Process and welcomes the process as an opportunity to reform the higher education systems as to make them more responsive to students and society, including the labour market.

When it comes to the concrete objectives, ESIB stresses the following:

1. Quality Assurance

ESIB welcomes the increasing European co-operation in quality assurance between countries and in the framework of ENQA. However, existing problems should not be overlooked. The lack of a common definition of accreditation, its aims and procedures, for example make it difficult to work on this issue into a clear direction. In accreditation diversification rather than a convergence seems to be the trend in Europe. A common European accreditation does not seem feasible and realistic from our opinion and the process should rather be steered into a mutual recognition of national systems.

ESIB also stresses that accreditation has to be accompanied by a continuous process of quality assurance and quality improvement through evaluation and that the set up of such systems where they do not yet exist is essential to guarantee not only the keeping of minimum criteria at a given point in time but a continuous assurance and enhancement of the quality of higher education. Quality assurance with a focus on formative improvement of the quality of courses and institutions should be properly implemented in all signatory countries and should focus on courses, programmes and institutions as such, assessing the quality culture of HEIs and how they work with quality internally at different levels.

National guidelines and bodies should be developed for both quality assurance and accreditation, which clearly state the responsibilities of different actors and must involve students, teachers, employers and other societal actors to make sure that the education system meets their expectations and demands. Transparency of quality assurance and accreditation must be ensured, particularly by widely disseminating the proceeding of such activities. Students, as the biggest stakeholder group in education, must always be included in both quality assurance and accreditation and this inclusion should be legally guaranteed.

2. Degree Structures: Adoption of a system of two main cycles

ESIB observes with great interest the adoption of the new degree structures. While it seems to be fairly easy and well done in a lot of eastern European countries and the Scandinavian countries, a lot of western and southern countries seem to have more problems in adopting this system.

For the first-cycle degree, ESIB stresses that the first cycle degree such as a Bachelor should allow for different profiles (i.e. practical vs. scientific profile), even though the inclusion of a certain number of both practical and scientific aspects of a subject has to be ensured. The employability of the graduates holding such degrees as well as societal gains should be more clearly defined than stating that first-cycle degrees shall be employable. Also, a focus should be placed on transferable skills that are gained in

certain subjects. This will make qualifications not directly relevant to the labour market more easily relatable to the question of what a person with a certain degree can actually do in practice. Governments need to ensure that the labour market and employers recognise these degrees more easily as the reform of increasingly introducing those degrees will otherwise fail and face serious problems, a trend already apparent in a number of countries.

The successful completion of the first cycle must allow for entry into the second degree. ESIB opposes any additional selection mechanism, be it special entry exams or numerus clausus. The second cycle programme also must be provided free of tuition fees. Both first cycle and second cycle degree have their own specific value, as they provide answers to different and sometimes complementary needs. There is no “normal” degree. Instead both should be equally valorised and students must be free to choose if they want to continue or stop after the first cycle.

ESIB recognises that issues of progression rates between first and second cycle vary widely for socially disadvantaged and discriminated minority and indeed majority groups. Further to its commitment to access and progression at all levels ESIB calls for research to establish which barriers exist for these students. In this process students from the disadvantaged groups and student unions should be consulted and instruments have to be developed to remove these barriers.

The aim of the reforms to degree structures should be more flexibility also in the light of lifelong learning and not to get the largest number of students out of the universities and polytechnics as quickly as possible. ESIB calls upon governments to ensure free access to the second cycle and also engage into a clearer definition of employability to ensure the success such reform. If these objectives are met, the reforms could decrease drop out rates as well as create the above mentioned flexibility which will allow a bigger and more diverse number of students to successfully reach different levels of higher education.

Lastly, ESIB would like to stress that a reform of the structures necessarily should involve a reform of the content of programmes rather than pressing old contents into a new form and then believing that all problems of these degrees will be solved. A thorough assessment and reform of the curricula is essential to ensure the success of the BA/MA structures.

3. Promotion of Mobility

While a lot of progress has been achieved with the new generation of Socrates programmes and an increasing number of students are mobile in Europe, there are a lot of issues still to be resolved.

The proper implementation of credit systems is essential to foster mobility and guarantee recognition of the gained qualifications.

Also, reforms of national student support schemes to make grants and other state funded financial support approved by students fully portable are necessary to make it easier for students to be mobile. Additionally, European mechanisms have to be developed to counterbalance the enormous differences between countries in the Bologna Process.

Also, to foster mobility, it is necessary to change and relax foreigner laws and further simplify the granting of visas and working permits both for the period of study and after graduation.

Furthermore, it has to be properly assessed in how far mobility affects brain drain within Europe and beyond and proper mechanisms addressing both the needs of individuals and the needs of countries have to be devised to balance these trends.

