BOLOGNA WITH STUDENT EYES 2012

IMPRINT

CONTENT

1 INTRODUCTORY WORDS

Constructing an essentially borderless European Higher Education Area without barriers for learning has been a driving vision for more than a decade. However, given the current situation of the European economy, we are witnessing real fractures in this vision.

Visible signs of damage are not necessarily the result of a tremendous blow; also a small force can shatter an object to pieces. We cannot deny that small cracks were originally present in the vision when the Bologna Process was initiated. Over time, surely enough these once negligible issues emerged, and ever so forcibly.

Students in Europe still support the vision of the common higher education area, but they have seen and felt their fair share of rattling and changes that seem to accompany the efforts making this vision a reality. Students do not feel they are part of a European system, and if they do they might not have positive associations with it, aside from those few that have experienced a successful exchange period.

Students and academics alike have protested against some of the changes in higher education policy, most notably concerning the perception that higher education is being turned into a commodity through introducing more and higher fees and emphasising primarily the individual benefit. In recent years, the student protest has not only made headlines, but has successfully influenced decision-making.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the European Students' Union is unveiling its latest edition of Bologna With Student Eyes with a message that highlights what we largely said and claimed three, five, seven and even nine years ago.

Our repetition is mostly due to slow progress in delivering the necessary reforms across Europe. It is down to lack of political willingness to implement reforms. We do not want to have a similar study structure and tools in place envisaged by Bologna, yet still have 47 different ways for using and recognising these. Despite all efforts, it seems there is perhaps more than irony at play when we say that academics can blindly trust each other's research, but cannot do so for teaching.

There is no time for complacency in taking the Bologna Process towards its finishing lines. But we are better positioned than ever before in having to think about the needs of future societies. This is particularly difficult in the current socioeconomic climate, where the short-term economic gain seems to dominate in policy-making.

Clearly, higher education is a natural crown-jewel of soft-power and diplomacy and has become ever increasingly important to governments. Whilst in statements pride and aspirations are high, education budgets are savaged almost universally across Europe and more of the cost is rolled over to individual students. Austerity has become a hype word; phrases like »doing more with less« and »efficiency gains« have become common. Impact of this is rather visible.

Social movements, often centred on students and young people who are in an extremely precarious situation regarding their study and job prospects, are gaining momentum. We should not only note some of the anti-Bologna movements and protest, caused by the fact that this process was not very inclusive at its start, but that protest has become more frequent and linked to the carousel of higher education reform in Europe. Among many changes concerning principles of funding or governance, Bologna Process is not seen separately. Logically, from the perspective of an individual student, it should not be disconnected indeed.

At the same time, today's young generation is the most highly educated ever. From this perspective, the gap between expectations and what our societies can deliver seems only to be growing wider. Given also the increasing graduate debt and unpromising labour market situation for young people, it should then be no wonder that protest is the preferred means of influencing policy.

Whether public investment based on the long-term growth generated on one hand, or on the type and magnitude of social costs prevented on the other hand, the same conclusion is reached: public investment towards education is not only the smartest but also the necessary thing to do.

We surely did not squander too many of our public Euros on education. And cutting education budgets will hardly take us out of debt in the long-term, for grander challenges lie ahead, including ecological and social expenditures that are unsustainable in the current forms.

We must all admit that we need to make a better effort at looking at each Euro we invest as a society. When it comes to higher education, processes such as Bologna can make a big contribution to this effort.

The tools that we have commonly built and which should be seen as a huge feat of our work would enable our systems of higher education to become much more student-centred and allow for more flexibility in terms of responding to current global needs as well as future challenges.

Fundamental issues including funding and governance of higher education should be at the forefront of discussions held by ministers of education, the same ministers who gave birth to the Bologna Process. Imbalances in the flow of mobile students are increasingly provoking political debates regarding national education budgets; this conflicts with a more European outlook where for example in the European Union, freedom of movement for citizens and the workforce is seen as a fundamental right.

The cracks that have become visible in the current economic and political context continent-wide are pointing to the necessity of using the vision for a common European Higher Education Area to pave a new path for Europe. We should not allow it to simply become an idyllic moment of nostalgia of once great thoughts.

Thus, to sum up the student expectations to this 2012 milestone, we are ready. And we ask for ministers, governments, higher education institutions and stakeholders to take a step with us in setting a goal that by 2020, any studying in Europe will proudly acknowledge and appreciate that they study in the European Area where values of academic freedom, personal development and citizenship underpin our common efforts.

The Bologna With Student Eyes 2012 edition is our contribution to the debates, bringing out the most crucial elements for students in the Bologna reforms. For this huge effort I would like to extend my gratitude to our member unions whose views this publication is bringing forward and who have kept up in being engaged with the Bologna Process. I also thank my dearest colleagues Nevena, Mari and Magnus for coordinating the entire process and Marianne and Linus for helping to make it reality on paper. Our work was helped also by Jens, Predrag, Sjur and Terhi, who supported us with giving valuable advice and comments. This publication really is a team effort and I would like to thank the impressive team of authors: Brikena, Daniela, Fernando, Florian, George, Karina, Magnus, Mari, Miro, Monika, Nevena, Rasa, Robert, Rok and Taina. With this dedication I am sure we will have many publications to come.

I thank you for taking interest in our publication and hope you will get an interesting insight through our work.

Allan Päll,
Chairperson ESU

2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
BOLOGNA WITH STUDENT EYES 2012

The Bologna Process is one of the largest endeavours ever undertaken aimed at reforming higher education continent-wide. It has created a framework of measures and policies aiming to foster greater compatibility and comparability of the national systems of higher education across Europe. Despite the impact reforms and change in higher education have meant for students in Europe since 1999, ESU is unfortunately again forced to report that progress has not yet caught up with the expectations propagated by the commitment and targets set by ministers. Seen from the perspective highlighted in this edition of ›Bologna With Student Eyes‹, development over the past three years since the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Conference in 2009 has not been satisfactory in a number of areas, even deplorably sliding backwards on some of the key action lines.

2.1 FROM RESPONDING TO THE ECONOMIC CRISIS TO LAYING FOUNDATIONS FOR THE LONG-TERM FUTURE!

The current social and economic crisis has propelled unemployment to soaring levels in the majority of European countries; this is especially evident among youth. Now more than ever, higher education systems are placed under enormous pressure to reinforce the relevance of education and contribute to equipping European citizens with the knowledge and skills required to counter the current crisis, while at the same time to lay the foundation for long-term sustainability. Arguably, the Bologna Process has not been properly employed to address this policy necessity in the last three years, and has not kept up pace with the rapid developments regarding national level discussions on financing of higher education, employability and the social dimension. This renders Europe's potential underexploited as attention is scattered, leading to vastly different responses while the Bologna Process platform can and should be used to punch above one's weight.

Gaining a higher education qualification has proved to be a key factor for individuals in enhancing employability in the labour market. This is especially true when looking at gaining immediate employment and maintaining long-term employment. Higher education is essential in providing society with sufficient overall levels of knowledge and competence needed for maintaining or improving living standards. Education levels continue to prove crucial in providing opportunities and success later in life for individuals, but family social and educational background still largely determines the success of students in the education system. It is therefore clear that the ambitions for improving the relevance of higher education must be coupled with creating equal opportunities for all, regardless of background.

Yet rising unemployment levels among graduates is also a concern, for it threatens to undermine the trust among young people that tertiary education degree is a guarantee of a relevant job in the future. Students' experience shows that the relevance of content and quality of learning needs to be explored on a deeper level. First and foremost, this must be done by thinking ahead, preparing students to meet unpredictable requirements and changing environments on a long-term basis while cultivating a culture of lifelong learning. More focus in education should be given to actual competencies and skills gained; learners should be empowered to think why they learn and how they can make use of their competence, promoting the benefits of education.

Democracy and openness in Europe has also come under increased pressure in recent years. Political scenes are vibrant around issues of European governance as growing impatience and lack of confidence in the political system to solve problems are surfacing at higher rates than before, alienating among others young people and students. In this context the Bologna Process could offer an opportunity to prove a case for European integration beyond economical turmoil. Within this, higher education should be called upon to take responsibility and act as a lighthouse of participative governance, while addressing global grand challenges such as environmental sustainability, social equality and democratic legitimacy.

In the majority of European countries, public investment towards higher education has been or is about to be cut, effectively defying repeated pledges made at ministerial conferences to uphold public investment despite the ongoing crisis. Alarmingly, this has been combined with serious reductions in student support in several countries, and in the most severe cases topped with proliferation of and increase of student fees and study costs. Lack of equal access to education and decreasing affordability of higher education is likely to increase the risk that youth unemployment today will lead to a lost generation tomorrow.

2.2   PROGRESS AND PROCRASTINATION IN THE BOLOGNA PROCESS SINCE 2009

Student mobility has been the action line gaining most attention since it was embraced as the hallmark of EHEA in 2009. Chiefly, political commitments have been followed up with deepening, by adopting a concretisation of the 20% benchmark and drafting a mobility strategy to be adopted at the Bucharest ministerial conference. While the EHEA is turning welcomed attention to balancing mobility flows internally within Europe and externally with other regions, the key issue that remains to be solved is funding of mobility. This has undoubtedly been the most contentious issue on the agenda, especially driven by the debate on new mobility programmes in the EU and a strong demand for more robust solutions. Lack of proper and adequate funding is the most significant obstacle to mobility, especially for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Unfortunately, the clear commitment to full portability of grants and loans articulated in 2009 has been quietly ignored, perhaps even withdrawn in the last three years, continuing to limit the accessibility of mobility to a great extent.

The **Social dimension** has seen progress over the last three years, albeit slowly, despite coming under the pressure of austerity. However, discussions on European level within the Bologna framework have been impeded by lack of quality data and precise indicators. The commitment made to adopt national targets and develop indicators shows no signs of improvement. Policies to expand access and widening participation in the Bologna Process has several times been tied to streamlining lifelong learning strategies and open up for recognition of prior learning. Very few countries have managed to develop sufficient tools for recognition of prior learning at institutional level, practically without progress since 2009.

Employability has been thrust into the limelight in recent European debates on education policy. Despite being a priority in the Bologna Process for a long time, the follow-up on European level has been limited since 2009. The impact of Bologna reforms and tools on graduate employability is still tentative, and is also inhibited by a serious lack of comparable evidence. Students working alongside studies predominately continue to take up positions unrelated to their studies, and the Bologna bachelor degree is perceived to offer too few employment opportunities.

Student-centred learning has gradually started to introduce changes that give students more potential for deciding about their own educational paths. While we may conclude that there has been considerable progress on the topic of student-centred learning over the past decade progress has not been particularly significant since the ministerial conference in 2009 and student-centred learning is still a long way from becoming a reality in most of Europe's higher education institutions.

Implementation of Bologna tools has made good progress throughout the last decade, however much work remained in 2009, and these deficits have been addressed to varying degrees in the last three years. Progress in removing obstacles associated with the implementation of the degree cycles and ECTS appears limited. Progression between cycles and accessibility is still obstructed in most countries and ECTS alignment to learning outcomes still only feature in about 40% of countries. Although the deadline for establishing national qualifications frameworks was pushed back to 2012, the majority of countries will still be working on this by the end of the year.

Quality assurance has seen a slower pace of progress recently compared to previous years. Nevertheless, relevant undertakings such as the MAP-ESG project and the external evaluation of EQAR have been accomplished by 2012. New QA mechanisms and classifications of HEIs are starting to be used in several countries. The involvement of students has improved at all levels since 2009, but there is still considerable room for improvement. The trend of involving external stakeholders more intimately in quality assurance is also quite clear. The impact of EQAR has so far not lived up to expectations for enhancing the ESG or increasing transparency for students.

Student participation in governance of higher education is still very much in progress. Although there has been an overall progress in consulting students in relation to Bologna Process implementation on a system level, at institutional level students are being gradually excluded from participation in decision-making on financial issues, staff policies and organisational structures.

European higher education integration has progressed through 13 years since 1999. However, a limbo between diverse national systems and European coordination still exists. Despite that progress has been made in many areas and in many countries, the reliability of the EHEA is threatened by disparities in implementation and gaps in common understanding. The situation of an overall lack of effectiveness in policy tools and frameworks might prove the EHEA to be more of a bubble than a dependable fundament for European higher education.

2.3   RECOMMENDATIONS

1   **Investing in higher education**: Member states should reinforce commitments to higher education as a public good and public responsibility by operationalising it with a common understanding of goals for investment and public funding for higher education. The ongoing meltdown of student support service financing must be reversed in order to avoid jeopardising the social dimension and accessibility for students of all backgrounds. Reaching the objectives in the Bologna Process will not be possible without necessary support. Revitalising investments in higher education should be done through targeting and supporting objectives of the Bologna Process such as the social dimension, mobility and lifelong learning.

2   **Accelerating student mobility:** The 20% benchmark on student mobility needs to pick up more speed in order to be achieved. The EHEA Strategy for mobility is a first step. However, fundamental challenges with insufficient financial support, lack of basic rights for mobile students and recognition needs to be addressed at a trustworthy level. Commitment to full portability of loans and grants is worthless, unless tied to a deadline and defined clearly. Student mobility must be opened up as a possibility for all students, regardless socioeconomic background, and should be measured as a benchmark.

3   **Balancing mobility:** While student mobility continues to grow, the imbalances in mobility flows within Europe, as well as with other continents must be addressed. Financing and students' rights in movement within the EHEA post-2020 should be explored. In order to reach truly free movement of students and academics within the EHEA, a mobility treaty should be developed. This should seek to guarantee equal and fair rights for mobile students, entail a common mobility financing policy, ensuring balanced mobility streams and overcome remaining recognition and information obstacles.

4   **Counter the crisis:** The Bologna Process should respond to how higher education in EHEA can contribute to counteract the social and economic crisis by renewed commitments for improving employability, through reinforced relevance and widening access to higher education. Member states in the Bologna Process should increase attainment levels through coordinated national targets for attainment and diversity adopted by 2015, referenced to an EHEA indicator.

5   **Social dimension:** Lack of data and comparability has made the social dimension an empty action line so far. Installing stronger mechanisms for monitoring, peer learning and review of national systems are concrete steps that can be supported from European level to push for greater priority of the social dimension. At the same time, all of the Bologna tools, should be streamlined to support the social dimension when properly implemented.

6   **Transition to work:** Facilitating more short-term, low-pay employment opportunities for young people and graduates are not solutions to tackle the long-term problems. Governments need to refrain from considering underpaid or unpaid internships and probation periods after graduation, and rather make trustworthy steps to secure relevant job experience during studies. Internships and practical education need to become part of the curricula, offering students links to prospective employers.

7   **Learning outcomes and qualifications:** Higher education institutions need to »come clean« and be more adept at presenting to their future students the expected outcomes of their qualifications. Students desire to make in-

formed decisions, but need realistic information to do so. The BFUG should take the initiative of increasing available information to students on European jobs and careers forecasts as well as for a European wide graduate survey to map outcomes of higher education, with a focus on employability.

8   **Student-centred Learning:** Real improvement in experienced quality and relevance will not be reached unless there is a paradigm shift in the learning process at classroom and programme level. Decision makers should encourage autonomous development of student-centred learning practices by the way of incentives and support measures. Quality assurance procedures, for example, should include more references to teaching than before. At the same time, teaching should be incentivised at both system-wide and institutional level in a manner similar to that in which research has been thus far.

9   **Cycles and ECTS:** The benefits of the three-cycles system and ECTS in the EHEA will not be fully used without restoring the commitment to their full and proper implementation by all relevant stakeholders. Decision makers should guarantee a flexible and open progression between cycles and should take initiatives improving the provision and rights of the Ph.D. candidates. Further focus on the alignment of ECTS and learning outcomes is needed in most EHEA countries.

10 **Quality assurance:** Quality assurance should take place with a more holistic approach and a tangible impact. More work should be done to transmit the information about quality assurance outcomes to students and the wider public. The ESG should be revised, focusing on its purpose, scope, clarity and usability. Continued stakeholder involvement in the revision and implementation of the ESG is a key element. At the same time, the European Quality Assurance Register needs to be empowered and become, within its activity, more directly focused on students as one group of users.

11 **EHEA governance:** The Bologna Process needs to be rebuilt on an approach based on targets for minimum expected standards of implementation, where Bologna »labels« should only be reserved for countries and higher education institutions that have properly implemented envisaged policy measures. Ignoring minimum standards risks affecting the coherency of the EHEA, fundamentally undermining the very essence and motivation of comparability and coherence.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 BOLOGNA WITH STUDENT EYES 2012—A STEP TOWARDS EVIDENCE BASED POLICY MAKING

ESU has been reviewing the state of educational reforms, especially those developed in the Bologna process framework, since 2003. There have been publications in 2003, 2005, 2007 and 2009, reflecting the perceptions of member unions on the progress of Bologna Process-inspired reforms. The approach to this publication is different to previous editions. Focus is now more on looking at the impact Bologna Process-inspired reforms have on students, graduates and wider society rather than focusing solely on the Process. Partly this has been a result of integrating the current publication in the SAGE (Students Advancement of Graduates Employability) project framework, and the information needs of the project. A greater emphasis has also been placed on the EU Modernisation agenda's impact on the reforms linked to the Bologna Process.

Right from its inception, the main beneficiaries of greater European integration were students. However, the implementation of the process was not as fluid as expected in 1999, when the Bologna Declaration was launched. In order for ESU to be an influential stakeholder in the creation of an European Higher Education Area (EHEA), a significant learning curve needed to be undertaken. The Process created an incentive for ESU to focus itself towards taking an increased evidence-based approach when representing students' views on the implementation of the Bologna Process. Practically, ESU (before 2007, ESIB) decided to undertake a bi-annual stocktaking exercise, which collated the opinions of its members (national unions of students) about the re-shaping of the higher education landscape.

Bologna With Student Eyes has been divided into several focus areas according the Bologna action lines (i.e. mobility, ECTS implementation). However, overarching this division is an approach that aims to bring a holistic perspective to the Bologna Process, ensuring key links and challenges can be highlighted. We hope this publication will present a clear picture of the challenges, progress and national variations across the European Higher Education Area.

3.2   SELECTION OF METHODS

IDENTIFICATION OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM THROUGH LITERATURE REVIEW

Preparations for this study started in July 2011 from a broader discussion with ESU elected representatives on how they see upcoming Bologna With Student Eyes both from an impact perspective (how we want to deliver the students' view to influence decision-making) and process-wise. A team, responsible for the preparation of the publication, was appointed and took over the coordination of the process. Once chapters had been assigned to the authors, work on identifying the main problem of the research started. There were one or two elected representatives, from various cultural and academic backgrounds around Europe, working on each chapter. A literature review was carried out for each chapter. This consisted of Bologna stocktaking reports, Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) reports, other stakeholder publications and statistics (i.e. EUROSTUDENT IV).

