

Berlin Declaration

18 March 2007

Between the 16th and 19th March 2007, more than one hundred student representatives from forty countries gathered in Berlin to discuss their demands to the ministers ahead of the upcoming London summit.

The discussions at this - the 13th European Students Convention, led to the recognition that the Bologna Process has triggered some of the largest and most crucial reforms of higher education policy in Europe. The Bologna Process helps to create a better Europe for all and a future in which all citizens have the possibility to develop their personality and to become active democratic citizens.

Students, however, express their doubts about the progress that is being made towards the goal of a European Higher Education Area. ESIB believes that the Process is and should remain challenging to all governments and stakeholders dealing with higher education. The London Summit can only be successful through joint efforts between governments and stakeholders, resulting in an ambitious reform agenda building on the work that has been done in the past eight years. Importantly, after these eight years, discussions surrounding the Process are still not prioritising institutions and students. The work done and the input from institutions and students have to be the reference point for future discussions.

We underline the importance of the involvement of students and their representatives in the implementation of the Process. ESIB notes that progress has been made regarding the involvement of students in the decision making processes and the follow-up of the Bologna Process in its signatory countries. However, students are not recognised as full and equal partners at all levels yet. The Bologna Process needs to become a strong driver of change, and spearhead an increase in the involvement of students in a democratic and transparent higher education system.

Taking stock – achievements so far

ESIB was always and is still against an “à-la-carte” implementation of the Bologna Process. Its communiqués cannot be implemented partially, but they provide a set of measures that jointly aid the creation of a European Higher Education Area. Unfortunately, we can see that some action lines are still being neglected and we hope that this will receive serious attention at the ministerial summit in London.

ESIB raises its concerns about the growing gap between countries that recently joined the Bologna Process and the other European countries. Indeed, implementation is taking place at two different speeds which can only lead to the splitting up of Europe into two regions, posing a serious threat to a European Higher Education Area. More support is needed for those countries that joined the Process most recently.

Equal Opportunities for All Students

ESIB welcomes that the Social Dimension of the European Higher Education Area has been taken up as a priority action line by Ministers in Bergen. The goal of the action in this area must be a situation in which the student body reflects the diversity of our population, and in which all measures in higher education aim at promoting equal opportunities. The lack of sufficient reliable and comparable data on the social and economic conditions of student

life in Europe has to be addressed with urgency.

ESIB notes that there is a lack of appropriate action towards access to, progression in and completion of study programmes on the basis of equal opportunities at a national level. The prioritisation at the European level has not yet been recognised at national level.

Mobility of students and staff

ESIB demands that a significant increase of student and staff mobility must be a core focus in the Bologna Process. The upsurge of xenophobia all around Europe has had a significant impact on the restriction of immigration. Mobility can only take place in an open and tolerant society, not in a fortress Europe. We note with concern that eight years after the Bologna Declaration, major obstacles to mobility in Europe still remain and in some cases have even become more problematic.

Up until today, we have not seen reliable and comparable statistics on mobility, which had been asked for in the Bergen communiqué. Towards 2009, data collection needs to be prioritised. On this topic, ESIB emphasises the need for data on so-called 'free-movers', students who are mobile outside their curriculum out of a free decision.

As a matter of urgency, visa-regulations, work permits, recognition procedures and social and financial conditions for mobility need to be addressed, with a view to the removal of all obstacles to student and staff mobility.

Recognition of Prior Learning

ESIB welcomes that, since the Bergen Ministerial Summit, the creation of possibilities for the recognition of prior learning (for the purpose of access and credit) is considered part of the Bologna Process. We note that recognition of prior learning may provide an important tool to enable traditionally disadvantaged groups to access higher education and/or to make full use of their informally and non-formally acquired competences.

ESIB is however concerned that no concrete action has yet followed this commitment to implement procedures for the recognition of prior learning.

Quality Assurance

ESIB notes with satisfaction a debate has been started on the compliance of national quality assurance systems with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, adopted by Ministers in Bergen. They are important and helpful in designing quality assurance systems which fit the signatory countries' needs and are compatible throughout Europe.

