Chapter One

Introduction to ESU’s policies on higher education

1. What is higher education?

When higher education emerged in medieval Europe, the organisation of the universitas was essentially a medieval guild: a small number of masters training a small number of apprentices either to continue the work within the institution, or to serve King or church.

The modern world has changed not only the institutions themselves, but the nature of education as well.

During the last decades, European society has seen an increasing need of a more highly educated population. This has been both the result of economic development, where an increasingly advanced production requires more knowledge, but it has also been the result of social movements and democratisation. In essence: the fact that more and more jobs require more education, taken together with the increasing realisation that education is a human right and a vital tool for democratisation and emancipation, has reshaped higher education.

Today, a purely self-sustaining and replicating higher education system can no longer function, due in part to a greatly increased student population as well as a change in the needs of society. This can be seen as part of the long-term transformation of higher education away from a tool for the elite to enable future generations of the elite to retain power. Therefore higher education in the 21st century should develop towards a multifunctional system that reflects different aspects and needs. This transformation is far from complete, and the needs and obligations of higher education in the 21st century and beyond will and do require constant attention. Higher education easily reverts back into a tool for preserving power structures when it is not accessible for all, and when the knowledge developed is not accessible for public benefit.

Parts of this multifunctional system will of course include the traditional view of recruiting and preparing the next generation for academia, but it also includes societal, including
economic, expectations that need to be taken into consideration. In addition, it is important that higher education provides the tools and the knowledge for the development of the individual. It can hardly be denied that some of these ambitions conflict with one another. Nevertheless it is important that all of the different aspects are included in the higher education system. Higher education must be able to serve different needs and targets at the same time. Embracing different perspectives and needs is not only a learning target it is also a competence that needs to be actively used inside higher education.

It is important to stress that learning itself is a key value of higher education. The development of the individual must be enabled through higher education. However, there is also a vocational/single-career-focussed side of higher education and this can be a challenge for some higher education systems in Europe. These challenges are fundamental, as parts of Europe still hold firmly to the concept that the traditional systems are the sole way higher education should function. This not only leads to the denial of societal needs, but it also excludes individuals. The vocational side of the higher education system needs to provide the knowledge and tools an individual needs to design and develop during the course of her or his working life. Additionally, the vocational side of higher education needs to provide also applied knowledge and labour market related skills. This does not mean solely that higher education provides preparation for a specific job; rather it is the intermediation of all required competences that an individual can then adapt to the labour market. Accessible and open higher education needs to deliver more options than just the reproduction of academia, for instance through jointly entrepreneurial and life-skills such as creativity. Beyond and including the vocational aspect of higher education the individual must remain a core mission.

However, there can be different understandings and implementations of higher education simultaneously. The important thing is that the multifunctional idea is implemented, strengthened and focused on by those responsible for policy-making. The specific details of how higher education is provided and run may differ in different contexts, but the essential part that ESU stresses is that the purposes of higher education laid out here are preserved and developed.

2. Who is higher education for?
Higher education is an inalienable and fundamental human right. As such it must be open for all parts of the society, independent from background, age or any other factor. Whosoever feels the commitment and interest to participate in higher education should get the opportunity. Higher education should be affordable for everyone and able to respond to each individual’s needs, and there should be positive measures for vulnerable groups to reduce the obstacles they face in access, participation and completion of higher education.

3. Interaction within the community
Higher education is neither a separate entity nor does it have its own sphere of reality separate from the rest of society. On the contrary, higher education should be an integral part of society. ESU believes that the higher education environment has to be inclusive and mirror society and all its diversity. This emphasises the fact that higher education as a system needs to implement measures to ensure that diversity is really taking place. The old metaphor of higher education as an ivory tower must be overcome.

Higher education does not just have a financial link to the community it is also has a duty to serve the community with knowledge and technology. This service takes place while educating actual students, but also while conducting research and publishing scientific results. Therefore, all outcomes of scientific activities should be considered at least as partially owned by the community, and the availability of these outcomes should be free. Higher education provides society with the fundamental basis, which allows for constant development and improvement in living standards of the whole community. Higher education should also contribute to the social development of the community by preserving and developing active participation, critical thinking, freedom of speech and democracy in general.

