



## **BM 77 – Malta**

### **Future of Bologna**

In the wake of the twentieth anniversary of the Bologna Process, and in the perspective of the 2020 Rome Ministerial Conference, the European Students' Union (ESU) aims to take a stand and raise questions about the future of the process itself. 2020 will be a key date in determining the next steps for Bologna, both policy and structure-wise. Through this statement, ESU would like to raise concerns and state its position on the issues related to the functioning of the structures, such as the secretariat, and the possibility of it becoming permanent. This is also an opportunity for ESU to assess the values and key commitments of the process.

#### **Permanent Secretariat**

The idea of having a permanent secretariat for the Bologna Process is not a new one and ESU already has an adopted position in favour of the establishment of a permanent secretariat. Within the existing structures, the Bologna Secretariat is composed and hosted by the country that is responsible for the next Conference of Ministers. For the consistency and continuity of the Bologna process, we believe that it would be beneficial to appoint a permanent secretariat. In the current system a lot of time and knowledge gets lost by the change in secretariat. However before this can be fully implemented, a number of questions need to be answered, especially about the permanent seat of the secretariat, the financing and budgeting as well as the staff of this secretariat.

We strongly believe that the next cycle of Bologna should carefully analyse questions that thus far remain unanswered through the creation of a Working Group. One of the other major questions that the group should look into is specifically what the meaning of 'permanent' should be and how to ensure that all governments involved within the process maintain ownership of the intergovernmental process itself. In ESU's opinion, it is important that the Bologna Secretariat operates in a neutral manner and remains independent from one particular country that takes the lead for the secretariat and the hosting of the next



ministerial conference and that it executes no political role whatsoever. It is therefore important to (s)elect people in the secretariat on a personal title instead of in the name of their respective countries.

## **Values and Key Commitments**

In the Bologna process all countries have committed themselves to the implementation of the three key commitments<sup>1</sup> in higher education to boost cooperation and compliance. In the past years we have learned that implementation of the key commitments needs to be prioritized. Steps have been made but there are still a lot of countries lagging behind in the implementation. Especially regarding the three-cycle and ECTS systems, differences are still large, and despite the strong developments in Quality Assurance, more work still has to be done. The differences between the countries also create distrust and also undermine the ultimate goals of the Bologna process itself, like improved comparability and facilitating more mobility between countries.

The Bologna process started in 1999 to create more coherence between higher education institutions in the European Higher Education Area in order to promote student and staff mobility, to make higher education more inclusive and accessible and to make higher education in Europe more attractive and competitive worldwide. This cooperation in higher education is and will continue to be crucial in such a globalising world.

Fulfilling the promises made by governments and achieving the key commitments of the Bologna Process remains essential and lays the foundation on which we can build stronger mutual understanding and peer learning to achieve sustainable, inclusive, high-quality education all over Europe with the goal to achieve the automatic recognition of degrees in the whole EHEA by 2030. The 2020-2030 decade should see the completion, testing and

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<sup>1</sup> A Three-Cycle System compatible with the QF-EHEA and scaled by ECTS; Compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC); Quality Assurance in conformity with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG).



perfecting of members' compliance with the agreed commitments, so that our higher education systems can function smoothly. In order for this to be possible, mutual support amongst the members to enable them to live up to the commitments is of the highest importance.

Whilst the key commitments remain of utmost importance to achieve the aims of the Bologna Process, we need to recognise that the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is not static and that a shift in attitude and commitments is necessary to remain up to date with the developments in different higher education systems. It is important to point out the dangers of both non-implementation and superficial implementation, on the national as well as the local level, which could fragment and damage the developments within the EHEA.

Increased attention for the social dimension in higher education is important to ensure that all people get the chance to develop their potential, regardless of their background. If we want to achieve the definition outlined in the London Communiqué, namely that the composition of our Higher Education Institutions reflects the diversity that exists within society at large, the BFUG needs to put more emphasis on concretely improving the Social Dimension of Higher Education. To do this, the Bologna follow-up group (BFUG) needs to put the Social Dimension (SD) as a core commitment for the next decade and utilise this time to concretely follow up, monitor and measure the implementation of the Principles and Guidelines for Social Dimension that are being developed in the current Advisory Group 1 on SD. Furthermore, ESU sees, as a medium-to-long-term goal, the provision for all the students within the EHEA of a minimum set of rights, based on ESU's Students' Rights Charter.

Greater focus for student-centred learning is necessary to provide students with the necessary flexibility and a sense of ownership of their education they need in order to enable them to successfully navigate through, and critically engage in this rapidly changing world. Student-centred learning should be a priority within the future of Bologna and the recommendations produced by the Learning and Teaching Advisory group of BFUG 2018-2020



should be followed, if they are in coherence with ESUs positions. Students need to be owners of their educational processes and for this they have to be put in the core of their education. This requires flexible learning paths with recognition of non-formal and short-cycle education of which a certain degree of quality can be assured on a European level. Achieving a student-centred approach demands a transformation of the mindset we hold within the institutions. Both students and teachers become learners at the times of this rapidly changing world. However, they have different roles where students as learners co-create their knowledge and learning, while teachers mentor, guide and transfer knowledge to the students. Both teachers and students need support in order to enhance their understanding about a student-centered approach to education. Furthermore, to ensure quality in learning and teaching, ESU underlines that the application of ESGs cannot focus solely on quality procedures, but must also seek to enhance the quality of the learning environment through student partnership and innovation in teaching practice.

