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# ACADEMIC PERCEPTION OF THE BOLOGNA PROCESS

**Report of the Education International to the  
Bologna Ministerial meeting in Bucharest, April  
2012**

*Education International represents organisations of teachers and other education employees across the globe.*

*It is the world's largest federation of unions, representing thirty million education employees in about four hundred organisations in one hundred and seventy countries and territories, across the globe. Education International unites all teachers and education employees.*

*EI is the global voice of more than 3 million higher education and research staff in 100 national organisations. Together, we work to defend the rights and promote the advancement of those working in the sector.*

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### **Where we stand?**

In its 6<sup>th</sup> World Congress in Cape Town, July 2012, Education International - the world's largest global union federation representing teachers worldwide, including c. 700 000 higher education staff members from 137 member organisations in 45 countries across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) adopted its first comprehensive Policy paper. Among other it stipulates the following:

“Consistent with international obligations<sup>i</sup>, public authorities must support the autonomy of higher education institutions in relation to academic policies, curriculum, staff appointments and internal management. Institutional autonomy, in these spheres, is a pre-condition for the existence of academic freedom which guarantees that independent research, teaching and scholarship can flourish, but it must not be confused with academic freedom. Institutions have an absolute obligation to ensure their autonomy facilitates the protection of academic freedom from a hostile external environment, and must not abuse their autonomy to undermine or suppress academic freedom internally. Further, it must be acknowledged that institutions operate in the public sphere and bear a general obligation to public accountability and the public good. A key element of academic freedom is the right of academic staff and researchers to be directly represented on all key decision-making bodies within universities and colleges that should be founded on the principle of collegiality. This principle includes guarantees of individual staff rights such as the freedom to determine teaching style, research priorities and the right to intellectual property”. (Paragraph 8)

However, as the EI Policy paper further acknowledges ... “in recent years the higher education and research sector has witnessed a series of attacks which have undermined the principles of academic freedom and collegiality, and the intrinsic value of knowledge acquisition, transmission and analysis. The global trends towards commercialisation and competition in the higher education sector threaten to compromise quality and equity. These trends must be reversed. The higher education and research sector has the potential of finding solutions to the most pressing scientific, environmental, economic, social and ethical challenges we face today. Higher education and research contributes to the development and well-being of individuals both through the personal development of students and through the development of society as a whole”. (Paragraph 19)

Education International has always expressed its strong support for the development of the European Higher Education Area, and of higher education as a vital public good which contributes to the social, cultural and economic development of communities, regions and states.

In particular, in its statement to the Bologna Anniversary Ministerial Conference in 2010, EI reiterated its support to mobility as a crucial component for the professional and personal

development of academics and students. Mobility remains the driving force of the Bologna Process and the underlying notion on which the EHEA was envisaged. As such, it requires special attention from decision-makers in terms of the provision of institutional and financial means for making it a reality. Attractive academic staff conditions are a necessary prerequisite for the successful implementation of the Bologna Process, as well as the European Research Area. In the same statement EI stressed that it is essential for the ownership and success of the reform process to include academic staff as key players in the implementation of the Bologna Process at all levels. Academic staff and their unions must not be perceived only as social partners, but also as professional associations representing the very persons on whom the practical implementation of the Bologna Process relies on a daily basis.

Therefore, in the context of increasing pressures on higher education – political reforms, demographic change, austerity measures – it is crucial to “measure the temperature” of the key agents of the implementation of Bologna process – academic staff, and seek ways how to relieve the unnecessary pressure on them and support their motivation.

### **View from within**

This report is based on the Education International’s Second study on Academics’ Perception of the Bologna Process. Covering the period from 2005-2010, the study highlights how academic staff views the state of affairs within the European Higher Education Area, especially after the impact of the Global Economic Crisis. The study was undertaken in 2011 among the EI member organizations in EHEA in the form of a survey. The unions have responded from the following eighteen countries: Albania, Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, and United Kingdom. The responses are based on unions’ internal consultancy with their constituencies and represent official view of EI affiliates.