There is an obligation for all members of the higher education community to work as a community, with each other’s needs and best interests at heart. This demands innovation and excellence in the process of teaching and learning, administration, staff-student relations, quality assurance and both institutional and student self-governance.

4. What is the outcome?

The goal of higher education should be to provide the potential for as many different outcomes and outcome combinations as possible. As education is a lifelong process, it is vital that these outcomes are accessible at all times. The pace of change in the course of just the last decades makes a very clear illustration that not only it is impossible, but even more so inadvisable to attempt to predict what skills, competencies and knowledge will be needed in the future.

The key capacity for participants in higher education that must be provided is the capacity to think critically. Knowledge is a value in itself, and the capacity to effectively and usefully analyse and evaluate information, while also developing a satisfactory way of life, is the key to this. To ensure this, the process of teaching and learning must be student-centred. Higher Education does not have the task to prepare for a single profession; in fact higher education needs to educate students with the competences to adapt to different professions and working environments. This could be seen as the employability component of higher education.
Knowledge and the preparation for employment are just two out of many outcomes that can be delivered by higher education. Higher education has the potential to dramatically improve life quality for both the participant and for all of society - social and financial status, improvement in general health conditions, acknowledgement of and attempts to tear down inequalities. These skills are necessary for democratic development and participation, and a society where these competences exist among more of the population is more likely to be able to handle the challenges posed by an increasingly globalised, multicultural and ecologically fragile world. In short, higher education equips people with tools to make more informed choices.

5. Who is affected?
Everyone should be affected. In times of economic hardship the popular debate tends to focus entirely on student employment and the economy. While this is one facet of the role of higher education it is far from the only one, as it may sometimes seem. The effects of higher education are wide reaching and not only to those who have the opportunity to study. Individuals are naturally those who see the effects first hand. What higher education should give individuals is opportunities for fulfilment. This fulfilment is often in the shape of skills that give individuals better opportunities on the labour market. The very foundation of the society we have built up today is based on a constant stream of choices. Higher education and students play a big role in furthering democracy. This is one of the basic goods of higher education. However it is important to remain vigilant in this ambition. ESU does not assume that a higher education system will by default further democracy. Active work must be done for this effect to flourish.

A public higher education system also affects society in a much broader way than a privatised system. The benefits to society of a highly educated population, outside of purely education-specific metrics vary from keeping the costs of health care and public school systems down to much higher levels of social trust. Social trust is paramount if a society is to build up functioning support systems and keep corruption as well as crime down.

Perhaps the most challenging to measure, but most valuable effect of higher education is the proliferation of harnessed creativity. A graduate who has the capacity to react to and develop their own innate creativity feeds into a global pattern of unprecedented advances and innovations. This benefits everybody, not solely employers, NGOs or political systems, but rather in increasing equality, developing healthcare, devising and improving on new technologies, exploring and understanding our lives and our universe, extending and improving human life, educating future generations to embrace and excel to their own potential and advancing the fundamental goal of human equality.

6. Who is responsible?
Higher education is a public responsibility. The greatest benefit of a multi-functional higher
education system accrues to the society overall. Therefore a huge part of the responsibility is going back to the society. This responsibility consists of two parts. On the one hand, it includes challenging higher education and addressing clear needs towards higher education. On the other hand, the overall society is the fundamental funding source of higher education to a sustainable level, which does not impact on admissions or accessibility within the sector, or equality of participation. Although other groups are responsible towards higher education, these others are not related to the funding.

As the European Students’ Union defines education as a right, access to education at any level should be ensured by the overall society through their taxation systems and governments. An important sub-group which is responsible for design, the developing processes and sustaining higher education are all people directly involved in higher education: students, researchers, teachers, institutional leadership, academic and non-academic staff. Effective quality assurance and efficient governance and financing of higher education are inseparable. Higher educations needs constant development and the groups inside higher education must ensure that this occurs. But it should not be from the inside out or the outside in; it is essential that both directions are taking place at the same time.