As an additional concern, ESIB would like to stress the need of continuous and tuition-free language courses of the language of the country of destination for studies to enhance the integration of the mobile students into the local communities and make mobility not only an academically but also a culturally challenging experience, contributing to more understanding, respect and tolerance for the diverse cultural differences in Europe.

Lastly, HEIs and student unions have to devise proper counselling mechanisms for foreign students to ensure their integration into the academic community and the social well-being of students from other countries.

4. Establishment of a system of credits

The introduction of a system of credits both for transfer and accumulation seems essential for a large number of aspects related to the creation of a EHEA. ESIB believes that it is essential that compatible and comparable credit systems be developed in all European countries.

When it comes to measuring workload, ESIB believes that students must be involved in this process.

The ECTS is a useful tool for credit transfer within the realm of mobility for the moment. However, more work is needed to develop it into a proper accumulation system. ESIB also stresses that governments should not be forced to introduce ECTS as a generalised credit system but that other compatible systems should coexist.

5. Recognition of Degrees: Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees

ESIB welcomes the efforts to facilitate the recognition of degrees and qualifications to stimulate mobility on the European labour market.

A proper implementation of the use of the Diploma Supplement is a means of easily facilitating this process. The Diploma Supplement should be issued automatically without students having to request it and free of charge. It should at least be issued in the language of the institution and another widely spoken European language.

For intermediate recognition, compatible credit accumulation systems should be used, which make it easier for students to get parts of their studies recognised when they change the country and/or city of studies.

A ratification of the Lisbon Recognition Convention by all signatory countries of the Bologna Process is urgently needed, especially if that is to be made a prerequisite of joining the process. ESIB believes that it is not possible to demand something from someone else, which one has not achieved oneself before. Therefore, we call upon all signatory countries to eliminate existing legal barriers and sign and ratify the Lisbon Convention. Furthermore, the Lisbon Convention should be made more legally binding, e.g. by making it part of their national higher education legislation. This legislation should also contain a more general paragraph on recognition issues to foster pre-degree recognition by credit accumulation. Lastly, the labour legislations of signatory countries need to be adjusted to facilitate recognition of qualifications in vocational higher education for labour market purposes. An observation of the discussions in the

Bruges/Copenhagen process on these issues could help to solve the questions linked to professional recognition in government regulated portions of the labour market.

In the light of these challenges, the mandate of the ENIC/NARIC network should be expanded to deal with all these recognition issues in different departments but in one main organisation responsible for assisting with the process.

It is also in this context, ESIB would like to highlight the issue of national and international qualification frameworks. ESIB calls for further research in this area in order to help and further policy development of all stakeholders.

6. Higher Education institutions and students

The inclusion of higher education institutions and students is essential for the success of any real student oriented reform. ESIB therefore calls upon all governments to include students into the national Bologna Follow-Up structures and all other reform bodies.

Furthermore, reforms of higher education governance structures must not lead to a process of abolishing democracy in higher education institutions. Efficiency in governance structures might be a useful goal, but efficiency must never mean that students, teachers and staff are being excluded in favour of corporate steering models for universities and polytechnics.

Furthermore, the autonomy of institutions should be designed in a way that gives a collective responsibility to all stakeholders of the higher education community, not by transferring all decision-making powers to the university leadership.

Lastly, ESIB considers it of importance to deepen the dialogue also with the teachers and researchers who have to implement the Bologna reforms in the faculties and departments. Leaving them out of the process will in the medium term have negative effects on the proper implementation of reforms and on the re-design of curricula and structures of studies.

7. Promotion of the European dimension in higher education

ESIB welcomes the design of new degrees with a specific European content. We believe that to create a European identity, European educational programmes are essential. This can be best achieved through joint bachelor and master programmes. For a joint degree, a stay abroad should be the norm. However, the needs of students with disabilities and parents have to be taken into account and means will have to be developed to allow for their access into these programmes as well.

Also, it seems essential that all degrees contain European aspects. This “Euromainstreaming” could be achieved by comparative analysis in social sciences for example. It has to be ensured, that these European aspects of programmes lead to a better understanding of similarities and differences between people on the continent and also critically reflect upon the concept of Europe. Furthermore, it is essential that these contents respect the huge cultural diversity on the continent and promote understanding, co-operation and tolerance between Europe and other regions of the world. It must never lead to the evolvment of a European nationalism which puts Europe above other regions of the world. Also, the autonomy of HEIs has to be respected in curricular matters.

8. Promoting the Attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area

ESIB believes that the shift of focus towards attractiveness is a positive development, as the term competitiveness can have a very negative meaning, especially when it comes to competing at all costs, which undermines academic values such as co-operation.

ESIB further believes that attractiveness can best be reached by a high quality of education and research and by a good international network of co-operation with various partner institutions around the globe.