It is important to note that the higher education sector is existing in a digital age. Digitalisation of education has to be perceived as a useful addition to the current existing solutions and tools in enhancing student-centered learning and accessibility of education. This, however, is only the case if all necessary precautions are taken to make sure it is implemented in the right way. For this reason, academia and students need to be supported in their digital literacy and learning how to critically use digital tools. Further, it is important to reflect on how these are influencing our society and political discourse. Digital learning should be a tool used to foster the student's participation in actively shaping their education.

The future of Bologna should focus on inter-alia, cross-disciplinary and cross-border cooperation. For this, synergies between the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA) are very important and the BFUG should cooperatively push for meeting the Sustainable Development Goals. Sustainability needs to be embedded in our education system, and higher education needs to play a crucial role in building sustainable societies.



## **GOOD DEFINITION OF CORE VALUES**

In order to strengthen a European higher education area that is based on common fundamental values, we need to ensure a clear understanding of such. The “BFUG Working Group 1 - Task Force for future monitoring of values” is currently working on defining fundamental values such as academic freedom and integrity, institutional autonomy, participation of students and staff in higher education governance as well as public responsibility for and of higher education institutions. The current strong focus of the Taskforce on academic freedom should be presented to the BFUG as an example of quality work on defining fundamental values while stating clearly that academic freedom is by no means the only fundamental value of importance. We firmly believe that there is a need to develop a monitoring framework on values in the EHEA, taking into account both de jure and de facto realities linked to protecting & promoting fundamental values. The fundamental values of EHEA are the foundation of cooperation of the Bologna process. Therefore, it is not acceptable that countries decide to opt-out of implementing them. If an EHEA country is considered to systematically not implement Bologna’s fundamental values, a Thematic Peer Group (TPG) within the Bologna Implementation Coordination Group (BICG) must be put in place in the next cycle to tackle the specific fundamental values not being implemented. Such TPG meetings will take place on a regular basis, which will take place on a regular basis. The BFUG must as well appoint national relevant stakeholders to be a part of the group, including independent student and teacher representatives and human rights NGOs.

## **Community Engagement, Sustainability and Relevance of the EHEA**

Higher education plays a pivotal role in ensuring a fairer, sustainable and more equitable world. For this more cooperation is needed within the EHEA to create innovative synergies and alliances among universities. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should take their societal role more seriously to search for and provide solutions to the challenges our societies face today. This requires HEIs to involve the entire higher education community and society at large in higher education. However, this will only work if it is built on a foundation of trust,



continued commitment by governments and full implementation of the already agreed commitments.

In order to achieve community engagement within the EHEA, the BFUG should encourage more sharing of best practices and allow countries to help each other to implement the Bologna commitments. This is also pivotal in the spirit of solidarity which should exist amongst countries in order to decrease the gap in the level of implementation and commitment between them. In accordance with this spirit, the EHEA always has to be seen as an area of collaboration and not as an area of Competition. ESU welcomes the structures of thematic peer groups that are being used in the current cycle. These groups have proven to be very beneficial to help with implementation of the key commitments. Nevertheless, more efforts need to be made to ensure that these groups have the necessary resources to function autonomously. More uniform data collection about the implementation of the key commitments is also important to improve the functioning of the thematic peer groups. Furthermore, this form of peer support should be seen as a good practice and expanded to issues beyond the current three key commitments.

Furthermore, ESU strongly believes that the future of the EHEA is only as powerful and relevant as the countries and stakeholders make it be. At this point in time, the BFUG needs to be visionary in the way it looks at the Bologna Process, and in order to do so, it must keep the relevance and connectivity to the end-beneficiaries of the process at its core. In this regard, it is crucial that the BFUG stops creating new terminologies that might create confusion, and work upon ensuring that the fundamental values and commitments are actually implemented and well communicated to all those involved in the process.

## **Conclusion**

ESU strongly believes in the added benefit of the Bologna-process for Higher- Education. To strengthen this process ESU demands for the future of the Bologna- process a permanent secretary, an improvement of student-centered learning, an increased focus on social



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dimension, a definition of the core common values and a fostering of the community engagement within the EHEA. In this regard, it is important that further efforts are made to ensure that no country is left behind when it comes to the implementation of Bologna commitments. Cycle after cycle of the Bologna Process, new commitments are made, without necessarily ensuring that existing ones are actually implemented across the EHEA, also because national political views sometimes impede policies from being implemented and developed or alter them in order to pursue other interests. Better peer support needs to be available to tackle grassroot issues that exist at the national and local level and that are until now still hindering the implementation of commitments and respect to fundamental values. The BFUG should not be afraid to recognise its weaknesses as well as the recurring problems that exist - it is only by recognising such issues that the EHEA as a whole can continue to progress and become better and closer to achieving its main aims.

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The European Students' Union (ESU) is the umbrella organisation of 46 National Unions of Students (NUS) from 40 countries. The aim of ESU is to represent and promote the interests of students at the European level towards all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, Bologna Follow Up Group, Council of Europe and UNESCO.