Another group or sub-group is employers in both the public and private sector, not in a sense that this group should have influence on curricula or should be directly involved in the decision making process, rather an exchange or a dialogue between higher education and this group is needed on the terms of the stakeholders in higher education.

In the papers that follow, ESU seeks to outline our vision for a truly modern and collegial higher education. Though it is simply not possible to address every aspect, we seek to empower and enable ourselves and future generations of students, student representatives and policy-makers to continue to strive for the ‘better’.
Part 1: European governing structures

I. The European Union

1. Introduction

In the past years, European integration has increasingly proceeded with more discussions on the European level and more competences being transferred to the EU or shared between the EU and its member states. The process of redefining basic values and principles needs extensive discussions and strong involvement of all stakeholders. These processes increasingly involve the field of education: not only is higher education subject of numerous conferences, papers and communications, it is also affected by other agreements and regulations. This includes for example the EU2020 strategy, more specifically the Modernisation Agenda, as well as austerity measures imposed by the European Union on countries in crisis. The purpose of this paper is to outline the European students’ approach towards these far-reaching changes on the EU level as well as the developments we wish to see in the approach to policies and structures of the European Union.

2. Concentration of power within European institutions

ESU supports transparent, democratic and academically free conditions in the EU. ESU is therefore committed to the national responsibility for education and decisions on educational policies.

ESU sees that the EU also influences countries outside the EU, especially through its partnership and neighbourhood policies. Therefore, when touching upon higher education, these policies should reflect commitments made by countries within the Bologna process and partnership countries.

European cooperation and support can have a positive impact on education. When it comes to higher education, ESU believes that the EU should be a tool to enhance development and cooperation and not a goal in itself. Therefore, the EU should focus on supporting the countries and their commitments set out in the Bologna process, for example through financial and political incentives.

ESU firmly believes that the EU should reflect the interests of the countries and the academic community throughout its policies. These policies should not contradict other European agreements or structures; the EU should support the Bologna process for instance, and not create alternative structures when it disagrees with the countries of the Bologna process. Policies should also be in line with each other throughout the EU.

3. Economic and social perspectives
There is pressure on all parts of society and politics to reach and fulfil the EU2020 goals. So far the European Commission has taken on more than a coordinating role and acts more like a governmental structure. Undue pressure is put on the EU Member States through demands, rather than open discussions on national higher education systems. It has become clear to ESU that the Commission wants to be prescriptive towards the member states in addition to taking on a supportive role. ESU believes that the EU is suited for a supportive role. This can be seen through the mobility grants encouraging recognition throughout the member states as well as the project funding.

Clear and open discussions on the diversity of higher education systems are a requirement in order to mutualise the benefits of this diversity. These talks must include representatives of all stakeholders in the decision-making process.

EU policies are often contrary to our vision of how education should function in Europe. With the Lisbon strategy, ESU foresaw that the Commission would become a driver for commodifying education in Europe. That has been the case since the EU has approached education solely from its function to optimise the competitiveness of the EU economy.

Higher education must never merely be used as a tool for economic goals. The EU must accept that education’s broadest primary purpose is for the development of societies, and reflect this in all legislative actions that have an impact on education systems.

Education is not a service that can be bought and sold between countries. Education should not be included in international trade agreements.

Transnational educational provision should not be used for the purposes of generating profit. For example, allowing foreign countries to sell ‘brand-name’ education especially in emerging European economies can put national education systems at risk. Ideally these systems will benefit society in the respective countries. However, this would not be the case when a foreign higher education institution establishes itself in a new national context for reasons of profit making. Higher education institutions should not be considered companies for the purposes of EU legislation dealing with the freedom to compete in second markets.