In order to measure the development of the Bologna process (with the students' eyes), note has been taken of the previous ESU publications (BWSE 2003-2009, BAFL 2010). Once the research problem has been identified, authors were able to move in designing the questionnaire.

DESIGNING THE QUESTIONNAIRE AND DATA COLLECTION

A distinct feature of Bologna With the Student Eyes is that it is based on the views and perceptions of students. After the questions for the main survey were collected and test phase was undertaken, five national unions of students', regionally balanced across Europe have been asked to fill in the 75-page length questionnaire and report back assessing it's quality and comprehensiveness[1]. Once this happened and the questionnaire has been improved, BWSE team started the dissemination to all ESU members (45 national unions of students in 37 EHEA countries).

By the end of December 2011, thirty-eight unions representing thirty-five countries had completed the BWSE questionnaire[2]. The way in which unions organise their responses can differ: in some cases unions launch a broader consultation with their members (i.e. UASS Ukraine). However, more often it becomes a responsibility of a specific policy officer in the national union of students.

The surveying process took more than 6 weeks and we are truly thankful for all the unions, which have kindly found time and resources to complete this long questionnaire. Your efforts are a key-success factor in ESU being politically recognised at the European level. Once the data was collected and systemised, there was time for analysis.

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1   ESU wants especially to thank the five national unions of students, ANOSR (Romania), CREUP (Spain), LSA (Latvia), NSO (Norway) and SUS (Serbia) who participated in a process of improving the survey by giving constructive comments on our test version of the survey in September 2011.

2   ESU members (38 unions representing 35 countries) completing the survey were following: ANOSR (Romania), ASU (Azerbaijan), CREUP (Spain), EÜL (Estonia), FAIRe (Portugal), fzs (Germany), HOÖK (Hungary), La FAGE and UNEF (France), LSA (Latvia), LSAS (Lithuania), LSS (Lithuania), LUS (Luxemburg), LSVb and ISO (Netherlands), NASC (Bulgaria), NSUM (the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), NSO (Norway), NUSUK (United Kingdom), ÖH (Austria), PSRP (Poland), SFS (Sweden), SHI (Iceland), SKRVŠ (Czech Republic), ŠRVŠ (Slovakia), SSU (Slovenia), SURS (Bosnia and Herzegovina), SUS (Serbia), SYL and SAMOK (Finland), DSF (Denmark), KSU (Malta), UASS (Ukraine), UdU (Italy), USI (Ireland), VSS-UNES-USU (Switzerland) and VVS (Belgium).

ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING THE DATA

Having received the responses, they were then categorised according the topic (i.e. mobility, financing). Content analysis was used to analyse both the qualitative and quantitative data[3]. Findings from this survey have been compared to other studies and reports produced by e.g. EUROSTUDENT, EUA, European Commission and ESU.

REPORTING AND DRAFTING CONCLUSIONS

In this kind of study, the process of analysing results is very much interlinked to the process of writing and clarifying the message of the chapter. Therefore, the role of various discussions on both the overall topic of the publication and content of specific chapters can be considered as crucial to the quality of the final outcome. This was seen as especially important because these discussions allowed for a peer-learning approach. It became possible to see the topic, the impact of Bologna Process and its multilayered and inter-related dimensions, from a more holistic perspective.

After the first draft was produced, BWSE authors came together for the peer-learning exercise (January 2012, Elche). During three intensive days of presentations of the draft chapters, input from the whole writers' group on how to improve the publication was received. Various policy discussions were happening in parallel, which, according to most of the participants of the process, helped them to understand the ideas behind Bologna and EU reforms better.

Once the feedback had been received, authors continued work on their chapters. The final stage was submitting the text to well-known European higher education experts. We are kindly thankful to Sjur Bergan, Jens Jungblut, Predrag Lažetić and Terhi Nokkala for their invaluable contribution to this publication.

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3   The questionnaire consisted on both qualitative and quantitative questions, both open and closed. It is noticeable here, that the statistical analysis of data was not made, either that it was not the target of the survey (in the sense of producing statistically representative picture of the factual situation in the countries), but the purpose of the data collection and analysis was to present the opinions and views on the higher education reforms experienced and explored by the students' unions on national level.

3.3   CLOSING REMARKS

Aspects of policymaking, learning and producing new knowledge were intertwined into the writing process. Its content also aims to achieve this by describing the relationships between the governing structures, status of the reform, current practices and relationships between stakeholders. Because the chapters of this publication were written and edited by different people, together and individually, writing styles and ways of working varied. However, despite of all this variation and diversity—or perhaps because of it—we managed to accumulate both the different perspectives presented in our survey answers by the national students' unions and among the group of writers. This reminds us of the process of the higher education reform. Isn't diversity a value in Bologna itself?

Higher education can and should focus on educating people to become critical, analytical and creative producers and users of knowledge, enabling them to facilitate change in a society. To come back to the aim of evidence based policy making, and our work on producing Bologna With Student Eyes 2012, questions on how to use research results, overcome the limitations of the different sources and types of data and to be able to produce an analytic, political statement with the practical recommendations for the further action, were critical. These elements can be considered as a crucial issue also for the other actors of the field and the success of higher education reform as a whole. After this critical reflection of the process, we dare to consider the production of Bologna With Student Eyes 2012 as a clear indication of the true value of higher education and its usefulness also for the practice.

4 CYCLES, DEGREES AND ECTS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The introduction of the degree cycles system and of the system of transferable credits has been one of the main goals of the Bologna process since its very beginning. The idea of a transferable credit system was actually first developed ten years before the Bologna Process started, with the introduction of the Erasmus program in 1989 but was seen as an important and viable goal for the Bologna Process to include.

The introduction of a 2-cycle system and a credit system is directly mentioned in the Sorbonne Declaration (Declaration 1998). The purpose of a credit system, such as the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was to promote easier transfer between institutions, to facilitate easier recognition of learning achievements and increase the flexibility of the cycles system. The Bologna Declaration (Declaration 1999) adopted one year later by 29 countries mentions the introduction of a two-cycle system and the establishment of a credit system—mainly for the purpose of enabling widespread mobility.

During the course of time, more and more demands and expectations were associated with the cycles system and the use of ECTS as core Bologna Process tools. The initial two-cycle system changed after the Ministerial Conference in Bergen (Communiqué 2005) from the original idea—two cycles—undergraduate (bachelor) and graduate (master) to three-cycle system, with inclusion of the third cycle, doctoral education. The momentum of changes within national higher education systems as well as in international cooperation in the third cycle programmes is very intensive, with a focus on establishing doctoral schools and emphasis of doctoral candidates and post-docs research careers (Sursock & Smidt 2010).

The ECTS should, since the Ministerial Conference in Bergen (Communiqué 2005), serve not only as a transfer tool, but also mainly as an accumulation tool within all study programmes and courses. The allocation of ECTS credits was originally linked to learning contact hours and later—according to the ECTS Users' Guide 2005—to the study workload needed to achieve the intended learning objectives in general (European Commission 2005). Finally—following the updated ECTS Users' Guide from 2009—the allocation of ECTS credits should be based on the expected learning outcomes and the workload needed to fulfil them (European Commission 2009). This change is following the call and need for a paradigm shift in higher education as a part of lifelong learning process, with students in the centre of it as well as other reform processes in European Higher Education Area such as the introduction of qualifications frameworks based on learning outcomes and competences.

4.2   MAIN FINDINGS AND RESULTS

IMPLEMENTATION OF 3-CYCLES ARCHITECTURE

The three-cycle system has after more than ten years of implementation become a standard in the European Higher Education Area. According to the EUA's Trends 2010 report (Sursock & Smidt 2010), 95% of the responding higher education institutions have implemented the three-cycle system in most academic fields.

According to the ECTS Users' Guide, each full-time year of formal learning consists of 60 ECTS credits, whereby one credit correspond to 25–30 hours of work on average (European Commission 2009). The overarching framework for qualifications in the European Higher Education Area, adopted by the Bergen Conference of ministers in 2005, defines a typical amount of ECTS credits for the first and second cycles, allowing a certain variety of models. The first cycle should typically consist of 180–240 ECTS credits, the second cycle should correspond to 90–120 ECTS credits with a minimum of 60 ECTS credits in a second cycle programme. (EHEA Framework 2005.)

The overview shows three main models in the implementation of the first and second cycles and several countries with no dominant model:

180 + 120	Andorra, Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Norway, Portugal, Slovakia, Sweden
240 + 120	Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Lithuania, Russia, Turkey
240 + 60/90	Bulgaria, Spain, Ukraine ,United Kingdom (Scotland)
No dominant model	Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Malta, the Netherlands, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, United Kingdom,

(EURYDICE 2010:19)

However, some countries, typically with binary higher education systems, use other amounts of credits in the first cycle. In Denmark, the programmes at universities consist of 180 ECTS credits, while at polytechnics students have to collect 210 ECTS. Finland has a similar system too, requiring 180–210 ECTS credits at universities and 210–240 ECTS credits at universities of applied sciences.

Hungary and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia also implement different systems for the first cycle. In Hungary consists of 210 ECTS credits and in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia it ranges between 180 and 240 ECTS credits.

The second Bologna cycle is more diverse throughout European Higher Education Area—not only in terms of workload, but also in terms of academic and practical orientations, the level of attainment of first cycle graduates and differing understandings of the second cycle qualification in general. There are an ongoing discussions about difficulties with finding a common understanding for second cycle qualifications (Sursock & Smidt 2010).

The overview of the implementation of the three-cycle system in the European Higher Education Area demonstrates that the harmonisation of cycles was rather a successful story. However, further findings show that the cycles system as a basic feature of EHEA Qualifications Framework still lacks transparency and coherence, particularly in the allocation of ECTS credits and progression between cycles.

PART TIME STUDIES IN FIRST AND SECOND CYCLES

The ability to study part-time is an important feature of an open higher education system. This is particularly true in the context of changing society with more diverse student population and increasing numbers of lifelong learners. It is necessary to have efficient tools to provide access to higher education for diverse student groups. One of those tools is the possibility to attend part-time study programmes.

According to member unions' opinions, although the possibility to study part time is seen as a general feature of the first cycle programs, it is more usual to study part-time in the second cycle. More than 80% of the unions stated that it is in general or in most cases possible to study part-time in the first cycle, and 84% of the unions stated that it is generally or mostly possible to take part-time study programmes in the second cycle. In four countries it is rather an uncommon option and in three countries it is usually not possible to study part-time.

The Finnish national unions of students, SAMOK and SYL, point out that »Finnish legislation does not have the term part-time student. All students are considered full time students, regardless of whether or not they do it full time or part time.« Other higher education systems—like in the Czech Republic—do however distinguish between full time and part time students but the difference does not apply to the workload with respect to study period.

The Bologna Process communiqués and other documents provide no common definition of part time studies as a different arrangement from full time studies. This leads to a lack of understanding about its role in the higher education landscape. The lack of data on part time studies in terms of differentiated workload (less than 60 ECTS credits per study year).

INFLEXIBILITIES IN LENGTH OF STUDIES

First cycle

Nearly 60% of the 34 countries have a maximum time limit for completion of studies. There are various measures used by higher education systems to restrict the length of study during both first and second cycles.

In twelve countries students are denied access to student support systems once they have exceed the maximum study time; eight countries charge higher tuition fees and six countries do not allow a student to complete their studies if they exceed the time limit.

Some countries set only restricted numbers of semesters to complete a qualification and others apply a combination of measures. In Switzerland, the restriction of study period depends solely on the higher education institutions. Other countries have different arrangements for different types of higher education institutions—the Finnish unions SAMOK and SYL report that at universities students have to »ask for prolongation of study time. Faculty then decides if it grants extra time«, whereas at universities of applied sciences students get »one year extra time automatically, another year can be applied for.

After that, the student may apply for the program again and ask for recognition of study achievements done so far. The student may register as absent for the maximum of two years.«

In other countries there are no direct restrictions, but other measures may have the same effect. ÖH, the national union of Austrian students, specified that there is no restriction, but »after a certain time you loose all support by the state and have to pay for everything on your own.«

Second cycle
Policies about the maximum length of study for the second cycle are less restrictive. Restrictions apply in 16 countries (compared to 22 for the first cycle).

Twelve countries apply financial sanctions with regards to student support, eight countries charge students higher tuition fees. The various arrangements and combinations of measures are students not particularly different from those ones identified in the first cycle.

PROGRESSION FROM FIRST TO SECOND CYCLE

The access of the first cycle graduates to study programmes in the second cycle is an important condition for increasing flexibility and students' individual choice. The progression between cycles should be open and flexible in order to provide multiple learning paths for different groups of students. However, the situation observed by national unions of students, shows that there are still barriers that limit access to the second cycle.

There are only six countries of out 31 that admit first cycle graduates automatically to the second cycle. In most higher education systems students have to apply for the second cycle (22 countries), undergo an exam or test to get admitted (9 countries) or have to achieve a target grade in the assessment of the first cycle to get admitted (8 countries).

There are other arrangements in place as well—in Italy and Romania the rules for progression are set up by the HEIs themselves. In some systems there are additional non-academic requirements—universities of applied sciences in Finland require work experience from the first cycle graduates to get admitted to the second cycle.

THIRD CYCLE

The third cycle has been introduced into the Bologna process after the Bergen Ministerial Conference (Communiqué 2005). The Bologna Seminar on doctoral programmes held in Salzburg in October 2005 set up ten basic principles as recommendations for the third cycle within European Higher Education Area (Bologna Seminar 2005). The latest development in doctoral education in Europe tends to organise it within doctoral schools (49% of all programmes in 2010) (Sursock & Smidt 2010). More programmes are being structured or modularised and the use of ECTS in whole curricula or in the structured parts of them is increasing.

Structured/non-structured programmes and ECTS
Fourteen national unions of students reported that the third cycle programmes are, in general, not structured while eleven unions identified structured programmes. In Ireland newly enrolled students already enter structured programmes.

Structured third cycle programmes usually consist of either 180 ECTS (typically in Central and South-Eastern Europe—as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and Slovakia) or 240 ECTS (Northern Europe—Estonia, Iceland, and Sweden). In Latvia the exact number of ECTS depends on the programme, the average amount of ECTS in third cycle is 260. In Portugal the amount of ECTS ranges between 180 and 240. The ECTS allocation generally corresponds to Salzburg Principles, which set the duration of doctoral programmes to be three to four years.

Status of Ph.D. candidates

Out of 26 national unions of students, 17 report that Ph.D. candidates are considered as students, while in three countries they have a status of academic employees. In Sweden and Iceland the Ph.D. candidates are considered both as junior academics and students. However, in some countries there are ongoing reforms regarding the Ph.D. candidate status—EÜL, the Estonian national union of students reflects, that »changes to switch the status of third cycle students to young researchers are in process.«

In five countries the status of Ph.D. candidates is rather mixed or even changing during the course of the cycle. In Finland »young researchers do not have a stable status: some of them are considered to be students, some of them are paid. Their status may change during their study/career.«

Such a »dual track« system is in place in various contexts, usually with regard to the representation of Ph.D. candidates or to the social support services. In France, Ph.D. candidates are considered either as students or as professionals; the status depends on the scope of teaching activities of Ph.D. candidates. The same conditions apply to the possibility to obtain a scholarship for their thesis.

Some countries have very vague definition of Ph.D. candidates—as in the Netherlands or in Slovakia—according to the Slovak national union of students ŠRVŠ it is difficult to identify their status, as it is »not clearly defined. In fact, they are students but they have no student benefits and no employees' advantages either«. Other higher education systems provide Ph.D. candidates with a special status—in Romania are the Ph.D. candidates called ›doctoral students‹ and are at the same time students and assistant professors.

According to several unions, the mixed or special status of Ph.D. candidates does not provide any special benefits. To the contrary—Ph.D. candidates with a special status are usually deprived of parts of students', as well as employees', rights and benefits.

Despite the unclear and sometimes mixed status of Ph.D. candidates, only 5 out of 24 unions reported that the status of Ph.D. candidates causes problems. In France and Slovakia the main problems stem from lack of social support for Ph.D. candidates, in Denmark, Romania or Sweden from problems connected with representation (confusions about the proper representative structures, lack of independence). In Romania, the Ph.D. candidates face additional problems, as they are, according to the Romanian NUS ANOSR, used as a cheap workforce by their supervisors.

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES WITH IMPLEMENTATION OF CYCLE SYSTEM

Most of the national unions of students reported problems with the implementation of the three-cycle system. Only five out of 34 reflected that the implementation of the cycles has been proceeding without any or major problems.

The unions' responses demonstrate that the main problems with the implementation of cycles apply to the implementation of the first and second cycles. The unions from Austria, Hungary, Slovakia and Switzerland reported that the implementation of the cycles was rather formal, based on division of the »pre-Bologna« long programmes without thorough rebuilding of the new first and second cycles programmes.

Furthermore, the first cycle programmes still lack relevance in terms of practical orientation of the curricula (Spain, Hungary) and for the labour market in general (Czech Republic, Denmark, Italy, Romania). The introduction of three cycles affects the freedom of choice as well, such as in the Netherlands.

Some countries have still difficulties with the transition from »pre-Bologna« degree structure to the three-cycle system (Bosnia and Herzegovina) or with a lack of understanding of the three-cycles system in general (Bulgaria).

National unions of students in two countries—Estonia and Norway—reported problems arising from transition between cycles and the impact of new cycles on the quality of education.

PROGRESSION BETWEEN CYCLES

More than half of the national unions reported at least some problems in progression between cycles in general. In six countries diplomas from domestic institutions are sometimes not accepted by institutions within the same country and problems with recognition of foreign diplomas occur in 13 countries.

Eleven national unions consider there are problems in progression when students change the type of higher education institution and 19 unions perceive that the fact that students have to repeat courses or make some additional ECTS to be admitted to another cycle as a problem.

Only 15% of the unions did not identify any of the above-mentioned problems, while 47% identified more than two of them.

ECTS CREDITS—ARE THEY LINKED TO LEARNING OUTCOMES AND WORKLOAD?

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System was established 10 years before the Bologna process started as a tool for transfer of study achievements for the Erasmus/Socrates programme. During the course of Bologna reforms ECTS became a powerful tool not only for transfer, but also for accumulation of workload in the first and second cycle (and gradually for the third cycles as well) throughout European Higher Education Area. The ECTS Users' Guide from 2005 linked ECTS credits very strongly to the workload as a basis for their calculation, whereas the updated ECTS Users' Guide released in 2009 specified that »the formulation of learning outcomes is the basis for the estimation of workload and hence for credit allocation« (European Commission 2009). Learning outcomes are closely linked to implementation of qualifications frameworks and to the paradigm shift in the educational process through the change of the learning environment towards student-centred learning approach.