When discussing the attractiveness of the EHEA, the problems of brain drain need to be tackled and resolved. Although ESIB believes in the freedom of each student, researcher and member of teaching staff to choose their place of study, work and life, special attention must be paid to the following points. Making Europe one of the most attractive higher education areas, countries have to act responsibly in relation to the problem of brain drain, both between Bologna signatory countries and outside. Since a lot of talented students, researchers and teaching staff in developing countries and countries in transition are emigrating, the creation of a cohesive higher education area is endangered, as is the economic and social development of the countries encountering brain drain. Signatory countries should respond to the fact that the process of brain drain also has highly negative implications for the development and quality of higher education and research. Guaranteeing safe employment and working conditions for students, staff and researchers in the qualification phase can reduce the problem of brain drain and enhance the attractiveness of the EHEA. This also means that PhD candidates should be employed by the universities, and enough full time jobs have to be provided for young researchers to make the academic workplace an attractive option for them.

With regards to the GATS, ESIB reaffirms its strong opposition against making any further commitments in education. ESIB calls upon governments to not make further commitments in education while at the same time reviewing existing commitments and legally assessing their impact on the public system. ESIB further calls upon governments to engage in a constructive dialogue with teachers, students and universities about the issues surrounding trade in education services, as the existing trade in the framework of TNE arrangements has to be steered to make it beneficial. Generally, ESIB reaffirms its commitment to education as a public good not a tradable commodity.

9. Lifelong Learning

ESIB welcomes the steps towards implementing lifelong learning in Europe. However, we feel that it is important to stress that lifelong learning should not only mean to upgrade professional skills but also to realise the right to education in an overall lifelong perspective.

ESIB believes that the flexibility that can be reached through a proper implementation of the Bologna objectives can have a positive effect on the role of higher education in the lifelong learning framework. Lifelong learning however must not mean that people's knowledge is automatically considered outdated or expired after a certain time period and everyone is obliged to update their skills.

Governments, HEIs, teachers and students have to continue their work to accommodate the needs and expectations of these new and non-traditional students in the lifelong learning framework, which has to provide multiple entry and exit points to HE.

10. The social dimension

ESIB believes that the social dimension should be at the heart of the Bologna Process. This involves questions linked to equity in access as well as equal chances of completion of studies. Furthermore, the national support schemes for students need to be sufficient to cover the living costs of students. While ESIB acknowledges potential benefits from students working during their studies, ESIB stresses that this employment should primarily be linked to the study subject and students should not be forced to work in order to pay subsistence costs.

Additionally, ESIB stresses that grants are preferable to other financial support systems. Loan-based systems can seriously damage the financial situation of students with a weaker socio-economic background. Furthermore, study financing systems should be portable, to enhance mobility, and independent of parental income.

Lastly, ESIB stresses that a social support system for students, which covers housing, health care, food and other counselling and social services should be properly implemented and enhanced to guarantee the social well-being of students. In the design and steering of these systems, students should form an integral part since they know student needs best.

The road ahead – opportunities and threats

ESIB believes that a proper implementation of the Bologna process can lead to the biggest changes in the landscape of Higher education in Europe since the early 1970's in Western and the early 1990's in Central and Eastern Europe.

ESIB considers that it is of utmost importance that the students' voice is being heard in the process. If students' concerns are not met this will provoke dissatisfaction and protests among students whereas if students' concerns are met, the Bologna process and its implementation will have a beneficial effect for students, as well as teachers and universities.

However, a few shortcomings of the process have to be mentioned: The strong focus on the economic role of education and the strong focus on competition and competitiveness can foster market driven reforms and increase the trend of privatisation and deregulation of public education systems. One of the main dangers is that the structural reforms towards greater transparency of European higher education make this education tradable on a global market. Therefore, ESIB believes that a renewed commitment to education as a public good and a public responsibility is necessary within the Bologna Process. Furthermore, ESIB believes that it is essential that governments ensure sufficient funding of education, so that HEIs are not forced to engage in commercial activities. Only if this objective is met, the Bologna Process will be a European model that counterbalances the global developments as exemplified by the GATS negotiations. In this light, ESIB also feels that it is necessary within the Bologna Process to develop alternative frameworks to the GATS, for example within the UNESCO framework and to enhance existing UNESCO and Council of Europe regulatory structures.

As an additional point, ESIB considers it to be of great importance that the research dimension is included in the Bologna Process, because a true European Higher Education Area does not merely consist of study structures and recognition of degrees but has to encompass the research dimension of Higher Education as well.

Lastly, ESIB reaffirms that addressing the social dimension of mobility, as well as the general question of study financing systems, have to be addressed to guarantee free and equal access for all students in the EHEA.

ESIB also believes that cultural diversity in Europe is an asset worth protecting. While adjusting the structures of higher education, the cultural and linguistic diversity of the continent should be respected and reaffirmed.

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned criticism and weak points of the process, ESIB reaffirms its commitment to engaging in a constructive work within the Bologna process to ensure that the student voice is heard and that the objectives of setting up a European Higher Education Area for and with students are met by 2010.