4. Democracy and transparency

The work that the EU does must become more stakeholder-driven in the spirit of modern collegiality as outlined in ESU’s policy paper on Financing, Commodification and Governance. This means that educational initiatives and decisions should be developed with relevant stakeholders. It should be students, teachers and institutional representatives and their organisations that are consulted in education issues. It is important that the EU’s internal structures create sustainable and representative stakeholder engagement structures to govern its educational initiatives.
ESU believes that large programmes that profoundly affect students, such as the Erasmus+ programme, should be co-governed by educational stakeholders. Not only for the sake of democracy, but to ensure the quality of the programmes. Educational stakeholders have a vested interest in creating the most responsible policies for those they represent. The European Union needs access to the information that stakeholder organisations have at their disposal.

The European Commission should choose its working groups according to democratic principles and relevant stakeholder expertise. There should be no preferential treatment of organisations whose opinions align themselves with those of the Commission. Policy should not be defined by the organisations that spend the most funds. The EU should engage with all stakeholders relevant to the issue under discussion.

The EU’s structures are changing as they grow, and therefore it is vital to have an open dialogue with stakeholders and allow their input and criticism without their feeling threatened by a loss of funding or influence.

By ruling on matters connected to higher education and students, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) clearly crosses the line between matters governed by the EU law and domestic matters of EU member states, such as education and responsibility over the national educational budget. Education is a subject for respective national governmental decisions and national legal frameworks. The ECJ should respect its role within the power division framework of the EU, and it should not attempt to impose new principles contributing and changing the face of the legal framework of the European Union or its member states. ECJ rulings may be used as an excuse to cut national educational budgets and hinder the internationalisation and mobility efforts of EU member states. Therefore, the ECJ should refrain from guessing what is in the public interest of society, as has been seen in recent cases where the ECJ has ruled in the area of education and educational support.

5. Abuse of research for political aims

The EU should, in its every interaction with research, support, encourage and welcome free, academic and rigorous research and policy debate. Very often when deciding on policies in higher education, the Commission hides behind recent studies that suggest policy solutions that fit a certain political and economic understanding of the value and beneficiaries of education very well. Too often the studies the Commission uses are strongly biased towards their desired opinions.

When acting like this, the Commission maintains the public image of technocrats while pushing a hidden agenda. Too often it argues that evidence suggests there is no alternative to the proposed policy, but that is simply not true. As the EC is such a large funder of research on higher education, its role of commissioning research can lead to consultancy and research institutions finding results that flatter the inherent biases of the EC. Therefore,
more often than not, the Commission is effectively hiding behind biased studies that will allow them to push their agendas and mark it as undeniable.

The EU needs to stop acting in this manner. It would be much more honest if the Commission simply acknowledged their political goals and how their proposed policies contribute to them. Only then a broad public discussion of higher education policies and strategies can become reality.

6. EU2030

ESU’s future EU:

- Education is a public good and a public responsibility and therefore public funding should be the standard. Higher education contributes to development in the broadest sense and should not only focus on economic purposes;

- Education is separated from culture, youth and sports in the EU structures and put together with research;

- Educational policy remains a national competency with legitimate support from the European Union through consultation with all affected stakeholders;

- A European Higher Education Area is a reality, where EHEA norms are fully harmonised and all internationally accepted processes, such as the Bologna process, are accepted;

- Funding for higher education has increased and is on a stable footing, where the EU increasingly supports mobility through increasing grants rather than loans, as well as supporting countries in developing their higher education policies on a national and institutional level;

- Educational policy on both national and EU level is made in cooperation with relevant stakeholders where students are a central part in order to ensure legitimacy. It should be clear to all citizens how decisions are made and how to influence them.
Part 2: The Bologna process and the European Higher Education Area

1. Introduction

ESU acknowledges that the Bologna process has a great influence on higher education in Europe, as many European countries are reforming or have reformed their higher education systems in light of the Bologna declaration and following communiqués. However, we believe that we are still far from achieving a fully functioning European Higher Education Area.

The main challenges of the current process from the students’ perspective have been: inconsistency or lack of implementation at the national level; Pushing of national reforms under the pretext of the Bologna Process; poor follow-up on previous commitments and lack of independent reporting on its progress.