The implementation of the ECTS ensuring it is properly linked to workload, based on formulated learning outcomes of the programmes is a rather difficult issue. However, the state of play differs significantly from country to country. Without a common understanding of and increased efforts towards making to use ECTS properly, the variety of possible benefits of the ECTS implementation will be hindered or used only partially.
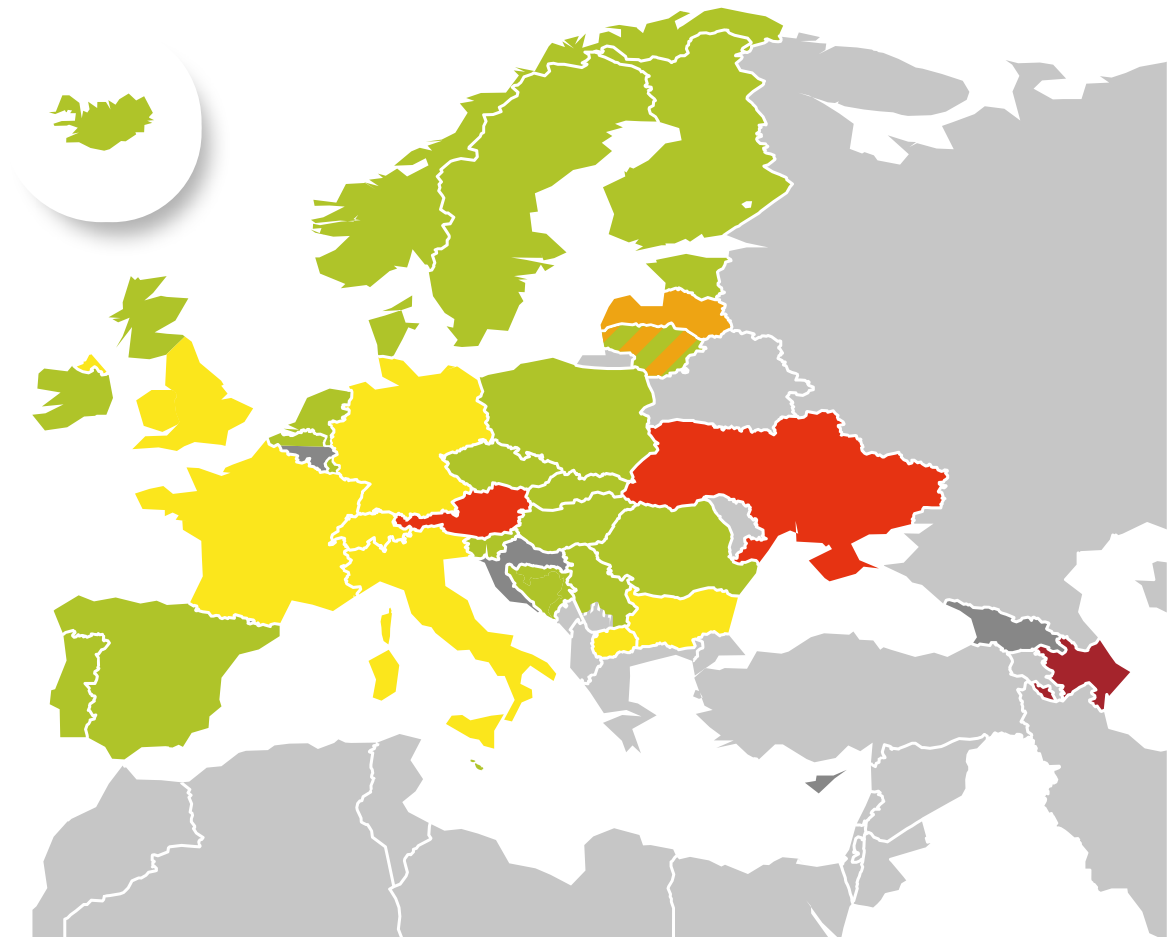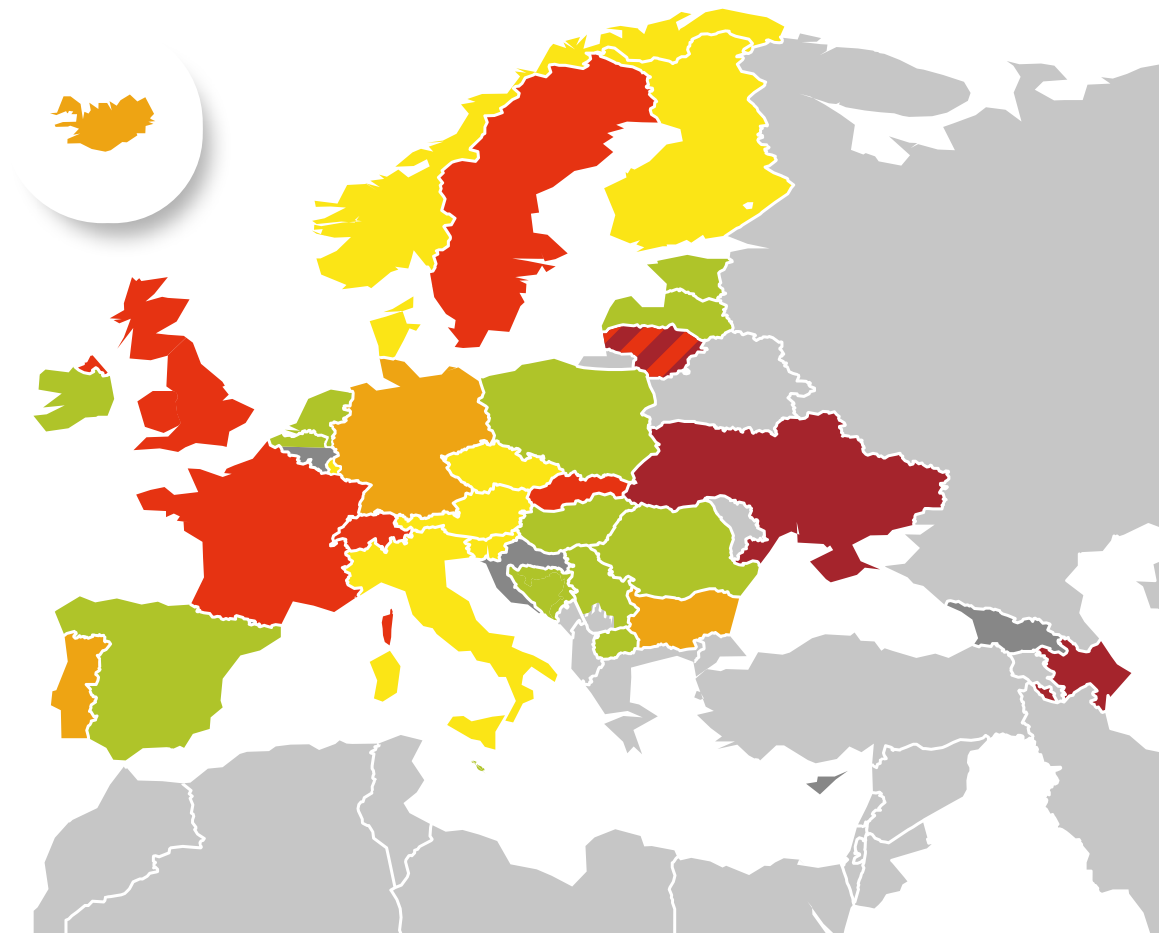
fig. 1   *ECTS and Learning outcomes: In my country, the allocation of ECTS does happen on the basis of an estimation of the workload*

- ● Not at all
- ● Hardly at all
- ● In about half of the Higher Education system
- ● To a large extent
- ● Completely throughout the Higher Education System

ECTS implementation in the national higher education systems

The implementation of ECTS (or compatible credit system) has been part of the Bologna tools since the very beginning of the Bologna Process therefore the level of ECTS implementation after 12 years should be very high. 77% of the national unions of students report that ECTS has been implemented completely or to a large extent in the national system. On the other hand, five unions reflect the level of ECTS implementation is very low or none.

ECTS credits based on estimation of workload

After 6 years of implementation, 63% of the unions are convinced that ECTS credits are allocated mostly on the basis of workload. Five national unions—or 16%—reported the allocation of the ECTS on the workload basis happens only in half of the system. More than 20% stated that the ECTS is, in most cases, not at all allocated on the basis of workload.

ECTS credits based on formulated learning outcomes

Learning outcomes as a basis of ECTS credits allocation was introduced by the updated ECTS Users' Guide in 2009 (European Commission 2009) and as such are a new issue in the Bologna Process. The national unions' opinions show that there is not yet a common approach to ECTS credits calculation within the EHEA.

Only 39% of 31 national unions reported that ECTS credits are based on learning outcomes within the large extent of the national higher education system. Another 20% state there is implementation in a half of the system, and more than 40% estimate that ECTS credits based on learning outcomes are implemented exceptionally or not at all. At the same time, 46% of 33 unions reported, that learning outcomes are not used in their countries, or only to limited extent.

Problems with regards to ECTS

Only four unions out of 33 reported that they had no problems with the ECTS credits in their countries. There are many problems connected with the allocation of credits based on the workload and/or expected learning outcomes.

Seven national unions of students (from Czech Republic, Hungary, Luxembourg, Portugal, Slovenia, Slovakia and Switzerland) reported that the allocation of ECTS credits with respect to the workload is arbitrary and rather intuitive. Another three unions—from Austria, Denmark and Spain—observed allocation of ECTS credits were based on inconsistent workloads. In some countries there it is perceived that decisions regarding credit allocations are made based on the power and influence of individual academic staff, rather than a transparent system. The national unions of students from Hungary and Romania stated that the allocation is based on the staff position or perceived importance of the subject rather then on a workload needed to achieve the course learning outcomes or objectives. According to the Hungarian union HÖOK, the allocation is based only on the amount of course hours.

The allocation of ECTS credits based on the workload needed in order to achieve the expected learning outcomes still remains a challenge according to more than a half of the unions. The Czech and Danish national unions of students reported a weak connection between the ECTS credits allocation and learning outcomes.

Furthermore, quality assurance processes regarding the ECTS implementation are not sufficient enough in several countries. The national unions of students in Denmark and Norway observed lack of evaluation processes with respect to ECTS credits allocation, while the Dutch and Polish unions pointed out that there is a lack of transparency and interaction between higher education institutions and students with regard to ECTS credits allocation.

fig. 2   ECTS and Learning outcomes: In my country, the allocation of ECTS does happen on the basis of the formulation of Learning Outcomes

- ● Not at all
- ● Hardly at all
- ● In about half of the Higher Education system
- ● To a large extent
- ● Completely throughout the Higher Education System
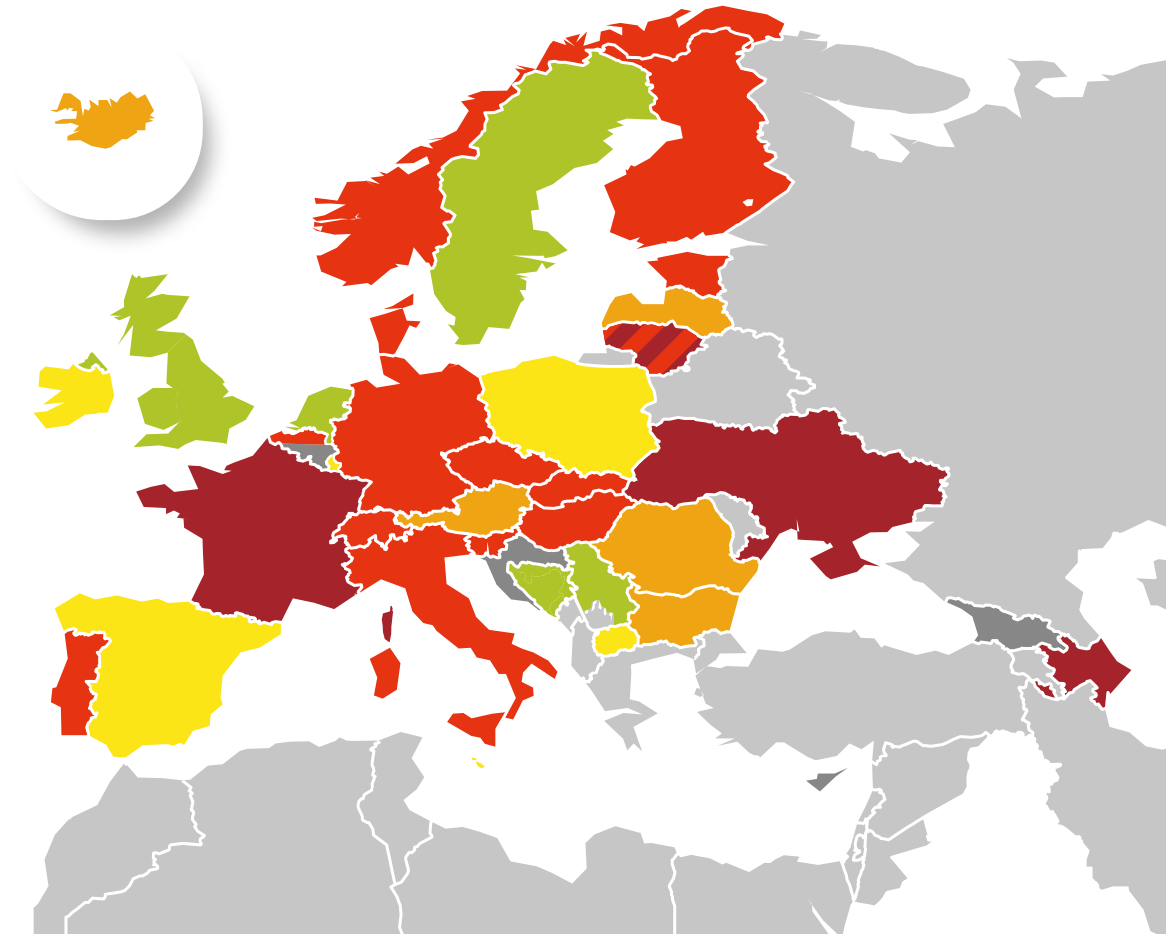
The implementation of ECTS in general is seen as a problematic issue in several countries—according to the Polish national union of students, PSRP, the ECTS system is misunderstood by the relevant stakeholders. The unions in Malta and Lithuania see the dissemination and promotion of the ECTS as a major problem.

AVAILABILITY OF INFORMATION ABOUT LEARNING OUTCOMES AND WORKLOAD

The availability of information on learning outcomes and workload as a basis for the allocation of ECTS is one of the most important features for a transparent higher education system. Out of 32 unions, nearly 60% consider that information as largely available or available with few exceptions. Nearly 10% estimated that there was availability in about half of their institutions. More than 31% national unions of students stated that the information about learning outcomes and workload is made available only by few institutions or not at all.

CURRICULA REFORMS

Out of 32 countries, 50% national systems have less than 50% of curricula modularised, and only 8% had modularisation to a certain extent. The remaining countries have modularised most or all of the curricula.

The following part is based on opinions of the national unions with regard to curricula reforms and impact of Bologna process on development and pace of these reforms.

Out of 32 unions 75% stated that Bologna Process led to curricula reforms to at least some extent. 41% feel strongly that this is a major issue and only 9% do not see as a major issue anymore. 25% of the unions consider the curricula reform as a national issue but not a major one.

Curricula reforms and the introduction of Bologna cycles were, among other things, focused on increasing flexibility. 40% of the national unions are strongly convinced that the Bologna Process made the curricula more flexible, whilst 28% do not agree, at least to some extent. Nearly one third of the unions do not have a firm opinion in this issue.

One of the ways to make the curricula more flexible and accessible is through modularisation. The link between the Bologna Process and modularisation seems to be rather ambiguous throughout the EHEA. According to 35% of the unions the Bologna Process clearly led to modularisation whilst another 35% stated the opposite.

The outcome of curricula reform is not always a positive one. More than 20% of the unions reported that the reform made it more difficult to work whilst studying. However, more than 57% of unions stated that this was not the case.

4.3 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Compared to Bologna with Student Eyes 2009 (ESU 2009), the progress with respect to removing obstacles associated with the implementation of the degree cycles system and ECTS seems to be minimal. A significant majority of national unions of students observed reform changes with respect to the curricula structure but the implementation of the cycles system in terms of progression between cycles and accessibility is still limited in most of the countries.

The situation is particularly ambiguous when it comes to the progress of reforms leading to more flexible learning paths, part time studies and implementation of learning outcomes as necessary tools for an inclusive and student-centred European Higher Education Area. The ECTS credits allocation based on the workload needed to achieve expressed learning outcomes is, according to the national unions of students, a common feature only in 40% of countries.

Despite significant changes and wide proliferation of the cycle system and ECTS throughout the EHEA, the implementation of these important and visible tools still suffers from the piecemeal implementation of the Bologna Process in many countries. The curricula reforms needed for proper implementation of first and second cycles are still considered to be rather superficial and the ECTS system still lacks transparency and coherence.

The unions' perception of the implementation of the third cycle shows persistent problems, particularly with respect to the status of Ph.D. candidates and their careers.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- National governments should restore the commitment to the proper and thorough implementation of ECTS. National reforms should encompass policies focusing on learning outcomes as a basis for proper ECTS credit allocation and take further steps to ensure a student-centred higher education system.

- The status of Ph.D. candidates throughout EHEA is still a precarious issue. Ph.D. candidates and early stage researchers in general do not have sufficient access to support services and are not being represented enough among other HE stakeholders. The national governments should establish or reinforce policies focusing on the improvement of the Ph.D. candidates' rights.

- In order to achieve a more accessible higher education system and more flexible learning paths, institutions and national governments should take initiatives to remove existing obstacles in terms of progression between the first and second cycles. This shall be done by strengthened focus on greater transparency and recognition of prior learning.

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5 STUDENT MOBILITY

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Mobility has been at the basis of the Bologna Process since its beginning, fostering mutual understanding and promoting an EHEA identity through facilitating knowledge sharing between individuals, higher education institutions, and member countries. Mobility has an immense value for all members of the EHEA due to its role in promoting wider awareness of European diversity, fostering the development of intercultural competences, disseminating knowledge and innovation, and making tolerance and peace the core values of European societies. However, is this ideal yet a reality?