We note that particular attention is required regarding the involvement of students in quality assurance as equal partners, not just as clients.

The main challenges for the next 2 years

Starting from our observations above, we call for the following priority actions to be considered in the follow-up work during the two years to come. We call upon ministers to make the necessary commitments at their London meeting.

The Social Dimension

ESIB stresses that the Social Dimension must become a top priority for the Bologna Process. Equal opportunities for all will increase both the quality and the value of higher education. Therefore, it has to be part of the Stocktaking carried out for the Ministerial Summit in 2009. Clear indicators must be developed which benchmark how the students accessing, progressing and completing higher education in the signatory countries reflect the diverse composition of society as a whole. Any sort of discrimination has to be stopped, including discrimination on the basis of political conviction, religion, ethnic or cultural origin, gender, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, socio-economic

standing or any disability students may have.

We note that while the Social Dimension is being given more priority, the financial position of students has worsened in a large number of European countries. It is important for the Bologna Process to address the increase in such barriers to accessing higher education.

In order to facilitate a meaningful Stocktaking, ESIB calls upon Ministers to commit themselves to carrying out student surveys on the socio-economic conditions of the student body in their countries. The responsibility for gathering comparable data at a European level should be entrusted to (a) professional data provider(s) such as the EUROSTUDENT Network.

ESIB further stresses the need of National Action Plans/strategies for the Social Dimension to be developed by all signatory states. The Bologna Follow-up Group should be asked to provide a framework for those.

Mobility

Education International (EI) and ESIB have successfully organised the Bologna Seminar 'Making Bologna a Reality – Mobility of Staff and Students'. We are convinced that mobility will enhance the quality of higher education and that it is time to make mobility a key concern of the Bologna Process again. A much greater effort is needed to build coherent strategies, including action plans at all levels, to provide incentives for more balanced mobility and to remove obstacles. We ask the Bologna Follow-up Group to give high priority to work on mobility, and to report back to ministers by 2009.

ESIB and EI's Pan-European Structure wish to develop a project under the auspices of the Bologna Follow-up Group that aims to develop a European strategy on mobility of staff and students for consideration at the next ministerial meeting in 2009. We invite stakeholders and governments to participate in the development of such a strategy.

Recognition of prior learning

ESIB calls upon ministers to charge the Bologna Follow-Up Group with exploring the issue of recognition of prior learning more deeply. In particular, the feasibility of the European guidelines for the recognition of prior learning, which would build on the practice already in place in some countries as well as represent a set of shared cornerstones of a good system of recognition of prior learning, should be explored.

Quality Assurance

ESIB has collaborated with EUA, EURASHE and ENQA in order to increase the reliable information on Quality Assurance Agencies, aiming to make European quality assurance more transparent and trustworthy. Jointly, we are proposing a model of a European Register for Quality Assurance Agencies. The inclusion of only those agencies complying with the agreed European Standards and Guidelines will create more transparency for students, higher education institutions and society as a whole. The stakeholder approach will be the Register's hallmark, as it will be governed jointly by students, higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies and social partners.

Higher Education in Europe after 2010

ESIB strongly believes that there will be an ongoing need for democratic cooperation between Ministers of Higher Education and stakeholders in Europe. The European Higher Education Area will need action that stretches beyond 2010 and addresses key concerns for the future. Students, representing the future, must be put in the centre of the development of our higher education systems towards 2020. Likewise, they should be put at the very centre of the learning process itself.

A fair and just system which is centred on this future generation, should aim to empower this body as much as possible. ESIB believes that high quality education, in which there

are equal opportunities for all, and is free from any form of discrimination, must develop into the ultimate goal of higher education systems in Europe. This goal can only be reached in higher education institutions and systems which are jointly and democratically governed by all stakeholders and recognise students as full and equal partners.

The future success of a European Higher Education Area also depends on its accountability to a wider public. The development of a higher education area must be part of a public debate which influences its contents and forms. Higher Education must claim an active place in this debate, realising its potential as a source of knowledge and reflection.