Nevertheless, ESU is committed to a European Higher Education Area that promotes and delivers high quality, accessible and student-centred education; social justice, participative equity, opportunities for mobility and serves as the foremost way to fix a broken social ladder; and autonomous and democratically led higher education institutions, which create critical thinkers and active citizens in democratic societies.

ESU recognises that these are all equally relevant and interlinked goals. Autonomy of the academic sector is a tool to protect the right to freedom of expression, diversity of methods and content of education and research. Therefore, autonomy must not be used as a way of putting universities in a competition based development. Democratic higher education institutions cannot exist without social justice and participative equity. Participative equity is a stimulating factor for high quality education because it is enrichment for the educational environment. By ensuring participation of a diverse student body in higher education decision-making process, a student centred approach can be fostered. Therefore, these goals are mutually reinforcing.

Thus, the European Higher Education Area must embed a quality culture whilst enshrining academic freedom; recognise that higher education is a human right, public good and public responsibility; work on the principle of cooperation, not competition; include students as co-creators and partners in the delivery and governance of the learning experience and recognise its own responsibility to society itself as a social good, and as such, be publicly funded.

2. From the Bologna Process to the consolidation of the European Higher Education Area

Due to the nature of the Bologna process, the goals are often formulated in an abstract way in order to make it possible for every member state to agree to such a goal and for it to be acceptable in the national context. This created a problem for implementation on the ground, as the Bologna goals are rather disconnected from the reality at institutional and national level. ESU believes that such problems need to be addressed through the use of national actions plans that specify the action lines in more details for each national context.
National-specific objectives should be clearly formulated, which will increase its relevance and state clearer goals for the institutions, students and other stakeholders.

Nonetheless, ESU warns that the Bologna Process’ aims cannot be reached as long as member states are approaching the implementation in an “a la carte” manner. National governments shouldn’t be able to handpick the reforms and action lines they want to work on and must make an effort to achieve more fundamental changes or address those areas that are of lower priority for governments. The action lines of the Bologna declaration and the subsequent communiqués are all interconnected and interdependent, so the reforms must be done in a comprehensive way. Countries need to make an express commitment to implement all the Bologna action lines equally. A fully functioning European Higher Education Area cannot be achieved without reaching minimum standards of commitment and integration.

ESU believes that there should be a control mechanism that would verify that governments and institutions are not misusing the name of the Bologna process to justify policies that are unrelated to the Bologna implementation. The Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) should find a way to ensure this.

Moreover, ESU believes that Bologna signatory countries should commit to implement commonly agreed pan-European benchmarks stated in the Bologna process action lines. The Bologna Process needs to be rebuilt on an approach based on targets for minimum expected standards of implementation. For example, a European Higher Education Area “label” could be reserved for areas where countries have properly implemented envisaged policy measures. Ignoring minimum standards risks affecting the coherency of the European Higher Education Area, thus a possible consequence of a country breaching the minimum standards would be to lose the EHEA “label”.

While the structure of higher education systems is being reformed, little is being done to make it understandable, clear and comprehensible to the wider public, especially prospective students. ESU thinks that it is crucial to enhance the communication and outreach of the European Higher Education Area, putting in place adequate and accessible transparency and information tools about the European Higher Education Area. Ministers should commit to establishing credible and easy to use guidance systems and to communicate what the academic opportunities in the European Higher Education Area are about to everyone. The European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) would be a suitable institution for providing information if supported adequately. A true shift to a European area will not happen without these support structures, rendering the European Higher Education Area as a myriad of systems that are incomparable while still carrying the same labels.

Students should also easily have access to information concerning universities, courses and student supports available in every country through the creation of a set of European guidelines on the description of study programmes.

3. Policy scope of the Bologna process
While the structural reforms, for ensuring comparability and compatibility of national systems of education, have been at the core of the Bologna process and the European Higher Education Area, ESU believes that the scope of the Bologna process needs to be expanded if the process is to remain relevant to all the signatory countries and ESU member unions. Therefore ESU encourages more discussion on overarching issues such as social dimension, mobility, recognition, funding, E-Learning, governance or research in the European Higher Education Area.