Mobility of European students contributed to the internationalisation and modernisation of the EHEA. It can even be said that the mobility initiated through the Erasmus programme paved the way for the Bologna Process. Several ministerial communiqués have highlighted its position in the process by recognising »that mobility of students and staff among all participating countries remains one of the key objectives of the Bologna Process« (Communiqué 2005) and that »mobility of staff, students and graduates is one of the core elements of the Bologna Process, creating opportunities for personal growth, developing international cooperation between individuals and institutions, enhancing the quality of higher education and research, and giving substance to the European dimension« (Communiqué 2007).

In this chapter, we will aim to analyse whether any progress has been made on increasing the financial support to mobility, on achieving the full portability of grants and loans, and on removing the remaining obstacles to mobility. All are important in order to achieve the target of 20% mobile students by 2020. This chapter will also elaborate on the access and equality of opportunities to mobility and on the sufficiency of student support for mobility. Because of the link to mobility, attention is also given to the trends in the internationalisation of higher education.

5.2   MAIN FINDINGS

In 2009, the member states committed themselves to a concrete target: »In 2020, at least 20% of those graduating in the European Higher Education Area should have had a study or training period abroad« (Communiqué 2009). Until then, the commitments on mobility concentrated mainly on removing obstacles. The 20% target was meant to ensure that mobility truly takes place within the EHEA, providing an end goal. The importance and need to collect data on mobility was mentioned for the first time in Prague in 2001, and repeated again in 2009 in Leuven-Louvain-La Neuve (Communiqué 2001; 2009). Important and new aspects were agreed on and brought in the same year; flexible study paths and active information policies, full recognition of study achievements, study support and full portability of grants and loans, which are all necessary for the proper implementation of mobility. Mobility should also lead to a more balanced flow of incoming and outgoing students in the European Higher Education Area, and we aim for an improved participation from diverse student groups (Communiqué 2009). However, no binding targets were agreed on at this point, which may explain why so little progress has been made on all these areas since 2009.
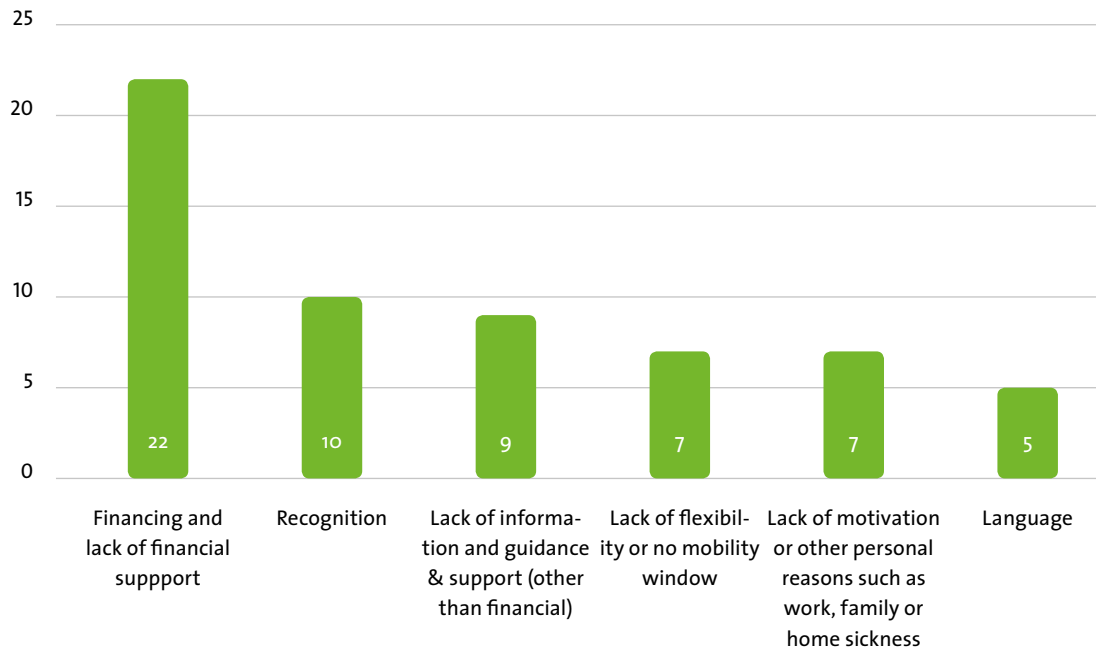
Main trends

Since 1987, 2.2 million students have been mobile through the Erasmus Programme. Each year, 200,000 students do part of their studies abroad through the Erasmus Programme. The number of free movers and degree mobility comes in addition to this; however, data for these groups of students are incomplete. In recent years, the mobility flows have become a central point of focus, with increasing emphasis on the competitiveness to attract students from outside the EU or EHEA. Therefore, inward mobility has traditionally received a higher priority than outward mobility. However, recent developments have caused some EU countries to pay more attention to balancing the mobility flows and it could be predicted that this trend is likely to gain importance in the future. Balancing mobility flows has been taken up by the BFUG working group on mobility in their 2020 EHEA strategy for learning mobility, which is to be adopted in 2012 by the Bucharest ministerial meeting.

A positive development is that the member countries have become increasingly willing to collect and monitor mobility data in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of the development and progress done on mobility. Particular to the year 2010 has been the opening up of the Erasmus programme to the Eastern Partnership countries as well as the start of the creation of the new Erasmus for All programme. This programme aims to replace the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission, putting all the mobility programmes under the same one. In order to gain a realistic picture of what needs to be developed still and where progress has taken place, it is necessary to take a closer look at the different barriers that do still exist (Commission 2011).

Progress and postponement since 2007

The largest obstacles to student mobility are still perceived to be financing, seen by 22 out of 25 unions as a major barrier. Recognition was also mentioned frequently by 10 unions, and lack of information, guidance, and other supportive measures by 9 unions. Flexibility through mobility windows were still seen as a problem by 7 unions, as well as lack of motivation or other personal reasons, such as work, family, or other attachment to the home country. Only 5 unions reported language barriers as a major obstacle.

Biggest obstacles for student mobility identified by student unions

Financing and lack of financial suppport: 22
Recognition: 10
Lack of information and guidance & support (other than financial): 9
Lack of flexibility or no mobility window: 7
Lack of motivation or other personal reasons such as work, family or home sickness: 7
Language: 5

Progress on improving administrative support and availability of information about opportunities to spend periods abroad has been intensive since 2007. Little progress has been made when it comes to the availability of language courses before and after departure, distribution of mobility opportunities among different groups, especially disabled students and certain nationalities of students, or recognition by the home institution of credits gained during study abroad. When it comes to removing bureaucratic obstacles to mobility, the progress has even been negative. Financial support seems to have increased in a few countries but decreased in others. When compared to the overall progress since 2007, in most cases the progress has slowed down.

The situation around the EHEA continues to be remarkably diverse when speaking about the level of commitment and progress to remove mobility obstacles. Therefore institutions along with the national level need to show more commitment to removing them. Hence a coherent and overarching European strategy for mobility, as is being proposed to adopt in the 2012 Ministerial Conference, needs to be used as a tool to remove the remaining barriers.

FINANCING: THE FOREMOST BARRIER TO MOBILITY

Since the beginning of the Bologna Process, the ministers have continuously reaffirmed their will and commitment on removing the remaining obstacles to student mobility. Particular attention has been given to the portability of grants and loans, as financing has remained the major barrier to mobility. It was specifically stated in the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve

Communiqué (2009) that if member countries are to reach the target of 20% mobile students by 2020, an urgent increased focus needs to be given to remove the remaining obstacles and to ensure the financial support for students. Erasmus represents the main mobility program, which has grown rapidly these recent years. Nevertheless, Erasmus students still represent a very small share of the total enrolment of less than 1% on average in Europe 32 region in 2008/2009 on an annual basis (Wächer et al. 2011).

The 20% benchmark seems to be quite ambitious, considering the fact that the level and forms of financing of student mobility across EHEA remain inadequate to cover the actual costs of studying or working abroad. Thus the financing available is not enough to meet the growing interest of students to be mobile.

Erasmus grant not sufficient

Indeed, numerous studies such as the CHEPS survey, Eurostudent and Erasmus Students Network Survey, confirm that financial constraints remain the most important obstacle to mobility and that ERASMUS is still accessible only to an elite of students that can afford to be mobile. According to CHEPS's survey results in 2010, Improving Participation in Erasmus, the data shows ERASMUS students tend to come from higher socioeconomic groups and that for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, financial constraints are the most important factor that restricts them from participating in ERASMUS. 57% of non-ERASMUS students say that studying abroad is too expensive to consider and 29% of students reject ERASMUS after consideration because the grant provided is insufficient to cover incurred costs (Vossensteyn et al. 2010). The survey of national unions of students for this edition of BWSE confirms this trend; the majority of unions affirmed that Erasmus grants are not sufficient to cover living costs for students; 10 countries out of 18 confirmed that the average of grants provided is not enough at all for students to study abroad.

Full portability of grants and loans not yet a reality

Perhaps the most considerable area of concern as reported by the majority of ESU member unions is the difficulties with the portability of grants and loans for all forms of mobility. Full cycle mobility to non-EU and non-EHEA countries stand out in particular. Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET2020) also confirms that very few countries report of having introduced portability of educational grants and loans (European Commission 2012).

We can observe from the Bologna with Student Eyes 2012 survey that unions confirm the tendency of loans being more portable then grants. Only unions from five countries, Belgium, Finland, Netherlands, Slovakia and Sweden, report having no problems with portability of grants and loans with any type of mobility. This is a definite contrast to a few countries where unions stated that the portability of grants and loans is not possible at all, such as in Romania and Lithuania. The picture seems slightly better according to the member union from the Czech Republic, even though Czech students continue to face major obstacles with portable grants and loans for full cycle mobility, as the majority of unions do.

As the map shows, states continue to hesitate in providing their students with fully portable grants and loans for degree mobility. This is also the background for the newly proposed master's degree mobility loan scheme, seeking to repair the lack of portability for degree mobility. The majority of ESU's member unions also indicated that the obstacles to portability precipitates new proposals like this and proves that the funding available to support mobile students on a national level is not sufficient. However, ESU and member unions have repeatedly warned against replacing mobility financing with more loans, fearing this trend can be harmful for the attractiveness of mobility and risk further increase in the inequality gap in mobility. Studies also underscore this, affirming that the deterrence factor in Erasmus participation is not the availability of student

fig. 5   *How portable are loans and grants for students? Outgoing students to EU/EHEA/World*

- ● Not possible
- ● Major obstacles exist
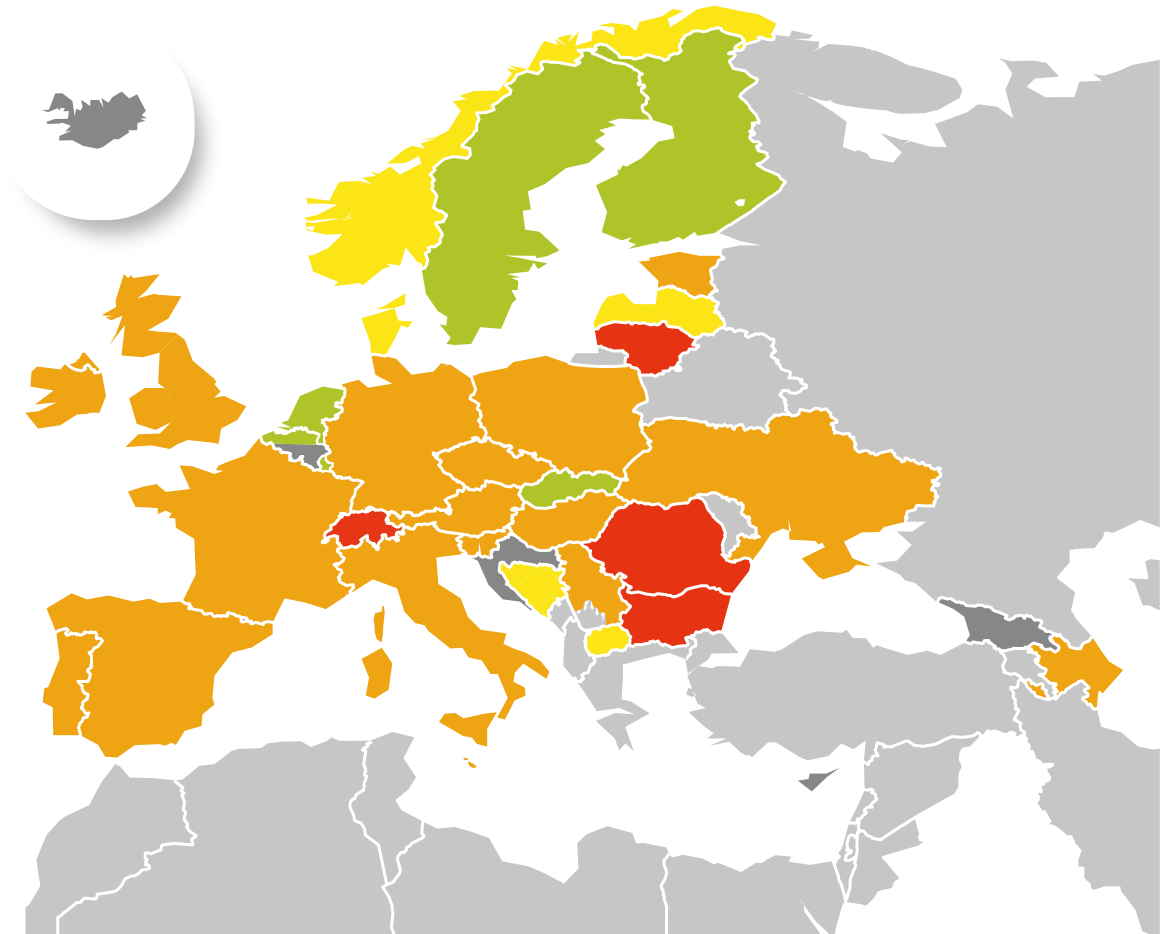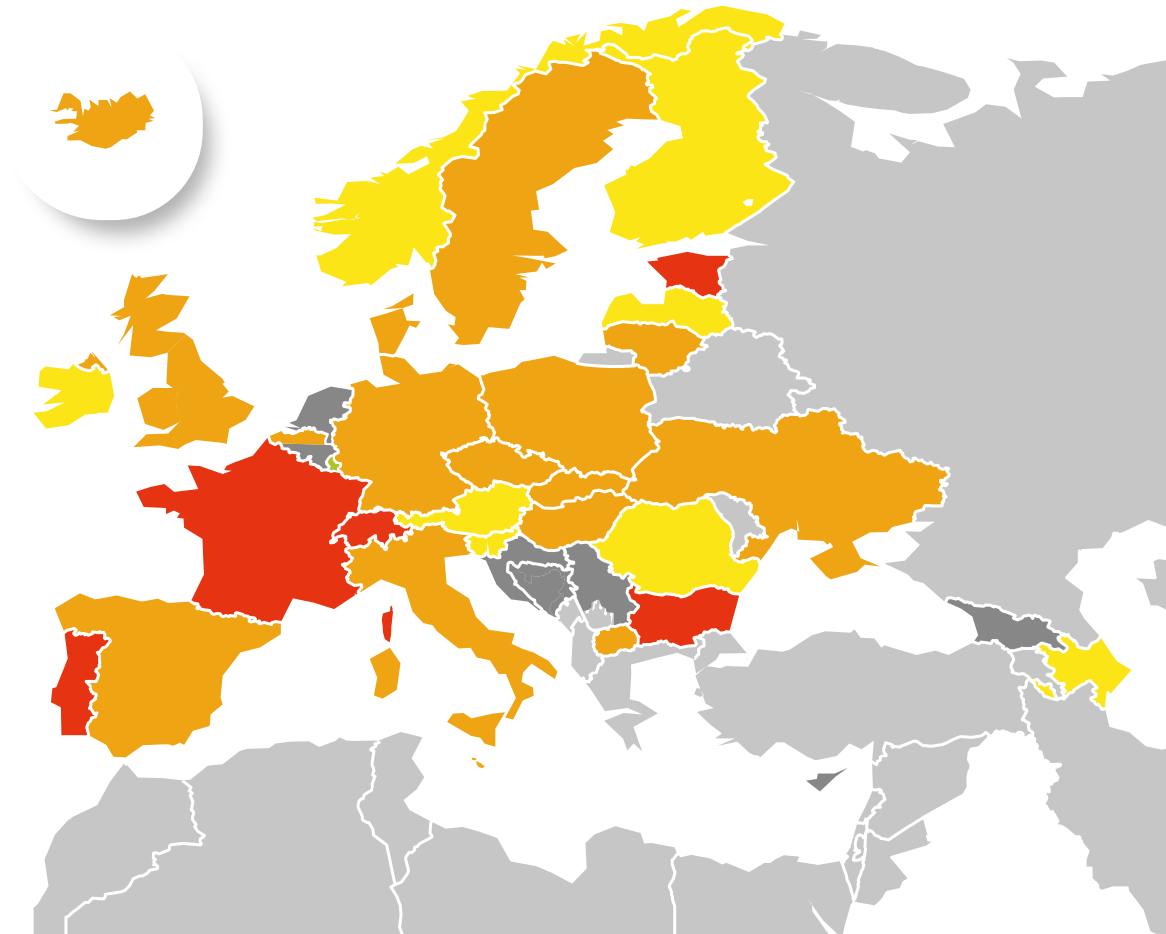- ● Minor obstacles
- ● Fully portable
- ● Not sure

- ● Many have problems.
- ● Some have problems
- ● Few have problems.
- ● None have problems.
- ● Not sure

loans, but rather the sensitivity of students from lower socioeconomic groups towards additional expenditures associated with a period of study abroad (Vossensteyn et al 2010).

Difficulties on meeting the living and study expenses

According to the 2010 ESN Survey, around 10% of the responding students lack funding to finance even basic necessities during their study period abroad. Of all respondents, 35% would not have gone abroad without financial support and 30% are not certain whether they would have gone abroad at all. In addition to the problems faced with the living costs, more than 90% of the respondents received an official grant for their studies abroad. But for 80% of the respondents, the grant covered less than 60% of the total expenses. For 30%, the amount did not even cover rent expenses. The rest of the expenses were most frequently covered by family support (80%) and by personal savings (51%). The grant amount affected the study destination for 25% of the respondents (ESN 2011).

The ESN study shows that the respondents are dissatisfied or entirely dissatisfied with the funding available for mobility. This trend might originate from different types of additional support for mobility. In this regard, it is clear that there is a need for coordinating the various types of funds available for mobility at European, regional, national, and institutional level; so that larger shares of the costs incurred are offset and any available funds are used in an effective manner.