The study aimed to capture staff perception of the Bologna Process and their appreciation of the on-going reforms (or) the lack of them that may or may not be linked to the implementation of the Process. What is most striking about the findings of this study is that while in 2009, academic staff felt generally positive about the Bologna Process, a year later, they are more or less neutral, with some countries feeling extremely negative about it. In many countries Higher Education teachers still assess the Bologna process to be the reason for many negative developments which happened to the universities during the last decade and many of them still see the main aim of the Bologna process as to further develop the market approach and to undermine working conditions, public funding etc.

This may be attributed to the decline in working and employment conditions, brought about by the decrease in public funding in higher education and/or research. As shown in this study, academic staff takes on more responsibilities such as administrative tasks and fixed term contracts increasingly replaces permanent ones. General teaching conditions have worsened - there are significantly less face-to-face contacts with students in some countries, and academics are struggling to cope with the workload. Some of this is directly linked to the Bologna Process, such as the change of methodology, the rise of both inward and outward student mobility and the higher number of courses taught in English, others are more linked to the current economic outlook, and the rise of direct student intake.

Some negative aspects of Bologna process are clearly related to an improper way of implementing the ECTS, excess of work load for students and rigidity, with negative consequences for mobility, as cited by responding unions from Croatia, Germany and Serbia. Bad implementation of the three cycle structure, with obstacles to go from Bachelor to Master level is pointed out by respondents in Spain and the Netherlands. Also criticisms were posed by organizations in Norway and Germany about the duration of the Bachelor studies, found inadequate to face the labour market needs.

As noted by most respondents, working conditions of academic staff have degraded and salaries and pensions worsen in a significant number of countries in the face of increasing workloads. Careers also worsen in an environment of increasing level of competition. Sometimes, it is difficult to discern the direct causes of deteriorating working conditions, especially when governments attribute an unpopular decision to the Bologna Process. It is also clear that staff and their unions are not as included in the implementation of the Process as they should, which could improve better understanding and sense of ownership. But this does not mean that they have not engaged themselves with the other national stakeholders such as student unions, or through Education International with the other EHEA partners. Many of them see supportive environment, mobility and student-centred learning as priority areas in the implementation of the Process.

The study also highlights the level of public and private funding in the sector. It must be acknowledged that in the period analysed, in spite of the onslaught of the global economic crisis, the level of both public and private funding has remained relatively stable in most of the countries studied. However, sharp decline of public funding is registered in certain countries like the United Kingdom, which is accompanied by an increase in private funding through student fees or direct private investment in infrastructure, research becoming the most vulnerable to private investment priorities. Also, in some countries as it is the case of Latvia, higher education faces a situation of the total decrease in both public and private funding. Lack of resources and inadequate financing to implement the Process are mentioned by respondents from Portugal, Spain, Germany, Norway, and Sweden.

Notably, tuition fees advance in more and more countries; seven countries report an increase attributing it primarily to the impact of economic crisis: Croatia, Netherlands, Poland, Serbia, Spain, Sweden and United Kingdom. On the other hand, student grants are reported to decrease in five countries: Latvia, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania and Serbia. Together, these developments illustrate a lamentable trend of putting financing of the studies increasingly on the students shoulders.

What is also regrettable is the reported decline in academic freedom across the EHEA. This could be related to the deterioration of democratic governance, often introduced in the name of restricted budget, however in fact representing spread of ideas of the new public management. Reportedly, the degree of academic freedom decreases in seven countries: Belgium, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom and increases in Albania, Denmark, Romania; followed by decrease of democratic governance and the degree of staff participation in governance. In the same time there is reported increase of institutional autonomy in few countries such as Finland, Romania and Sweden, however, unions argue that institution autonomy cannot be the autonomy of their non-elected governing bodies or presidents, and that increasing lack of resources is not compatible with autonomy. On the

positive side, meaningful participation of students is reported to improve in Croatia, Latvia and Serbia and unions relate this improvement to the Bologna Process.

Despite the general negativity about the Bologna Process, academic staff still sees the EHEA establishing itself as a label of quality in the future and a source of pedagogical innovation, provided that it fulfils criteria such as including social dimensions and having a more structured approach. The European Higher Education Area should have been implemented in all member countries by 2010 but the unions representing staff across its countries perceive that the Process is unfinished and are very aware of the difficulties of its implementation. Thus, the large majority of the unions that participated in this study are not favourable to include other regions in EHEA, and consider that the efforts should focus on improving it, not on enlarging. Nevertheless, unions are favourable to develop stronger links with other regions.