ESU acknowledges that different countries have joined the process at different times, and there are differences in the extent to which different member countries have implemented the action lines. While some countries are focusing on the implementation of the structural reforms, those who have already implemented them are willing to continue the further development of the cooperation within the European Higher Education Area. ESU believes that a two-speed process might be considered for the future of the Bologna Process and the sustainability of cooperation in the European Higher Education Area.

4. Structures and governance of the EHEA and the Bologna process

More attention needs to be put on the governance of the Bologna process and the European Higher Education Area. The decisions on the steering of the process should be reserved for the Bologna ministerial meetings; however ESU believes that the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) should be given an even stronger voice during the entire process. The working groups should discuss the issues in-depth, prepare the background information and propose the issues to be discussed in the Bologna Follow-Up Group, while the visionary decisions are made at the ministerial conference.

Furthermore, ESU encourages the Bologna Follow-Up Group to explore possibilities for a permanent Bologna/EHEA Secretariat that would be responsible for supporting other structures of the Bologna process and European Higher Education Area. ESU believes that the Bologna Secretariat should not be handed to any European institution, but should rather rely on the collective support of the Bologna participating countries and organisations.

ESU believes that a fund should be created to support the permanent structures and common projects and events on relevant topics, allowing a more diverse group of countries to participate and take the lead in the follow-up activities.

5. Stakeholders’ involvement in developing and implementing the Bologna Process

One of the distinctive features of the Bologna Process has been the involvement of stakeholders, especially of students, in the process since its really initial stages. ESU recognises that the stakeholders, through being consultative members of the process since its initial stages, have contributed significantly to the discussions and the developments of the different action lines. ESU stresses that trust, participation and ownership from the stakeholders has led to a better implementation of the reforms. A clear example is the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, one of the most successful Bologna tools, which were developed by the E4 group (ESU, ENQA, EUA and EURASHE) and have also been revised by them in cooperation with the social stakeholders. It is of utmost importance that the path taken regarding student participation...
in the development and implementation of the Bologna Process should be continued and enhanced on all levels.

6. Follow-up and monitoring of the Bologna Process
While the current implementation and progress reports have contributed to accelerating the reform by exposing the countries’ evolution, ESU sees the need for an independent monitoring and reporting mechanism. Objective indicators, based on the above-mentioned student values of Bologna Process, should be developed. Together with improved data gathering and analysis, this would present the basis for further discussion and actions, however these indicators should not be used as a tool for incentive management of students or institutions. Furthermore, ESU encourages the Bologna Follow-Up Group to develop the methodology to complement the current reports with better data gathering from different sources of information at the national level and not just ministerial officials. Additionally, the possibility of organising on-site visits by experts from other countries should be considered, which would allow for proper evaluation of the implementation of the Bologna reforms as well as the effect that they had on the higher education system of the country.

7. Bologna implementation on national level
In order to achieve proper implementation on the national level, all member countries should establish (or continue) a structure with decision-making power that would include all stakeholders (akin the Bologna Follow-Up Group) and would be responsible for the implementation and follow-up of the reforms while respecting the autonomy of higher education institutions. ESU is absolutely certain that consistent consultation and involvement of stakeholders at national levels is essential for a successful implementation of the Bologna reforms. Students, academic staff, institutional leadership and management as well as other stakeholders are the ones bearing the brunt of any change and thus should be part of any discussion and decision.

Governments need to establish special incentives and provide a significant level of financial and regulatory support for institutions that are trying to implement various elements of the Bologna process. There should be a system of scrutiny for the implementation of Bologna while focusing on improvement rather than penalisation. An additional “EHEA-label” for institutions with corresponding minimum standards should be developed as a tool for encouraging institutions to implement the Bologna process effectively.
Annex

This policy draws from sections of the following policies, statements and strategies of ESU. In case any conflict arises with any other policy of ESU, this policy shall take precedence.

Related briefings:
- EU2020 Review
- 2000 Policy paper "Guideline on future discussions on European education"
- 2002 Policy paper “Student visions on a common Europe”
- 2004 Policy paper “Social objectives and the economic perspective of the Lisbon Strategy”