



Prague Students Declaration towards the 2009 Ministerial Conference of the Bologna Process

With a membership of 49 national student unions representing over 11 million students directly affected by the Bologna Process, the European Students' Union (ESU) has both a strong interest in, and an expert, direct knowledge of the Process and its implementation. As a member of the Bologna Follow-Up Group, ESU is a recognised stakeholder in the Bologna Process and our members strive to ensure that its promises become a reality on the ground.

For this reason, more than one hundred students from across Europe gathered in Prague at the 17th European Student Convention from 15th-19th February to debate student participation and empowerment at national, continental and global levels. This declaration provides the voice of European students towards the analysis of Bologna so far, and our aspirations for it over the decade to come.

The Bologna Vision

The Bologna Process is all about a vision, a vision of breaking down educational borders and creating a European Higher Education Area where learning is encouraged, facilitated and enabled in a simplified, integrated way across the continent. The Process is about delivering this vision, translating the concept into a reality on the ground.

The ultimate goal of the reforms must be the creation of an EHEA that distinguishes itself by the high quality of its higher education provision; its focus on catering for diverse student and societal needs and its capacity to ensure equal opportunities for all, free from discrimination and barriers to the development of the full potential of its citizens. The core values needed to guide the achievement of such goals are student participation and academic freedom within a framework which enshrines education as both a public good and a public responsibility.

ESU believes in this vision, which has come a long way since its formal inception ten years ago on 19th June 1999. Much has changed, bringing benefits to millions of students across Europe. And yet, many of the action lines will remain unfulfilled by 2010. A renewed and ambitious Bologna agenda is therefore essential to make the original vision of the EHEA an unequivocal reality for all European students, regardless of origin, background, means or ability, by 2020.

From vision to reality: a renewed, learner-centred agenda for the EHEA

While the commitments and words on Bologna continue for the most part to reflect the spirit and ideals of the EHEA, progress on the ground has been much slower than needed to make the EHEA a concrete reality. At a national level, the different reform agendas have become indistinct and the lack of public debate has created a level of misunderstanding about the real goals of the Process. Countries have insisted on a 'pick and choose' approach to the implementation of the Process, neglecting fundamental action lines and resulting in contradictions and inconsistencies. The focus on structural reforms, a divorce between form and content, the misuse of tools, and reforms reducing student participation in institutional governance have led to a feeling of

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frustration and a reduction in support amongst the student body. The gap between rhetoric and reality needs to be urgently addressed if students, academics and the European public are to retain faith in the Process.

Ministerial commitments to 2020:

- The Bologna reforms are not an *à la carte* menu. Ministers need to focus on the action lines already agreed and must commit to the full, integrated implementation of the Bologna reforms and to delivering the action lines as a complete package, with clear benchmarks in all policy areas to enable monitoring of the pace of implementation. Steps must also be taken to ensure the consistent engagement of the Process with all other relevant policy areas at national and European level. The efforts of the education ministers alone are not enough to fulfil the ambition of creating the EHEA.
- Ministers must increase the knowledge and accountability of the Bologna Process to the wider public by mainstreaming its discussion at all levels of society, involving more stakeholders and enhancing the ownership of national partners for the reforms agreed upon at European level.
- Student participation at all levels (institutional, national and European) is a key condition in the success of the Bologna Process. Ministers must ensure that students are considered primary stakeholders and involved in a fully participative way in all aspects of Bologna implementation and in institutional governance, instead of playing a merely superficial 'consultative' role. Only free, independent and empowered student organisations can act as drivers for change and provide sustainable support to a reform agenda such as the Bologna Process.
- Higher education and a high quality EHEA must be fully acknowledged as a public good and a public responsibility, and this requires proper public financing. Ministers must commit to providing the full support needed to implement all of the Bologna reforms and action lines over the next decade.
- The principle of free access for all to a high quality education must also be upheld and any measures in favour of the introduction of, or increase in, tuition fees must be rejected. ESU strongly opposes any attempt to introduce tuition fees in the Bologna Process and we call upon ministers to guarantee free higher education accessible for all, based on public funding.