When looking at the progress of the level of grants and loans for outgoing students, only unions from Azerbaijan and Belgium (Flanders) reported that the level of grants and loans available to students has improved a lot. For 11 of the unions, the level improved just a little; according to half of the unions, some progress has taken place in increasing the grants for outgoing students. Though only the member union from Italy reported that the level has decreased, 12 unions reported the level has remained the same since 2009. If compared to the progress reported in 2009, the level seems to have stagnated, as the majority of unions reported little or few progress to have taken place in the availability of grants and loans. It can be concluded that even if there are increases in the grants, they are not sufficient to make a difference and that the progress has deteriorated.

FURTHER OBSTACLES TO STUDENT MOBILITY

Financial obstacles are inherently difficult to isolate from non-financial barriers to mobility, as these are closely intertwined.

Lack of information and guidance for prospective mobile students

Better guidance and information can motivate students go abroad; however, limited knowledge about the added value and benefits of mobility is perceived to be a threat to further mobility growth. SFS from Sweden argued, »It's rather a question of not knowing about the possibility or that the will and motivation doesn't exist. The knowledge of the possibility and what you as a student earn on it need to increase«.

More than two thirds of the member unions reported improvement on the provision of information and guidance since 2009. However, providing better information about mobility opportunities and procedures will remain a challenge in the upcoming years since it is still perceived as a major barrier to mobility. The majority of the unions stated that even though information about support for mobility is available on national level, it is not sufficiently raising awareness to students directly on institutional and study programme level.

Administrative barriers

Administrative deterrents are making mobility even more complicated between EU and non-EU countries within the EHEA. This is especially true for students coming from outside EHEA. Several countries have started to improve the situation, with two thirds of the unions reporting a small improvement, but more has to be done in terms of removing visas and resident permits procedures, which are often too long and create unnecessary complications for students. USI from Ireland, points out that the »Irish immigration system is highly complex and student visas include many limitations for non-EU students, and particularly non-Europeans.« For incoming students, major progress has been made only in a very few countries in terms of removing bureaucratic obstacles, namely visas and residence permits. Eight unions report many incoming students facing such barriers. Unnecessary administrative burdens, such as prolonged processing time for mobility applications, discourage students going abroad and can negatively impact the experience of studying in foreign country.

Linguistic barriers

An important deterrence for studies in many European countries is that students lack the confidence to go abroad due to their lack of linguistic proficiency. Since language provision is of an institutional remit, we surveyed the extent to which the appropriate language courses are available before departing to participate in a mobility programme abroad. The progress in making language courses available has slowed when compared to 2009, with 11 unions claiming progress in 2009 and only 5 unions in 2011. Member unions from 7 countries reported that there are not enough language courses available to students, while 7 more claimed that the courses offered are not of adequate quality to prepare for studies abroad. Some unions also pointed out that language courses are not offered free of charge, which impacts the accessibility of learning languages necessary for the studies and going abroad.

Commitments from higher education institutions

Studies and student experience show that there are, in many cases, an institutional resistance to student mobility during degrees. The design of student support services and attitudes from professors and teaching staff is important in promoting mobility, but can act as gatekeepers if they have no interest in sending their students abroad. Especially the design of curricula and study programmes offer opportunities to stimulate mobility. In this context, introducing mobility windows in programmes have frequently been encouraged. Unfortunately, unions from seven countries— Azerbaijan, Finland, Germany, Italy, Portugal, and Romania— report deterioration in the flexibility of programmes and mobility windows.

ACCESS AND DIVERSITY OF THE MOBILE STUDENT POPULATION

In the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, the ministers committed to aim for an improved participation rate of mobility from diverse student groups (Communiqué 2009). This was done to ensure that particular attention would be paid to widening the access to mobility for students from diverse backgrounds, and therefore providing everyone with an equal opportunity. The obstacles a student may face in pursuing mobility vary depending on the individual, which is why it is necessary to include measures that target specific student groups.

Out of 32 unions that replied to the query if progress has taken place on promoting the policy line of improved participation, 10 unions reported that no progress has taken place since 2009. Fortunately, the majority (16 unions) have seen some progress, and the three unions from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Spain, and UK reported significant progress in their countries. The lack of an agreed upon target or benchmark may explain why some countries do not pay attention to the policy line, suggesting that setting a more concrete indicator for inclusiveness in mobility could be a potential task for the BFUG.

fig. 7 *Situation for students who have spent or who wish to spend a period abroad. Progress made in 2007-2009 and 2009-2011.*

Availability of funding for outward mobility
- 2011: 1, 11, 15, 1
- 2009: 13, 13, 6

Availability of language training before departure
- 2011: 3, 2, 20, 2, 1
- 2009: 3, 8, 20, 1

Bureaucratic obstacles to mobility, especially visas and residence permits
- 2011: 2, 6, 16, 2, 2
- 2009: 6, 16, 10, 1

Information available about opportunities to spend periods abroad
- 2011: 6, 15, 5, 1
- 2009: 10, 17, 4, 1

Administrative support and encouragement for outward mobility
- 2011: 21, 5
- 2009: 9, 16, 5, 2

Fairness of distribution of mobility opportunities among different groups and nationalities of students
- 2011: 1, 7, 14, 1, 1
- 2009: 3, 15, 14

Level of grants and loans available to students spending a period abroad
- 2011: 2, 11, 12, 1
- 2009: 9, 17, 7

Recognition by the home institution of credits gained during study abroad:
- 2011: 2, 7, 15, 2
- 2009: 6, 16, 7, 2

Flexibility of programmes and mobility windows
- 2011: 2, 6, 10, 6
- 2009: 7, 12, 8, 4, 1

Legend:
- ● Much better
- ● Little better
- ● About the same
- ● Little worse
- ● Much worse

Participation and widening access

Concrete measures are necessary to improve participation rate in mobility and widening access. Only 13 of the surveyed unions claimed that new measures have been put in place since 2009. Improved grants or financing of mobility was the most frequent course of action, as well as a wider selection of mobility opportunities and more support in terms of information and guidance. CREUP from Spain responded, »the number of grants is increasing and also number of vacant places so that all students get the opportunity to study for some time abroad.«

Financial constraints to mobility are not surprisingly perceived as the number one threat to improving accessibility in the future, including increasing tuition fees, insufficient financial support, and austerity driven by the economic crisis. Several unions also pointed to the trend of replacing grants with loans, undercutting accessibility to mobility. These challenges should be addressed at institutional level as well as through reinforcing the EU mobility programmes. Counterweighting the student support from national level will likely become increasingly important due to the crisis.

CURRENT GLOBAL AND EUROPEAN TRENDS

Need for internationalisation strategies

In the Bologna With Student Eyes 2009, ESU recommended that in order to ensure an increased and more balanced inward and outward flow of mobile students, a European strategy for mobility is needed, which would link the European benchmark to national targets and actions (ESU 2009). The BFUG has been working on developing this during the last three years, and the Bucharest ministerial conference is now expected to approve an EHEA Mobility Strategy.

To get an idea of whether internationalisation strategies are bound to make an impact, unions were asked whether they thought enough financing had been allocated to achieve the targets of the strategies in the national budget. The answer was negative in 100% of responses. In the case of institutional budgets, the answer was negative in 80% of responses. Only one union replied that there are enough resources allocated.

When asked about the challenges of meeting the targets set in the strategies, most unions chose financing, while institutions' commitment and willingness to take up on the implementation came out as a second most frequent answer. Specifying the problems, defining terms, and finding correct ways to benchmark the achieved results set in the strategies were also mentioned as challenges standing in the way of a functioning strategy. Without enough financing allocated for the different tasks and goals related to mobility, both by governments and higher education institutions themselves, it becomes evident that reaching the Bologna Process action lines on mobility is still far from guaranteed.

Imbalanced mobility

It is obvious that between the 47 countries of the EHEA there are economic, cultural, social, lingual, educational, political, and demographic differences. These differences influence the mobility flows around the EHEA. If we have a close look at students' mobility from a quantitative point of view, we can easily recognise that there is an apparent imbalance in the mobility flows within the EHEA countries as well as between the EU and the non-EU countries in the EHEA and the rest of the world.

Numerous studies on mobility flows conducted by several research institutions such as Eurostudent, Eurostat, DAAD, and OECD give us a picture on the overall situation in the EHEA. The results show the students' tendency to move from the east to the west and from the south to the north. In 2008, Eurostat data showed that 199,984 students moved from east to west for a study period and only 32,133 of them from west to east. 160,225 students moved from south to north for studies and only

18,500 vice versa (Dalferth 2008). A limited number of countries and institutions attract most of the mobile students, with certain countries mainly sending out students.

The reasons and implications of imbalanced mobility cannot be analysed without taking into consideration the noticeable variations in the mobility flows per country, institution, and study field. In the latter years, there have been several cases of feared brain drain caused by imbalanced mobility flows. Both great numbers of incoming degree students combined with high return rates upon graduation (Austria, Belgium, Hungary) leave few qualified workers behind in the host country, as well as general depletion of young people studying and seeking jobs in other countries, has sparked debates about reintroducing restrictions. The threats of brain drain and imbalance of costs and responsibilities should be seriously discussed in the Bologna Process. Unilateral alternatives to tackling these challenges produce a very real risk of undoing important progress made in the last decade.

High tuition fees, poor quality of studies, lack of availability of a study field, or the restricted access to higher education together with the socioeconomic situation might influence the decision of students to pursue their degree abroad. In recent years, several countries have increased or introduced tuition fees for non-EU/EEA students, notably Sweden and Finland. This type of discrimination can both be motivated by intentions to limit access to studies for international students or gain incomes from capitalisation of higher education. This trend is unfortunately moving towards a globally oriented market system, where students become consumers, instead of promoting mutual academic and cultural exchange.

Discussions or attempts to try and solve the issues of who should pay for the education of foreign students in a given country have become more common and is likely to intensify as the share of mobility climbs further. Different solutions have been suggested, including building a mobility fund on the European level, guaranteeing students' rights through a mobility treaty, enhancing the clarity of legal rights for students through EU legislation, or schemes for transfer of fees and funding, such as voucher systems, a Bagwati-tax, or contingent student loans (Gérard 2011). In any case, there is a clear demand for a common solution that supports mobility and the EHEA construction. This should be solved through the Bologna cooperation, preferably before the problem escalates, forcing the EHEA to take steps backwards.

Commitment to balancing the mobility flows

In 2009, the issue of balanced mobility received attention in the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué: »Mobility should also lead to a more balanced flow of incoming and outgoing students across the European Higher Education Area« (Communiqué 2009). In the minority of countries where national internationalisation strategies are in place, member unions reported that only five of these address balancing of mobility flows. This suggests there is a great need to address balancing mobility on a strategic level in the upcoming years. It is also important to highlight the deficits in data availability on movements of students between non-EU countries and how they affect the picture. Enlightening the EHEA mobility patterns is a concrete step towards better balance.

5.3   CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

A common policy or a common EHEA fund for mobility should be considered in order to ensure equal and free movement to study in a foreign country within the EHEA and to solve the question of responsibility of financing the different types and flows of mobility. Until a Bologna level financial support system has been agreed on, the attainment of an EHEA level mobility target of 20% mobile students is not realistic.

The role of the different types of mobility such as intensive courses, virtual mobility, the experiences of international students, and mobility periods of teachers and students play an important part in creating an international environment at home institutions. Using these possibilities should be developed and taken into account, as the potential is immense.

The quality of mobility periods should be a point of focus in terms of enhancing the recognition of its benefits and added value to the work environment and educational pathways. Often mobility has been considered by higher education institutions as the individual responsibility of students and staff, but they have been underestimating the impact of mobility in enhancing the quality of higher education as well.

As a prerequisite for mobility and internationality in general, language proficiency and the quality of teaching should receive more attention in the future, starting from primary and secondary education. This would provide more possibilities at higher education level and thus eliminate a barrier by the time mobility becomes relevant.

It is crucial to state that the main principles for any kind of mobility cooperation within the EHEA and non-EHEA countries should be based on partnerships with respect to solidarity and reciprocity in order to find an acceptable solution for all sides. A major point of focus should be the equal treatment of non-EU students in the EHEA when it comes to providing students services such as accommodation, catering and in addition facilitating states regulations procedures for visa, resident cards, et cetera.

5.4   CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Mobility has grown from a simple idea in which students go abroad to a complex issue, where social, economic, financial, and cultural issues have to be considered. After more than 10 years of mobility focus within the Bologna Process, mobility is still mainly available to students from stable or privileged socioeconomic background, with little progress being made on widening the participation of diverse student groups.

Financial constraints remain the main burden for the majority of students to be mobile and for institutions to properly implement their internationalisation or mobility strategies. The imbalanced mobility flows seem to be increasing and causing disputes over financing policies.

Progress in removing obstacles seems to have lost speed since 2009, with the most progress taking place in removing administrative barriers. A realistic picture based on reliable data, which can be easily compared and evaluated by each stakeholder, is still missing.

The following recommendations should be considered:

- Commitment to designing and implementing internationalisation strategies: Institutions and national governments need to commit to fulfilling the policy lines and targets that have been set up in the Bologna Framework. In order to do this, concrete measures need to be implemented to remove remaining obstacles to mobility, widen participation, ensure flexible mobility windows, and solve issues in the form of national action plans or internationalisation strategies, with adequate financing allocated to implement the strategies.

- Portability of grants and loans: Full support for mobility needs to be achieved through making grants and loans fully portable. A target of having fully portable grants and loans should be set up by 2015 as well as the definition of what it means and whom the portability concerns.

- Targeted and increased Erasmus grants: The Erasmus grants must be increased to meet the living expenses of the destination country and to allow for any student irrelevant of their background to be mobile. The grants should therefore be adapted to the living costs of each country that is part of the Erasmus Programme. Financing remains the primary barrier to mobility and students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to be mobile than students from advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Targeting stronger support to underrepresented students should be enforced in the next cycle of the programme.

- Regional imbalances within the EHEA must be reconciled by the BFUG: In order for a truly equal EHEA to be achieved, the regional imbalances and inequalities in mobility opportunities and flows must be reconciled, with the BFUG making an initiative and leading the discussion on the topic as balancing mobility plays a key role in the current mobility discussions. Numerous clauses and quotas for inbound and outbound students should deserve governments' attention as they present obstacles to mobility. Higher education institutions with low numbers of incoming or outgoing students should invest in the number of international partnerships and exchange agreements as well as on their promotion.

○ Mobility treaty: The Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué set an ambitious benchmark of 20% mobility by 2020. However, long-term discussions should not be shelved while this is in focus. Financing and students' rights of mobility within the EHEA post-2020 should be explored. In order to reach a true free movement and academics within the EHEA, a mobility treaty should be developed. This should seek to guarantee equal and fair rights for mobile students, entail a common mobility financing policy, ensuring balanced mobility streams and overcoming remaining recognition and information obstacles.

○ Measures for widening participation: In order to make mobility a reality for all the students who wish to be mobile and meet the 20% mobility target, special attention must be paid by higher education institutions to removing the barriers for students with disabilities, students with families, students that come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, and students from fields of studies where windows are not developed for easy access to mobility.

○ Up to date with the data collection: Data collection and analysis of all types of mobility has to be done thoroughly and systematically, in order to make the progress of mobility evident across the EHEA and understand the trends and needs in mobility as well as be able to make evidence based policy.

○ Promote the added value of mobility: In order for mobility to fulfil its mission as an instigator of social tolerance and global active citizenship by building a knowledge network within the EHEA and providing new ways of learning and quality enhancement of the academic environment, the academic and cultural benefits of students' mobility through improving the data on it needs to be recognised.

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6 FINANCING OF HIGHER EDUCATION

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The term austerity didn't enter Europeans' everyday language until recently. However national governments claim it's here to stay, not least due to the ongoing economic crisis and not least when it comes to Higher Education (HE). The most prominent theme regarding HE financing over the past two to three years is that of contradiction: a contradiction between ministerial commitments at European level and HE funding allocations at national level, between the call for improved participation in mobility schemes and the reality of financing, or lack thereof, as the key barrier to mobility, and ultimately between the stated view of HE as a public good and public responsibility, equally accessible to all—regardless of socioeconomic background—and increased cost sharing combined with cuts to public funding.

Although the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was launched in 2010, implementation of critical Bologna Process reforms remains piecemeal at best. Many of the observations from Bologna at the Finish Line (ESU 2010) are still relevant, marking a regressive or at best stagnant situation regarding the financing of higher education. Funding for implementation of reforms is vital if all action lines are to be met effectively for the realisation of a truly harmonised EHEA. Funding of higher education must therefore be increased, not cut, despite the unfavourable economic conditions. There is an urgent need to go back to the basics: to recognise the importance of fair, inclusive HE systems that are based on academic ability, not ability to pay, as those excluded are most often from the lowest socioeconomic groups of our societies. Funding systems must be redesigned not only to cater for diversity of institutional missions and deliver unmet ministerial commitments, but also to avoid compounding regressive recent trends.

6.2   KEY FINDINGS

The first part of this section is dedicated to the presentation of key commitments made through Bologna Ministerial Communiqués as well as effects of the economic crisis on funding of higher education, followed by a discussion of the recent trends in higher education financing.