Most organizations and countries represented in the survey show a partial attainment of the Bologna objectives, indicating that there remains room for the fulfilment of the Bologna action lines across Europe. However, the percentage of organizations who perceive that more objectives of the Bologna Process have been reached has increased since 2009. Mobility, student centred learning, learning outcomes, and social dimension are line actions and aspects of the Process that, on the one hand, have not been fully attained yet, but, on the other hand, have been improved. All unions perceive that the Bologna Process has had an impact in their respective countries, although depending on the situation, that impact is of different depth and nature. In general respondents rank Bologna Process as the second most influential policy factor influencing higher education, right after national governments policies. Yet, their own involvement in it remains limited.

Quality Assurance is another critical element of the Bologna process. Although some Quality Assurance agencies operated before 2005, Quality Assurance (QA) has become an area of increasing activity with the creation of new agencies, legislative changes and debate, and an enlarging number of programs, research activities, etc., that are evaluated, even some of the changes are not seen entirely driven by the Bologna Process. In the large majority of cases, unions are not involved at all in design of the QA processes. Although unions consider QA positive, they do not have the perception that QA is actually protecting and enhancing quality or supporting their work and criticize the steering effect in which institutions just attempt to do better according to a narrow set of indicators. The balance between qualitative and quantitative indicators remains far from perfect and increased involvement of professionals would be beneficial.

Speaking about the future of the Bologna Process, academics agree that social dimension in the EHEA has to develop for both students and staff as part of the right to a quality education for all. Their priorities about social dimension are better living conditions for staff, a secure career is an essential aspect, and also better access to student housing in particular. To improve staff mobility, more comparable and easily accessible information about staff conditions and salaries, and the portability of social rights and career opportunities are needed.

### **The way forward!**

A stronger focus on the information and implementation on the ground is needed and not only including the Rector's office, the Ministry and the external quality assurance agencies, but with a

particular focus on and inclusion of the staff and students – and in particular the teaching staff and their trade unions.

The best way to start this process is a serious debate and work on how to create the supportive environment mentioned in the last ministerial communiqué.

In particular in the Budapest-Vienna Ministerial Declaration on the European Higher Education Area, 2010, the Ministers stated '...We recognise that a more supportive environment for the staff to fulfil their tasks, is needed. We commit ourselves to working towards a more effective inclusion of higher education staff and students in the implementation and further development of the EHEA. We fully support staff and student participation in decision-making structures at European, national and institutional levels.'

As stated in the EI/ETUCE position paper on Supportive Environment presented to BFUG meeting in October 2011, Krakow, such supportive environment should entail:

Academic freedom for both academic teachers and researchers; trust and collegiality; reduction of excessive bureaucracy; eradication of excessive workload; recognition of the role of early stage researchers; availability of professional development programmes for all staff; career perspectives; recognition of teaching and research as key pillars of academic activity; recognition of the role of quality of teaching and research as the main factor of professional attractiveness; improved physical and emotional working environment; inclusive and anti-discriminatory policies in the workplace; work-life balance, access to sabbatical leave, recognition of collective bargaining and public funding.

The mission of universities and other Higher Education Institutions is complex and include being the critical voice to established truth and political correctness. This mission is unique in a modern, democratic society and if the academics are supposed to exercise this mission, they need to be protected from irrelevant external (and internal) pressure and risk of sanctions. This is why **academic freedom, collegial governance and public responsibility and funding** are essential.

Without these essential mechanisms, universities will not be able to exercise their mission.

The high quality of teaching is (or should be) created in the classrooms by the interaction between students and teachers. High quality and student centred learning is neither created by quality assurance agencies nor by the management. They can help and develop the basis for high quality but that is it. It is therefore important to the development of the entire Bologna process in the future that EI/ETUCE is more involved in revision of the ESG and is recognised as an important internal stakeholder on the same line as ESU and EUA/EURASHE.

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<sup>i</sup> The responsibility of public authorities for education also includes the ratification, implementation and regular monitoring of international conventions and regulations relating to education. These include the following: the *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*, 1948; the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, 1966; the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women, 1979; and the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1989; the ILO/UNESCO *Recommendation Concerning the Status of Teachers*, 1966; the UNESCO *Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel*, 1997. (EI Education policy paper, Paragraph 6)