Delivering on a stronger Social Dimension: Action to 2020

The social dimension has been an overarching objective of the Bologna Process since 2001. But despite the commitments and words on paper, very little has been delivered on the ground. In fact, the financial situation of students has worsened; tuition fees have been introduced or raised in several countries and poorly implemented degree structures has brought inflexibility in admissions and progression between cycles. The insufficient concern with the social and economic conditions of students has led to a false conception of Bologna which threatens the viability of the Process and undermines student support for the European higher education reform agenda as a whole.

Ministerial commitments to 2020:

- The goal that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education should reflect the diversity of the national population is a clear benchmark. But concrete indicators to measure progress in achieving this goal in a comparable manner must be developed in the forthcoming mandate of the BFUG.
- Ministers must establish clear and measurable goals for widening participation and ensuring progress at national level. National action plans for the social dimension must be prioritised in all member countries, focusing on proposals for student support schemes designed to address study living costs and student well-being in a holistic manner (including housing, food, health care, counselling, etc.). Both the NAPs and the support schemes must be developed with full student involvement.

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- The expansion of higher education systems and increase in both accessibility and study completion rates remains a challenge for most of the countries in the EHEA. We call upon the ministers to establish a European target to increase participation and completion rates of the typical age cohort across the EHEA by 2020.
- Comparable data on the socio-economic situation of students across the EHEA was collected at the request of the London Communiqué in 2007. This professional work of describing the composition and well-being of the student body must be further developed. Ministers must draw conclusions from the data gathered and commit to achieving concrete goals in the decade ahead.

Mobility and internationalisation: from aspiration to action

Mobility is fundamental to the Bologna Process and has become a barometer of the success of the reform agenda. It can be a tool for the proper implementation of the Bologna Process because it engages with every policy area of it: qualifications frameworks, understanding of ECTS and learning outcomes, progression in recognition practices, trust in quality assurance mechanisms, attention to internationalisation, concern with the European dimension, development of flexible and student-centred provision and significant social support for the student body to achieve its full potential.

Its benefits for students, academics, institutions and society as a whole are undisputed. Xenophobia exists and becomes especially evident in the event of an economic crisis such as the one we are currently facing. Mobility will require openness and will contribute to a more tolerant European society. Yet, while action to promote intra-European mobility is lacking, national policies are becoming more focused on marketing strategies, competing for international students and introducing and raising tuition fees for foreigners. Such an approach of the EHEA stimulates the commodification of higher education, promoting brain drain and helping to create a higher education market.

Ministerial commitments to 2020

The priority to 2020 must be to take mobility from a privilege and an aspiration to a right and a reality. Only in this way will all students be able to fully benefit from the EHEA. Specifically:

- Ministers should adopt ESU's target to make 20% of students mobile by 2020, with the freedom for member countries to set their own higher targets if they choose. This benchmark must encompass all three cycles and focus on outward cross-border mobility. Measures must be put in place to ensure that the expansion in mobility is accompanied by a diversification of the student body benefiting from it.
- Financing remains central to the realisation of the goal of greater mobility, as data gathered shows a strong element of social selection among the students that are currently mobile. It will not be possible to combat established elitism in mobility without additional financial commitments from member countries. It is therefore imperative that ministers agree to the creation a European mobility fund steered by a coalition of relevant stakeholders. In addition, there is a clear need for a model of multi-level coordination of financing mechanisms at the European, national and institutional levels, as the only viable solution towards a quick and considerable increase in available funding for mobility.
- Ministers must make a commitment to working towards the easing of visa regulations and work permits for all students, including doctoral students, coming from both non-EU and non-EHEA countries.
- Ministers should also make a commitment towards mobility as a means of enhancing cooperation and exchange, and not as a trade or source of revenue. All forms of education are a public good rather than a commodity, and ESU strongly opposes making a market out of the EHEA.

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- Higher education institutions must provide accurate information to prospective students and public authorities must take responsibility for the quality assurance of the provision of transnational education. The principle of cooperation and a commitment to sustainable development must be followed when enhancing the attractiveness of the EHEA.
- ESU supports the exchange of Bologna experiences, achievements and values with other continents in the context of cooperation, increased recognition of qualifications and intensified dialogue between governments and higher education institutions. A stakeholder and student dimension must be inserted in the policy dialogue between the EHEA and other world regions.