BOLOGNA, HIGHER EDUCATION FINANCING AND THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

Commitments in the Bologna Process
There are varying degrees of emphasis on the view of HE as a public good across Bologna Ministerial Communiqués. However, every communiqué from Prague (2001) to Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve (2009)—apart from London (2007)—and the Budapest-Vienna Declaration on the EHEA (2010) affirm the view of HE as a public good and public responsibility. Beyond general statements of HE as a public good, financing is often linked with the social dimension and mobility, both implicitly and explicitly. As mobility and the social dimension are discussed comprehensively in their respective chapters, this chapter focuses on their facets related to funding. Table 1 summarises the key commitments of the various in the Communiques regards to financing.

table 1   Key general commitments to the view of HE as a public good and HE financing for mobility and the social dimension across the Bologna Ministerial Communiqués.

| Communiqué | Commitment | | |
	Public good & responsibility	Social Dimension	Mobility
Prague 2001	HE is a public good and will remain a public responsibility (Para. 5)	Accounting for the Social Dimension (SD) in the Bologna Process, as highlighted by students (Para. 14)	Removal of barriers to free movement of students and academic as well as administrative staff (Para. 9)
Berlin 2003	HE as a public good and public responsibility, the context of the Social Dimension (Preamble, Para. 2)	Appropriate study and living conditions for students to successfully complete their studies within an appropriate time period, without obstacles related to their socio-economic background (Higher Education Institutions and students, Para. 5)	Removal of all obstacles to mobility (Promotion of mobility, Para. 2)

| Communiqué | Commitment | | |
	Public good & responsibility	Social Dimension	Mobility
Bergen 2005	HE as a public responsibility with a need for sustainable funding of institutions (Section V, Para. 1)	The Social Dimension as specific measures to support students from disadvantaged groups on financial matters while providing them with appropriate guidance in order to widen access to HE (Section III, Para. 3)	Intensification of efforts to lift obstacles to mobility (Section III, Para. 4)
London 2007	An EHEA based on institutional autonomy, academic freedom, equal opportunities and democratic principles (Para 1.3) Importance of strong, diverse, adequately funded, autonomous and accountable institutions (Para 1.5)	Concentrating efforts on removing barriers to access and progression between cycles (Para 2.4) The student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations. Students to be able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their socioeconomic background (Para. 2.18)	Some progress made but challenges remain. Issues relating to immigration, recognition, insufficient financial incentives and inflexible pension arrangements as key obstacles to mobility (Para 2.3)
Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve 2009	Public investment in HE as an utmost priority,as it has a key role to play in meeting the challenges faced due to the global financial crisis and to promote cultural and social development (Para. 3) Pledge full commitment to EHEA goals where HE is a public responsibility and institutions have the necessary resources to continue fulfilling their range of purposes (Para. 4) Public funding remains the key priority in guaranteed equitable access but diversified funding sources and methods should be investigated (Para. 23)	The student body within higher education should reflect the diversity of Europe's populations. Widening access to HE by targeting students from under-represented groups and providing adequate conditions for the completion of their studies. Removing all barriers to study, and creating the appropriate economic conditions for students. (Para. 9)	By 2020, 20% of EHEA graduates to have experienced study or training period abroad (Para. 18) Improved participation rate in mobility from diverse student groups (Para. 19)

Communiqué	Public good & responsibility	Commitment Social Dimension	Mobility
Budapest-Vienna Declaration 2010	HE is a public responsibility and notwithstanding the difficult economic times, institutions should have the necessary resources within a framework established and overseen by public authorities. HE is a major driver for social and economic development and innovation in an increasingly knowledge-driven world. Efforts on the social dimension will be increased to provide equal opportunities to quality education, specifically targeting under-represented groups. (Para. 11)		

The following brief conclusions can be drawn from Table 1:

- Ministers consider HE a public good and a public responsibility. Public investment must continue in spite of economic crises and HEIs must be financially sustainable;

- Individuals should be able to access HE regardless of socioeconomic background. The demographic composition of students in HE should reflect the demographic diversity of populations across Europe;

- 20% of EHEA graduates should have undertaken a period of work or study abroad by 2020. Participation in mobility schemes should be improved by removing all barriers, including financial ones.

Have concrete measures been implemented consistently across the EHEA to ensure the above aims and priorities are realised? In short, is financing of HE fit for purpose? The rest of this section will seek to answer this question based on recent data and trends.

Higher Education financing and the economic crisis
When asked about the effects of the global financial crisis on financing of Higher Education, 16 national unions reported negative trends with decreasing funds. Nine unions observed no significant influence while three observed positive effects with increased investments.

The European University Association, EUA, reports that several countries including Norway, Germany and Finland have upheld their commitments to or increased HE funding despite the ongoing economic crisis. However, some form of cuts, ranging from indirect or moderate to major cuts have been realised in the vast majority of countries, most notably in Latvia, Italy, and the UK. Figure 4 shows the effects of the economic crisis on HE budgets across Europe as of June 2011 (EUA 2011).

Where Higher Education financing is maintained or increased, this is often achieved through stimulus packages that include support for HE, despite adverse economic conditions (Crosier et al. 2011). This, however, appears to be the exception, not the rule, and while it is commendable good practice, such financing should be invested in ensuring key objective, including targets relating to mobility and the social dimensions are met.

The European Commission suggested that 2% of GDP was required by 2010 in order to ensure modernised higher education systems reach the targets of the Bologna Process (European Commission 2011a). In 2005, 1.1% of GDP was allocated to higher education in the median Bologna country, rising to 1.14% of GDP at EU-27 level as of 2008 (Eurostat/Eurostudent 2009). Noting that most countries have seen some form of budget cuts to higher education as described above, the picture

fig. 8   *What effect did the global financial crisis have on financing of higher education in your country?*

- ● Negative, the budgets in higher education institutions have been reduced.
- ● No significant difference
- ● Positive, more investments have been made into higher education institutions.
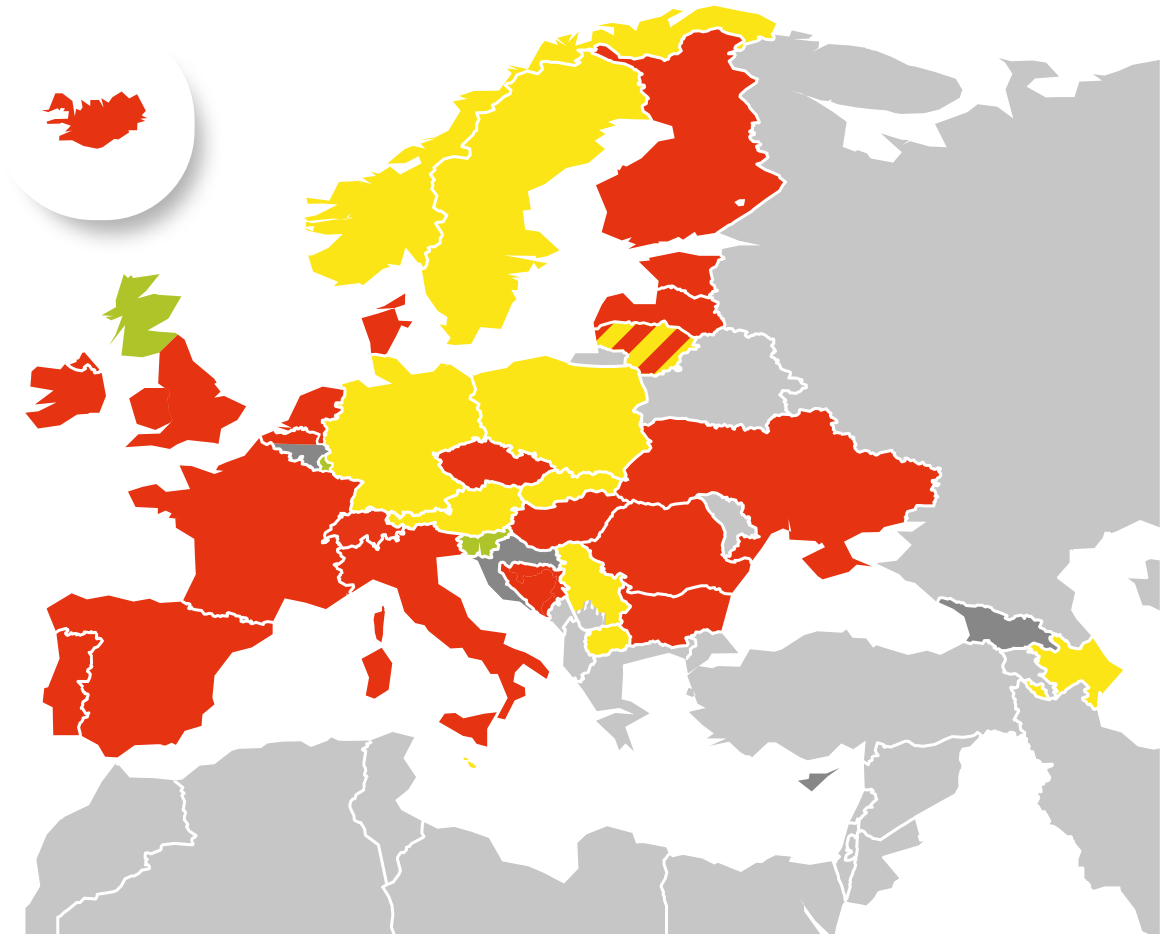
Legend:
- Major cuts (>10%)
- Substantial cuts (5–10%)
- Indirect/moderate cuts (<5%)
- Previous commitments discarded
- Commitments upheld/increased funding
- No information available

Ireland
2011:   -7%
2009:   -9,4%

Netherland
2009:   -10%

Latvia
2010:   -18%
2009:   -48%

Germany
until 2015:
+800 millionen €

France
2011: +4.7 billion €

Italy
by 2013   -20%

Greece
2011:   -35%
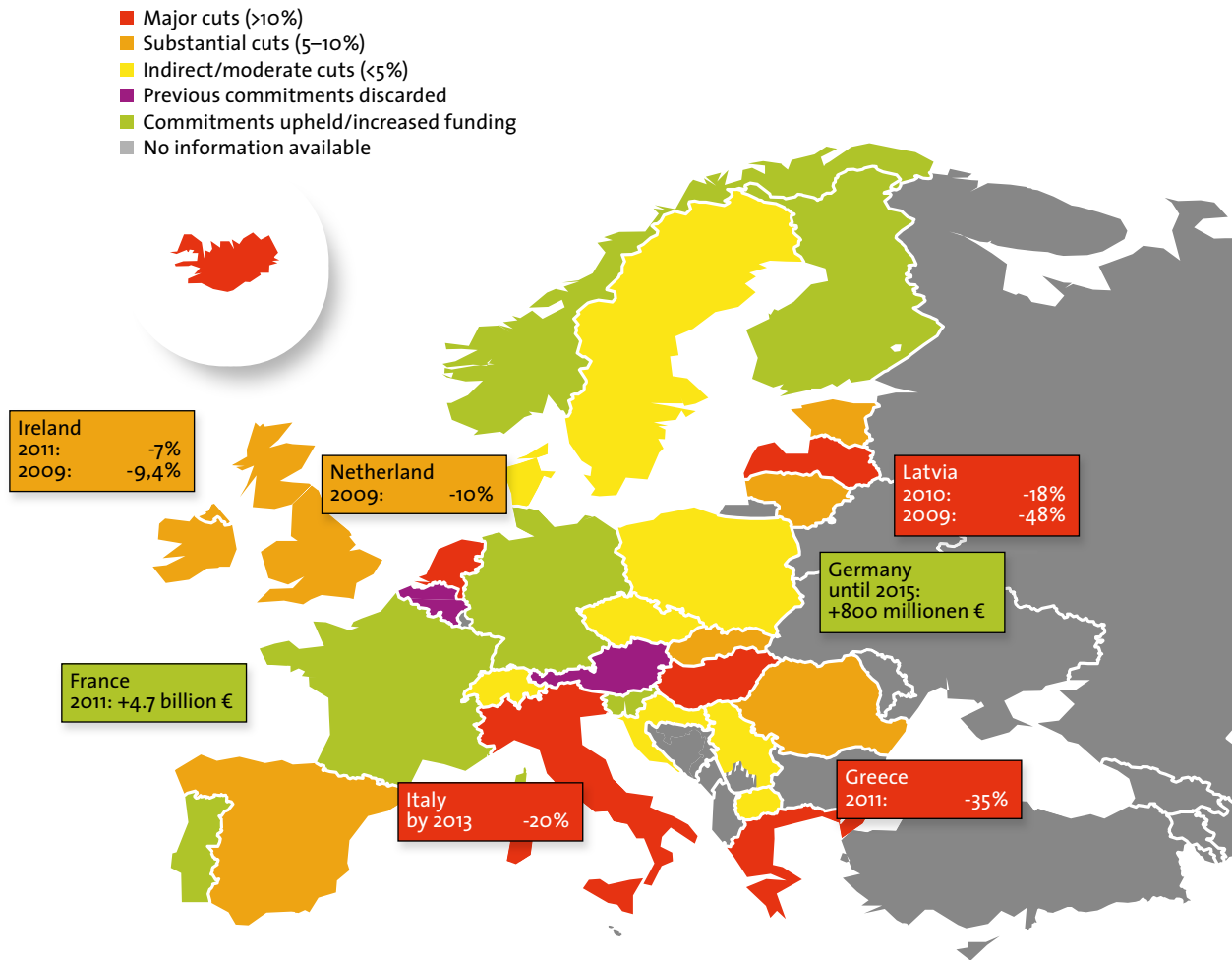
is unlikely to have improved drastically, if at all, since 2008. The consequence of such a disparity between targets and reality could result in a setback in the implementation of Bologna measures across the board. This will range from impacts on social dimension and mobility to students and educational quality, ultimately jeopardising the competitiveness of the European Higher Education Area.

Massification of higher education

The massification of HE is a prominent trend; half of the Bologna countries have seen student populations increase by more than 10% between 2003/04 and 2008/09 (Eurostat/Eurostudent 2009). Additionally, the headline target in the Europe 2020 Strategy of 40% tertiary educational attainment for individuals aged 30–34 by 2020 is likely to drive a further hike in student numbers. This leads to a widening funding gap when combined with cuts to HE budgets such as those outlined previously, and is likely to result in decreasing expenditure and resources per student, possibly leading to negative knock-on effects on quality. National unions of students also observe a widening funding gap when asked about anticipated trends over the next few years; LSVb (Netherlands) claims, »although no nominal cuts are being made, the available capital per student will continue to decrease due to the increasing number of students«.

Eurydice reports that investment in HE failed to keep pace with participation trends even prior to the economic crisis, with funding as a percentage of GDP remaining stagnant despite rapidly increasing participation (Crosier et al. 2011). This widening in the funding gap is a dangerous trend, as widening access to HE is unlikely to be successful unless accompanied by additional financial investments. In fact, Eurydice highlights the fact that increasing student numbers do not necessarily imply that HE systems are becoming more socially inclusive (Crosier et al.2011).

Despite increases in many countries, a decrease in the student population is also observed in some countries (Eurostat & Eurostudent 2011). Even where this trend is a result of changing population demographics, it should not impact on social mobility and widening participation. When national unions of students were asked to comment on the participation rates in their HE systems and whether they believed participation was »too high«, »about right«, »too low«, or they were »uncertain«, the largest number of respondents felt participation was »too low« (McVitty forthcoming). Some qualitative comments included:

> »It is not simply the number of people in higher education we are concerned with, it is the socioeconomic background that we should be more concerned with.«

> »[Participation is] Ok for the average student, but still problematic for some socioeconomic groups in society. Even with extra financial support and additional measures in HEIs, the percentage of students from these equity groups stays far below the average.«

This again points towards the social dimension, which will be discussed further on.

Cost sharing and diversified income streams

Most European countries are using some form of cost sharing to finance higher educational costs (ESU forthcoming). In countries where public spending per full-time student is higher there is generally a weaker dependence on private contributions, whereas lower public expenditure per student is often accompanied by a higher dependence on income from private contributions (ibid.). Furthermore, trends over the past ten years indicate that HEI income from private sources is gradually increasing (Crosier et. al 2012).

This is consistent with observations from the majority of national unions of students. When asked about expected future trends in higher education policy, most ESU members anticipate public funding of HEIs to be decreased, with institutions

- Significantly increased (10% or more)
- Substantially increased (5-10%)
- Minor increase (up to 5%) or increased for smaller groups of students.
- No change or no tuition fees.
- Decrease in tuition fees.
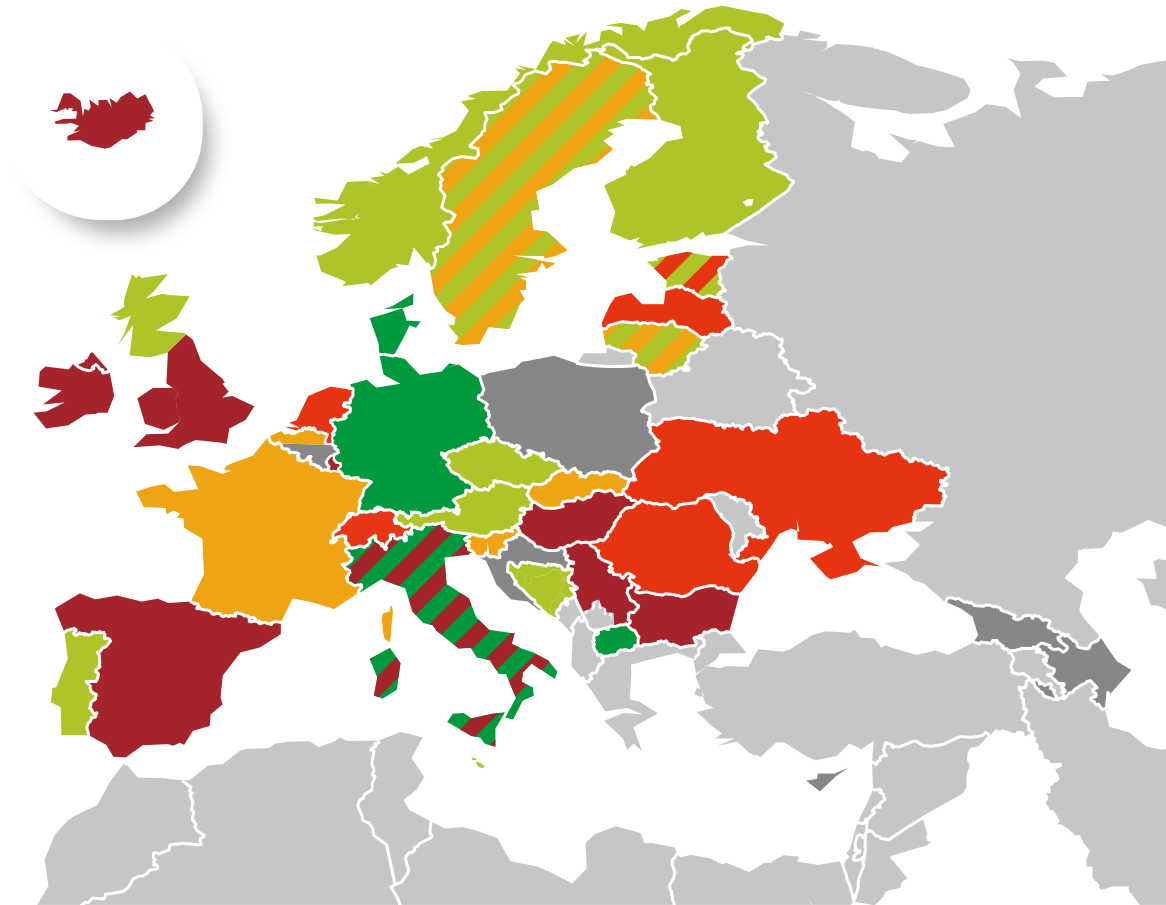
The map shows development of student fees relative to 2009 levels in each country, meaning that rates of increase do not refer to increase in absolute numbers.

having to compensate for the resulting funding gap through diversification. Figure 6 illustrates the situation with regards to the development of student fees in the period from 2009–2012; some level of increase is reported in the majority of countries. ANOSR (Romania) notes increasing tuition fees accompanied by the introduction of partial grants by the state, »universities may chose to either fully finance a set number of students or to double student numbers, providing only half the grant.« CREUP (Spain) reports drastic increases in tuition fees as well as increased co-funding by students and private companies. LUS (Luxembourg) anticipates »increasing tuition fees, more student debt.« Although the situation observed by FZS (Germany) is somewhat different, the outlook is alarming:

> »In most Länder (German states) tuition fees have been abolished with almost all political parties clearly ambitious that this remains the case, as students are an important electoral group. But at the same time some Länder have already introduced budget cuts, forcing HEIs to find new financial sources.«

The most extreme situation can be observed in the UK. As of 2012, many students in the first cycle will be charged tuition of over €10.000 a year, with NUS UK reporting, »There is now virtually no public funding for teaching or research in the arts and humanities, a trend set to continue.«

Where there are strong advocates of tuition fees for international (non-EU) students or where such fees already exist but there is no fee for home students or EU citizens, the debate for extending fees to all students is legitimised. This is yet another worrying trend. In Sweden, where tuition fees for international students were recently introduced, SFS (Sweden) remarks, »Well, probably the discussion about tuition fees for all students will start.« SYL and SAMOK (Finland) also indicate the fees debate is alive and further funding diversification is expected:

> »The funding model is going to focus on effectiveness, which is called >quality< nowadays. The debate over tuition fees will continue, especially for the overseas students but increasing pressure is put into debates of whether or not Finnish and European students should also pay fees. Diversification of funding sources and education export will continue and expand.«

From an institutional perspective, EUA finds that most HEIs use cost sharing, though relying predominately on public funds, which on average constitute just below three-fourths of their overall income (Estermann & Pruvot 2011). However, nearly 50% of EUA members anticipate an increase in the number of income sources in the near future. Additionally, over 50% expect public funding for teaching to decrease. Universities reported their second largest income source as student contributions, constituting just under 10% of overall income on average. (ibid.)

