



Statement on the EHEA Ministerial Conference 2020

The European Students' Union (ESU) once again reiterates its belief that the Bologna Process continues to have a significant impact on higher education across the EHEA, and it is because of such belief that it continues to put pressure to improve the process and integrate all stakeholders at a level playing field.

Whilst reaffirming the content of our last statement in December 2019 on the Future of the Bologna Process, ESU cannot ignore the developments that the year 2020 has brought about with it, particularly in the areas of diversity & inclusion, digitalisation and learning & teaching. The COVID-19 pandemic has distraught the world and higher education in particular in a manner which was unimaginable till a few months ago. For the last few months of the last academic year, most institutions were offering emergency education, rather than holistic and inclusive online learning. The sudden impact of the pandemic showed us just how unprepared we were for such eventuality, despite the years of work on the impact of digitalisation, inclusiveness, learning & teaching.

From the very start of the Bologna Process, the unique vision behind the EHEA was one not only built on comparable and compatible higher education structures. Equally, it is based on shared fundamental values that are essential for higher education in democratic societies and the challenges they face. These fundamental values include public responsibility and public funding for HE; institutional autonomy, academic freedom and the full participation of students and staff in all decision making processes. Although these fundamental values cannot be emphasised enough as prerequisites for HE within the EHEA. Fundamental values are not just to be committed to but also need to be strongly defended when endangered. Committing to the value of institutional autonomy also means speaking out when the autonomy of an HEI is under threat. Academic freedom means supporting and protecting students and staff when they exercise their autonomy. EHEA and its HEIs should be at the forefront when academic freedom is threatened internationally and should aid students or scholars that are threatened or persecuted for their academic work or human rights activism. Public responsibility for HE does not go well with tuition fees and privatisation of HE. And finally, full student participation requires to guarantee that students are being involved in a timely and meaningful way and that they are allowed to express their opinion without endangering their studies or civic freedoms.

As we gear up for a new academic year and a Ministerial Conference, which will for the first time in history take place virtually, we need to embrace the challenges and look at the opportunities that the pandemic has brought with it. Ministers at the upcoming conference



have the opportunity to turn words into practice. The years of policy on inclusion and effective learning and teaching need to be adapted accordingly to fit the current realities. The concept of leaving no one behind has never been as crucial as this time. Whilst offering online lectures or having a mixed approach seems to be the ideal way forward, we need to ensure that everyone has the access and ability to take full advantage of the necessary technological resources and that the right pedagogical training for academic staff is being offered to ensure effective online delivery of lectures. In addition, we warn against forms of digital surveillance that can violate the privacy and data protection rights of students. We call upon the institutions in EHEA to comply with GDPR and respect the privacy needs while implementing digital evaluations and examinations. All of these points still ensure to put the students at the centre of the process, regardless of who they are or where they come from.

We also need to ensure that all the work that has been carried out in the field of internationalisation is not lost. ESU urges Ministers to collaborate, in order to be able to return to “normality” as soon as considered feasible and safe by health experts. While internationalization at home through “virtual mobility” as it is confusingly referred to can be considered an appropriate bridging tool while the pandemic persists, it can never replace the intercultural learning experience of physical mobility which needs to be re-established, promoted and fully funded at the earliest possible point.

Whilst the key commitments and fundamental values are not always being observed in the EHEA countries, ESU needs to point out that Ministers must take note of the situation in Belarus, which has been escalating over the past days. Police brutality, prosecution and detainment of students and academics cannot be allowed under any circumstances within the EHEA family, and ministers need to send a strong message by offering concrete support and acting in solidarity with those standing up for the much-needed change in Belarus.

Lastly, ESU strongly urges Ministers to focus on the implementation of their commitments. This year, Ministers will be adopting a set of Principles & Guidelines to strengthen the social dimension as well as a set of recommendations to continue improving learning and teaching. In order to be useful and bring about change, these documents need to have structured support, and there needs to be sufficient resources and funding for ministries and institutions to be able to implement them on the ground. As with other Bologna commitments, the true

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test will come after the official adoption of the documents by the ministers. ESU, therefore, hopes to see a follow up of these commitments in the next cycle, to be able to monitor the situation and improve where necessary.

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