Student-centring the EHEA

Much of the work on the EHEA to date has focused on structural reform rather than on content and practice. Quality is an essential component of a successful EHEA, and a student-orientated education system is a key tool for the attainment and maintenance of quality.

Ministerial commitments to 2020

- Qualifications frameworks, ECTS and learning outcomes must be discussed with all stakeholders and the wider public to enhance the ownership and understanding of the reforms. These are just tools for achieving a more important objective on the enhancement of high quality, flexible, and more individually tailored education paths.
- Ministers must now envision an EHEA in 2020 in which students are empowered to recognise their own knowledge and acknowledged as co-creators and partners in the delivery and governance of their learning experience. Specific actions should be developed which support institutions, staff and students in establishing high quality learner-focused educational environments.

Lending support to lifelong learning

The current economic crisis illustrates the importance of high quality and accessible lifelong learning systems to enhance the ability of all to acquire sustainable employment skills. Lifelong learning can be an effective tool for the promotion of flexible learning paths, widening participation and the up-skilling generations that were not able to benefit from higher education in the past. It is not a mere tool for economic development or a responsibility of the individual alone. It is therefore important that this be made part of the Bologna Process towards 2020.

Ministerial commitments to 2020

- Lifelong learning should be regarded as an integral part of the education system and therefore as a public good and a public responsibility which merits proper public financing. We strongly oppose any attempts to introduce tuition fees in education through lifelong learning or to make the individual responsible for its up-skilling.
- The same principles in terms of quality, equity and access must be applied to lifelong learning as they are to higher education. Ministers should put in place measures to ensure the quality of provision is enhanced and that access and support mechanisms are developed.
- Recognition of prior learning is a tool for access to, and credit within, higher education programmes, and is especially relevant for under-represented groups in higher education. There is still great inconsistency in the recognition of prior learning and the public remains generally ill-informed of the procedures relating to this. We support the creation of European guidelines and principles for the recognition of prior learning, built on established good practice in some member countries.

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Assurance of quality, not rankings, in higher education

Quality assurance has witnessed significant progress at all levels, from the creation and adoption of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) to the creation of the European Register for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. However, there is still a need for the continuous development of quality assurance practices whilst retaining ownership by stakeholders.

A greater demand for transparency in the performance of institutions opened a debate about rankings. But grouping higher education institutions according to profiles and performance can have serious consequences in the allocation of resources and in institutions' behaviour. Cooperation, recognition of qualifications and mobility can be inhibited; policies on the social dimension (an issue too complex to be properly addressed by a list of indicators) can be overlooked by the majority of institutions.

Ministerial commitments to 2020

- There is a need to continue the exchange of experiences and views on the interpretation of the ESG. The quality of the educational experience for students transcends academic standards. An analysis of support services, both academic and welfare-related in higher education institutions, must be discussed as standards for defining quality in QA processes.
- Greater attention must be paid to the involvement of students as equal partners in all quality assurance processes, including in the design and governance of internal QA systems and agencies.
- ESU strongly opposes the introduction of rankings into the Bologna Process. Rankings, or so-called “transparency instruments”, provide a false sense of knowledge of the institutions' performance and quality, are inaccurate and scarcely focus on the information needs of the students.
- Rankings are not a substitute for nor, complementary to, QA activities, as they introduce different logics and principles that contradict the ones enshrined in the ESG (such as peer review, stakeholder engagement, cooperation focus, enhancement instead of conformity and multiplicity of criteria, rather than responding to a narrow indicator list). Ministers must commit to taking an approach to quality in the Bologna Process that follows QA principles and not that of rankings.
- The increasing demand for the measurement of institutional performance must be done in accordance with the principle of European cooperation that the ESG and EQAR imply, and any developments in this regard must be entrusted to the E4 partners¹. Communication of QA outcomes to the wider public must be actively promoted.

¹ ENQA, ESU, EUA and EURASHE.