The anticipated further diversification of funding should not merely translate into increased student contributions as an easy solution to plug the funding gap, although this appears to be the case. Students are consequently transformed from active participants in the academic community to passive consumers of education. Diversified funding should not be synonymous with increasing fees, not least due to the fact that students often have to cover more than just direct educational costs including travel and accommodation, especially when studying away from home.

Student support and maintenance
In addition to direct educational costs in the form of fees, students studying away from home have to cover indirect costs including rent, bills, subsistence, and transportation as well as sometimes having to cover direct costs not included in the original fees, or >hidden costs< such as books, printing, and study supplies. Although not the focus of this chapter, it is important to acknowledge that the existence of such costs may constitute barriers in themselves.

Although some may argue publicly available loans are a solution and exist in many countries, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds likely to be more debt-averse than others, especially in the current climate where unemployment is soaring and prospects are bleak. Youth unemployment rates across the EU alone averaged above 20% at the end of 2011 and at the beginning of 2012 exceeded 50% in some cases such as Spain (Eurostat 2011; Telegraph 2012).

Performance-based funding
European countries are increasingly introducing performance-based funding models in higher education due to increasing demand for effectiveness and efficiency. The European Commission has also introduced proposals to link funding with performance (European Commission 2006; 2011b).

Performance-based funding models are generally based on certain outputs, usually with a guaranteed base funding and a certain percentage that depends on the performance of the institution. While in some cases this can be considered as a step forward, further analysis of the effects should be foreseen. It cannot be uncritically claimed that performance-based funding brings progress or indeed stimulates institutions to perform better.

National Unions of Students also identify performance-based funding as a trend. SKRVŠ (Czech Republic) notes, »decreased public funding, attempts to introduce tuition fees, [and] more performance-based indicators«. Pointing out anticipated negative effects, ANOSR (Romania) raises the question of equity: »While financing [of] Higher Education is perceived as a public responsibility, there is a strong trend towards performance-based financing, which is likely to have a negative effect on equity«.

Performance-based funding mechanisms can be used to create direct links between public policy objectives and HE funding and can be a good tool for fostering government objectives. However, they also have the potential to shift the focus of institutional activity towards achieving particular results while disregarding other fundamental goals and missions.

Performance-based funding should be critically assessed as a funding mechanism. It should not deliver perverse incentives for HEIs, but rather facilitate the fulfilment of institutional missions while recognising these are diverse across countries and institutions. Performance indicators should not only regard research outputs, but should also include targets for widening access and participation as well as the delivery of a high quality, student-centred education. In the context of the Bologna Process, performance-based funding should be employed to reach these policy targets.

Higher Education: a public good?
Increased cost sharing, the emergence of loans (replacing non-repayable grants), and the further income diversification anticipated by students and HEIs are all signs marking the commodification of higher education, where HE is increasingly viewed as a tradeable good and students as consumers. This is a particularly worrying trend, which despite Ministerial statements and commitments begs the question: is higher education still indeed viewed as a public good and public responsibility?

Bergan and Weber (2005) describe the notion of a public good as »non-rival and non-excludable« such that anyone can enjoy the good. It is therefore not readily tradable; public responsibility broadly denotes the duty of public authorities with regards to financing of HE. (Bergan & Weber 2005.)

From a student perspective, the notion of HE funding as a public good and responsibility is understood by recognising the wider societal benefits education delivers, including social mobility, and therefore the necessity for society to be responsible for sustaining it through public means and ensuring equality of access based on ability. Due to the existence of various interpretations of the notion of education as a public good and public responsibility, there is often confusion amongst stakeholders; a common understanding is therefore necessary. In any case, it is not possible to reconcile education as a public good and responsibility with reduced public funding, increased tuition fees, and HE systems that are not socially inclusive.

National Unions of Students were asked if they believe financing of HE is generally perceived as a public responsibility, and whether or not recent trends indicate differently. Concerning recent trends, LSA (Latvia) responded, »in 2009/10 the government cut HE funding by almost 50%.« All unions replied that financing is indeed a public responsibility; however, this can hardly be considered progress when viewed in the broader context of trends reported. Namely, decreasing public funds combined with cost sharing in the form of fees, accompanied by loans a mechanism for student support. Moreover, national governments are increasingly using institutional autonomy as an excuse to reduce public funding.

Although no union stated that education is perceived as a commodity per se, some mentioned a shift towards such a view. At the current pace, HE will eventually cease to be perceived as a public responsibility; the question remaining is when this will happen. The following quote from NUS UK is rather telling:

> »Although still regulated by public bodies, there has been a significant shift from HE being a public good, to HE becoming a private commodity.«

Although still the exception and not the general rule, trends exhibited and most pronounced in the UK are setting dangerous precedents and increasingly shaping funding discussions in other European countries.

Stakeholders including students, academic staff, HEIs, and businesses were brought together to discuss financing of higher education at a Consultation Seminar held by ESU in Liverpool in November 2011. The event saw firm consensus amongst all stakeholders that HE should remain a public good and public responsibility and that public funding is essential to ensure this.

Returning to the original question of HE financing and fitness for purpose, in relation to HE as a public good, the trend of cost sharing combined with recent cuts to HE in most countries is in contradiction with the regularly affirmed view of HE Ministers that HE is a public good and remains a public responsibility. Recent trends point in an alarming direction, one that is likely to have negative repercussions on mobility and the social dimension.

Mobility

One of the core aims of Bologna was to facilitate and promote mobility. Ministers have often stated their commitment to reducing all barriers to mobility, including any economic barriers, although the lack of financial incentives is recognised as an obstacle in the London Communiqué (2007) (see Table 1).

Financial constraints remain the most significant obstacle to mobility, as illustrated by a recent study on Improving Participation in the Erasmus Programme conducted for the European Parliament (Vossensteyn et al. 2010). The study surveyed students who have and have not undertaken a study or work period abroad. It revealed that 57% of non-Erasmus students found study abroad too expensive, while 29% of students accepted into the scheme rejected the Erasmus grant, as it did not

cover all expenses (ibid). Although Erasmus is not the only mobility scheme, the results are likely to be indicative of the situation more broadly.

Social Dimension

The social dimension is often understood as the commitment that »the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of European populations« (Communiqué 2007). This is not currently the case, with under-representation of low socioeconomic groups prevailing in the vast majority of HE systems (Orr et al. 2011). In spite of the fact that certain measures have been put in place across countries to target the under-representation of particular groups, Eurydice reports, »it is difficult to find clear evidence that national higher education institutional funding mechanisms are being oriented to support and stimulate the main social dimension policy objective of widening participation.« (Crosier et al. 2011)

Flexible learning paths and alternative routes to HE are often used as measures to address the social dimension; however, such mechanisms are not universally established across the EHEA and are mainly found in western European nations. The countries in which attention to under-represented groups and the social dimension will be most necessary are those where such measures for non-traditional learners are currently the least developed. (Crosier et al. 2011). This is an example of a domain in which implementation of Bologna reforms at national level is uneven, highlighting the urgent need for action.

Two of the key conclusions of the Eurydice report are quoted below (Crosier et al. 2011, p.64):

> »Political declarations on the social dimension are not always matched with coherent measures, funds to realise them or monitoring mechanisms to evaluate their impact.«

> »There is an urgent need to address the social dimension issues more forcefully and coherently both at EU and national level, particularly in view of the economic downturn across Europe.«

With regards to the social dimension, this clearly answers the original question, »have concrete measures been implemented consistently across the EHEA to ensure the aims and priorities are realised?«. Unfortunately the answer is no. Social and economic barriers still exist with participation in HE not determined solely by ability to succeed, but ability to pay, and current trends are likely to exacerbate this. Efforts must be increased despite the ongoing economic crisis as complacency or inaction will only guarantee further social inequality.

Considering the trends set out above and reflecting on the key priorities set out by ministers (Table 1) warrants re-examination of the question posed in Section 2.1.1: is financing of higher education fit for its purpose? Unfortunately this does not seem to be the case. Concrete measures have not been implemented consistently across the EHEA to ensure the aims and priorities set out by ministers are realised. There is a disparity and even contradiction between ministerial commitments and the initiatives (or lack thereof) to deliver such commitments. In fact, far from heralding progress, observed trends often appear explicitly antithetical to declared aims. This raises the questions of what next? And where next? There are various aspects to consider when looking towards the future of HE financing, some of which are discussed in the following section.

6.3   CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Looking ahead, this section sets out some considerations for financing of Higher Education, taking into account current trends and challenges previously discussed. Without aiming by any means to provide a comprehensive or all-encompassing outlook, some key aspects are highlighted.

DIVERSIFIED INCOME STREAMS: CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The trend of increasingly diversified funding often translates to increasing tuition fees, to the detriment of students and access. The trend of placing the burden on students should be reversed while carefully considering and evaluating the potential for other private contributions. There are various possible ways of collaborating with the private or business sectors and more attention should be paid to such prospects without jeopardising academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

Financially sustainable universities that strive for more financial autonomy should also strive to realise such potential in working with the private sector. On the other hand, the diversification of income streams should not be used as a pretext for cutting public funding and governments should instead incentivise private contributions as a way of supplementing funding while ensuring HE remains predominantly publicly funded. VSS-UNES-USU (Switzerland) reported increasing diversification coupled with a reduction in public funding:

> »There is a trend to reduce public funding and generate income through external partners and raised tuition fees.«

In a recent survey to national unions of students (McVitty forthcoming) ESU members were asked about the balance of public and private contributions. Responses have showed that representatives of national unions support the view that business and employers should pay a share of the costs of higher education, as opposed to students and their families.

The issue of funding from business and the private sector must be handled with extreme caution. Private contributions should not be considered as a means to steer the focus or mission of institutions, dictate the content, delivery, and assessment of teaching, or shift towards business managerial governance structures where students are marginalised in or excluded from decision making processes. Therefore, private contributions cannot by any means or under any circumstances influence or jeopardise academic freedom and institutional autonomy. If private contributions were to become the predominant funding mechanism of HE, academic freedom could experience these negative impacts.

MISSION-SPECIFIC FUNDING

Higher education institutions have different missions, aims and profiles. Funding models do not currently cater for such diversity, tending to address different types of institutions with a similar approach to funding. Future funding models must account for the diversity of institutions in order to reach sustainable funding for different missions and profiles, be it focusing on teaching and/or research, widening participation, or a combination of factors.

Furthermore, as seen in Table 1 and more generally through the various Bologna Process Communiqués, Ministers of Education across the EHEA have a range of aims and objectives regarding HE. This is undoubtedly the case for each country across the EHEA, as HE is not perceived to have a single aim, but rather a variety of objectives. Additionally, different stake-

holders have diverse views regarding the aims and objectives of HE, although there is often much overlap and different HEIs themselves have different missions.

Some of the stated aims often appear to be in competition with each other, especially regarding financing. Research and teaching are not regarded as equally important across countries and institutions. DSF (Denmark) reported, »More money is bound to research, less is available for teaching. This is a big problem and makes it hard to ensure quality for students.«

Institutions are provided with strong funding incentives for research, but not for the social dimension, to widen access and participation. These two aims are not mutually exclusive. By revisiting the desired outcomes of HE, it is possible to design funding models and mechanisms to deliver such outcomes. The social dimension can and should be reconciled with research activity; however, as discussed previously, there has been a lack of funding for the former.

A vicious cycle, exacerbated by the economic crisis, exists between government aims, funding incentives, and institutional missions, goals, and targets. Institutions race to secure funding while sometimes neglecting their true aims, aligning their priorities so as to attract funding. Although mission-specific funding models are not a universal solution to funding challenges, they can allow for a more sustainable, focused, and relevant approach to higher education funding.

Reflecting on some of the key considerations for financing of higher education, it is evident that public funding must be maintained and increased in order to facilitate the various missions existing across HEIs. Governments and HEIs should critically evaluate the prospect of supplementary contributions from the private sector without sacrificing academic freedom and institutional autonomy. HEIs should not be faced with counterproductive incentives; the diversity of their missions, aims, and goals should be recognised and valued.

6.4   CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter discussed financing of Higher Education in Europe, analysing current trends and challenges and providing some future considerations. Through the various Bologna Process Communiqués, European ministers of education have set a range of targets. With regards to financing, the key priorities can be summarised as: i) the view of HE as a public good and public responsibility with continued public investment despite adverse economic conditions; ii) removal of socioeconomic barriers in accessing education as the student body should reflect the general population in diversity; iii) removal of all, including financial, barriers to mobility, such that 20% of EHEA graduates have experienced a mobility period abroad by 2020.

Recent trends indicate that the targets set by ministers are far from being realised, with the situation even sometimes regressing. Although HE remains a public good on the whole, there is a gradual trend towards viewing it as a commodity. The social dimension is far from being realised, as most HE systems are not socially inclusive. Financing remains the main barrier to mobility. There is a pattern of contradiction between political declarations and the reality of higher education across Europe.

Based on recent trends, higher education funding models are unfit for purpose, and must be re-evaluated and redesigned with careful considerations to the intended outcomes. Furthermore, additional funding is paramount if EHEA countries wish to effectively implement Bologna Process reforms and successfully modernise their higher education systems. It is time to go back to the basics both at European and national level, to devise fair, inclusive, and sustainable funding and HE systems. A series of recommendations seen as key to achieving this are put forward below.

- National governments should not play lip service in referring to education as a public good and public responsibility. Political declarations must be matched with increased investments. An explicit target should be set, as recommended by the European Commission, to allocate 2% of GDP on higher education in modernising and realising the Bologna aims. This target should be declared in the 2012 Bucharest Communiqué. Redistribution of existing funds will not suffice to meet the target; therefore additional money originating from public sources must be allocated.

- Although income diversification is a reality for higher education institutions, cost sharing should not be interpreted as a transfer of costs to students through tuition or other fees. Contributions from business and the private sector should be critically evaluated and considered as a supplementary funding mechanism, whereby public investment remains the predominant source of funding. Diversified income streams must not under any circumstances impinge upon academic freedom, and institutional autonomy must not be used as a catalyst to reduce public funding.

- In order to realise truly equitable higher education systems, it is paramount to increase public investment; the introduction or increase of student fees should not be used to plug the funding gap created by budget cuts and massification.

- Higher education should be socially inclusive and reflective of wider society. Student support should therefore be designed to be socially progressive and target individuals from under-represented groups of the general population, while ensuring sufficient support for students in general.

○ The fitness for purpose of funding models should be critically assessed against the intended aims and outcomes. Performance and other output-based funding models must account for the diverse aims and objectives of higher education. Whilst performance in categories such as research and quality is incentivised, models should also include incentives for widening access, student-centred learning, and other policies that countries have individually and jointly signed up to.

○ An appropriate framework to discuss financing of higher education within the context of the Bologna Process is necessary. A Working Group (WG) on financing should be established at the latest by the next Ministerial Summit in 2015. This WG would have the responsibility of discussing the way in which specific Bologna aims are financed, including mobility and the social dimension. Furthermore, the WG would be tasked with formulating a common understanding amongst all relevant stakeholders of HE financing as a public good and public responsibility.

○ European funds, such as the European Social Fund, should be applied to a larger degree as leverage to implement the Bologna Process. While education is an important part of the fund today, this has to be reinforced for the new programme period (2014–2020) and prioritise the Bologna Process reforms more clearly.

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7 LIFELONG LEARNING

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning can be achieved through many different paths, including flexible learning and work based study and is a key means of widening participation in higher education. In 2009, ministers acknowledged that lifelong learning policies should be implemented through strong partnerships between public authorities, higher education institutions, students, employers and employees (Communiqué 2009).

To date there is no shared definition of lifelong learning in the Bologna Process. Ministers interpret lifelong learning as involving the attainment of qualifications, extension of knowledge, acquisition of new skills and competences and enrichment of personal growth (Communiqué 2009). Other stakeholders define lifelong learning as the learning activity taken through one's life in view of improving knowledge for achievement of skills and competence for personal, civic, social or employment related goals. In promoting its Lifelong Learning Programme, the European Union (EU) has identified lifelong learning as a way of providing citizens with »tools for personal development, social integration and participation in the knowledge economy« (European Commission 2012).

ESU believes that lifelong learning is a multidimensional, yet natural part of education, equally subscribing to the necessary principle of public responsibility and public funding.

7.2   MAIN FINDINGS

DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS

When asked to define lifelong learning themselves, the majority of ESU's 38 unions acknowledge that lifelong learning is a tool for:

- widening participation

- continuing education

- job training

However disparities occurred when they were asked to describe the characteristics of lifelong learning identified by their respective governments, which perhaps reflects the range of definitions outlined in the introduction.

Countries where steering documents for higher education contain a definition of lifelong learning.	
21 member unions answered with **YES**	Austria, Belgium (VVS), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania (LSS), Luxembourg, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia.
10 member unions answered with **NO**	Azerbaijan, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania (LSAS), Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

As can be seen by the graph below, if lifelong learning has been defined at a national level, it usually includes »continuing education«. The multidimensional nature of lifelong learning is also clearly understood in national definitions, as many unions selected more than one option.

Categorically, all respondents were against references to age in defining lifelong learning.

Member unions from countries such as Austria, Hungary, Slovakia and Sweden view lifelong learning as provision of all education with a lifelong perspective, thus including any formal, informal and non-formal learning.

Member unions believe lifelong learning should be delivered through the provision of a series of activities, such as professional upgrading, distance education, preparatory and part-time courses as well as university courses for mature and senior students. A good example is the Slovak Republic, where lifelong learning takes place through a range of providers including universities, universities of the third age, private academies that provide career and language courses, as well as sector-specific training agencies.

We asked unions to choose reasons they felt people participated in lifelong learning. The most common answers focused on individuals seeking a career change and updating their skills. The third-most common characteristic reported was intellectual curiosity, highlighting that lifelong learning is not merely a tool for professional advancement.

fig. 11   Elements included in the definition for lifelong learning used at a national level

fig. 12   What are the characteristics of the lifelong learner in your country?
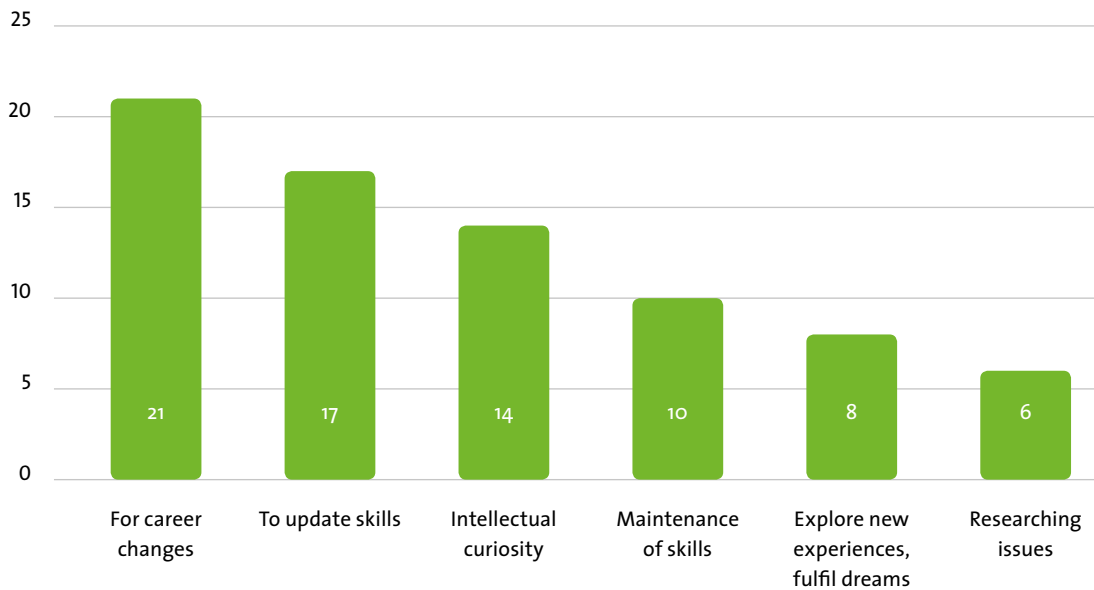
Most member unions have reported that their countries lack a policy that promotes access to continuing education. Lifelong learning is often limited to mere references in separate education and training policy reforms. Furthermore, whilst legislation across European countries makes a reference to lifelong learning, there appears to be little or no legislation focussing specifically on it.

National policy for promotion of access to continuing education	
16 member unions answered with **YES**	Belgium (VVS), Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania (LSS and LSAS), Luxembourg, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain.
13 member unions answered with **NO**	Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, France, Germany, Norway, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

In the case where such policies exist, the responsibility of implementation of lifelong learning policies rests with different bodies, ranging from state bodies, including länder governments (Germany) and national institutions responsible of higher education (Finland) to national agencies for qualifications (Romania). In some other countries, such as Belarus, civil-society organisations and social partner organisations play an important role as providers or stakeholders in lifelong learning programmes. The participation of the industry may also be important in the development of lifelong learning programmes, as is the case in Italy. Most respondents indicated autonomy of higher education institutions in implementing programmes aimed at lifelong learners.

Whilst recognising that diversity is a positive feature in higher education, concerns arise that the lack of systematic approach to addressing lifelong learning is causing discordance in its implementation. As Italy reports, the lack of a coherent national programme has lead to programmes and initiatives which are not well-organised and do not have a follow-up.

In Finland, there is a governmental strategy for development of education and research. Additionally the Council for Lifelong Learning, composed of experts in education policy as well as researchers and industry representatives, is responsible for overseeing conditions for lifelong learning and adult education. The main responsibilities of this Council are to monitor changes in the education and work environments, including conditions for implementation of lifelong learning policies; foster cooperation between HEIs, education providers and institutions; and promote research relating to lifelong learning, pedagogical development and international cooperation.

This reflects the Ministerial communiqué in Leuven/Louvain La Neuve, which acknowledged that a successful implementation of lifelong learning policies necessitates »strong partnerships between public authorities, higher education institutions, students, employers and employees« (Communiqué 2009). Such partnerships are also exemplified by the Czech Republic, where the Ministry of Education supports higher education institutions by funding projects that widen access and promotes lifelong learning.

It is apparent that higher education institutions are at times operating without the support of a specifically developed framework. Several member unions have reported that this leads to fragmented adoption of lifelong learning services. Thus, whilst

most Bologna countries have introduced lifelong learning programmes, it has not de facto translated to wider access. While lifelong learning services are provided, they may not be accessible by everyone, and consequently the policy mission of widening access may not be fulfilled. This fragmentation of services also exposes the national education system to institutional inefficiency and wasteful use of scarce resources.

INTENDED USERS OF LIFELONG LEARNING SERVICES

Member unions were asked to indicate the three most significant groups of intended users of lifelong learning services offered by higher education institutions. The limitation to a choice of three was made to give a clearer picture of the most prominent participators in lifelong learning initiatives across the continent.

fig. 13   *Intended users of lifelong learning services*
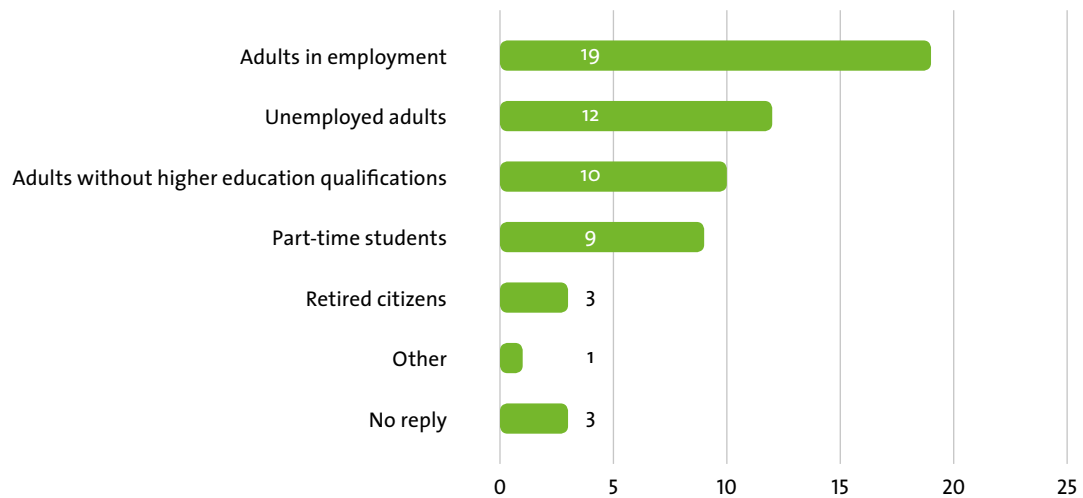
The most common intended users of lifelong learning services are adults in employment. This is in line with the reports by member unions that most of the lifelong learning programmes are provided by employers providing sector-specific training to their employees. This can also be attributed to the fact that lifelong learners seeking to further their education often do so on a part time basis and while in employment.

Since the Sorbonne Declaration, and reaffirmed in later Communiqués and the EU's Europe 2020 strategy, the enhancement of employability of European citizens through education was deemed a core objective of the European Higher Education Area. Deeming unemployed adults as intended users of lifelong learning services shows the strong reliance on education to strengthen skills and employment prospects. Aside from individual initiatives, it is common for the national governments to introduce compulsory or voluntary training programmes.

Adults without higher education qualifications are also amongst the intended users of lifelong learning. Student representatives in Latvia held that whilst this is the case at a national level, most of the training is done for acquisition of specific skills and competences for a certain vacancy.

ESU also asked its member unions whether there are policies at a national or regional level that facilitate access to higher education for early school leavers or non-graduates.

Countries with a policy to widen access to higher education for early school leavers or non-graduates.	
17 member unions answered with **YES**	Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania (LSAS), Luxembourg, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Switzerland, Untied Kingdom.
12 member unions answered with **NO**	Belgium (VVS), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czech Republic, France, Italy, Lithuania (LSS), Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Ukraine.

In Slovenia non-graduates may access higher education and be entitled to student benefits. Students with partially-complete studies may also resume their studies under the conditions determined by higher education institutions.

In Spain there is a set amount of places for learners seeking to access higher education for the first time, which are gained by passing a special examination. In Bulgaria education to this category of student is often accessible through part-time programmes in sectorial institutions.

The validation of prior learning may also facilitate access to higher education, as is the case in Estonia and Norway. In the latter case, five years of work experience will allow a student to complete a higher education course in one year rather than three.

In a more liberal approach, Finnish education policy avoids the creation of defined study paths that hinder students continuing to higher degrees at a later stage of life. Recently, Finland have been exploring the possibility of the developing policy that ensures that everyone under 25 years and anyone under 30 who has been unemployed for at least three months is either studying or in employment. Whilst this is encouraging, as member unions have unanimously stated, policies on lifelong learning must not be ageist in nature.

ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF LIFELONG LEARNERS

Since its origin in 1982, ESU has advocated a European Higher Education Area that fosters a democratic and sustainable society. In this spirit, ESU has promoted lifelong learning as a way of creating a more inclusive higher education system that provides equal opportunities to the diverse body of lifelong learners.

Concept of lifelong learning encompasses wide array of issues, from liberal adult education, part-time degrees, continued professional development, staff development to open access courses. The diversity amongst lifelong learners necessitates a comprehensive strategy for addressing their needs.

fig. 14   Factors are available to serve the lifelong learner
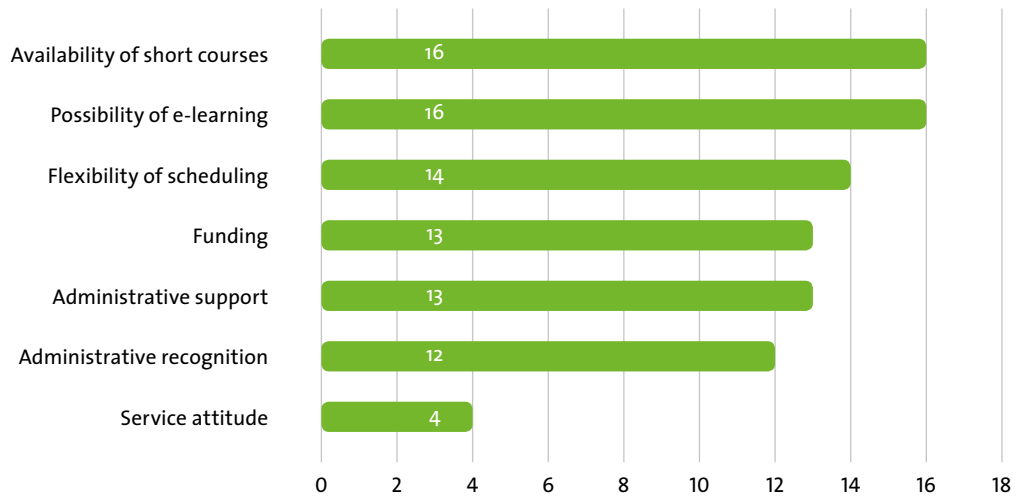
Despite the promises made in 2005, not all members of the Bologna Process have improved opportunities for all citizens to engage in lifelong learning (Communiqué 2005). Only half of the national unions of students reported that financial aid was available for lifelong learning. This exposes the risk that lifelong learning could be increasingly viewed just as a source of additional income for institutions, rather than a public responsibility.

In Spain, learners furthering their education face higher fees for second and subsequent degrees, as the education system is based on the premise that once the first degree is completed, the new graduate is fit for the labour market. Furthermore, the Polish national union of students expressed its concern that the reasons for the increased willingness by higher education institutions to support lifelong learning is due to the opportunity for more income through such activities. Having tuition fees for lifelong learners does not, however, imply that the burden lies solely on the learners. Slovenian student representatives commented that lifelong learning enjoys most support amongst employers, who often partly or fully finance the education of their employees.

The Flash Eurobarometer 192 reported that almost 9 out of 10 teaching professionals working in universities in the EU agree that universities should open up to adult learners. (European Commission 2011). Teaching professionals must, however, be more student-centred by adapting the pedagogy and content to cater for a diverse student community.

DATA COLLECTION

Measuring participation in lifelong learning is essential for determining the commitment of European countries to providing lifelong learning. As part of the development of education strategies, it is essential that Bologna countries engage in systematic data collection to provide comparable data on the participation of adults in the educational system. Official data is currently obtained through periodical national Bologna Process stocktaking reports, which monitor governmental action in the key Bologna areas. Student representatives from only four countries (Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland and the United Kingdom) report data collection at a national level. In Estonia data collection is done through recognition statistics.

The lack of data collection jeopardises the ability to analyse participation patterns in lifelong learning across Bologna signatories. The selection of a common methodology with pre-set indicators is central if signatories are genuinely seeking to obtain a true picture of the state of play.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

In order to increase participation in lifelong learning initiatives national governments must address the whole education cycle, including the formal, informal and non-formal learning processes.

Lifelong learning is strongly related to the concept of universal access. ESU believes that lifelong learning should not be used as a means to generate income. ESU encourages European governments to increase participation rates, specifically increasing the participation of under represented groups.

Subsequently, the varying needs of the different groups of students must be addressed through student-centred learning. ESU acknowledges that for this to be achieved, education institutions must be provided with sufficient and sustainable resources that permit the delivery of high quality teaching and research.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, there are a variety of elements that need to be adapted to the need of lifelong learners. It is essential that core competences are identified to ensure that learners are able to adapt to societal needs. As flexibility is a key issue in lifelong learning, there is still a need for flexible provision of education through part-time, distance or evening courses that takes into consideration the learner's competences acquired from past experience. Such learning programs must be developed within a quality assurance environment that ensures learners receive a valuable qualification and must be delivered through teachers that have received the necessary pedagogical training to address the different needs of lifelong learners.

In addition, developments in lifelong learning cannot be monitored without a pre-determined systematic process of data collection to provide comparable data on the participation or otherwise of adults in the educational system. This will allow the Bologna member countries to identify the non-functional elements of the existing system making future action more cost-effective.

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8 SOCIAL DIMENSION

8.1 INTRODUCTION

The European Students' Union (ESU) sees the social dimension as a fundamental cornerstone of the Bologna Process. The purpose of the work on the social dimension is to ensure that the student body accessing, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity of our populations. Equal access to higher education is also a human right (ICESCR 1966). The social dimension is an action line that not only benefits the individual student by ensuring equal opportunities in higher education, but also society at large. A socially sustainable higher education system will return advantages to the public through preparing people from different backgrounds for active citizenship, providing skills and competences for work life and promoting social mobility. The concept of the social dimension needs to be treated holistically, taking into account all the distinctive sides of higher education policy on multiple levels and by working together to support an equitable higher education area.

THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL DIMENSION IN THE BOLOGNA PROCESS

The social dimension was not initially included in the Bologna Process (Declaration 1999) and only included gradually over the past thirteen years, due to increasing student involvement in the process (ESU 2010). The Berlin Ministerial Conference emphasised the importance of the social dimension of the Bologna Process and aimed to strengthen social cohesion and reduce social and gender inequalities in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This aim was also connected to a commitment to protecting higher education as a public good and it being a public responsibility, whilst counterbalancing increased competition (Communiqué 2003). However, it was not until 2005, that ministers promised to take active measures to widening access to higher education (Communiqué 2005).

The next steps came at the London ministerial conference in 2007 which affirmed that »higher education should play a strong role in fostering social cohesion, reducing inequalities and raising the level of knowledge, skills and competences in society« and that »we share the societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations« (Communiqué 2007). This has now become the agreed definition of the social dimension for the Bologna Process.

This definition sets the framework for the social dimension in this chapter. It can be seen as an overarching action line in the Bologna Process with implications for all other policies contributing to the implementation of the social dimension. Other

action lines such as lifelong learning, learning outcomes, recognition of prior learning, quality assurance, student-centred learning and qualification frameworks all support the fulfilment of the social dimension, if properly employed to do so. This is clearly a target that demands collaborative efforts from other action lines.

8.2 MAIN FINDINGS

STATE OF PLAY IN 2012

National targets and EHEA indicators

In the 2009 national governments were asked to set measurable targets for widening overall participation and increasing participation of underrepresented groups in higher education. The targets should be met by 2020. Concurrent to this, the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) was asked to define the indicators to be used to measure the social dimension (Communiqué 2009). Despite this there have not been any attempts by member states to collect information on the national targets. This situation is a stark in contrast to the relatively clearly defined indicators for student mobility.

It is obviously a daunting task to define common indicators and comparable targets for the social dimension when the social, cultural and economic situations are so disparate between EHEA members. Nevertheless, progress in this action line will continue to be very challenging without any common point of reference.

The social dimension as a policy priority

Whether or not the social dimension is actually a policy priority for national governments, higher education institutions or for students' unions is a question best answered by evidence of actions taken. However, perceptions from national unions of students are a useful insight into how students see the level of commitment. While as many as 27 member unions see the social dimension as a high priority for students' unions and 6 see it as a medium priority, the picture is less encouraging for our national governments. Member unions claim that only 8 countries hold this as a high priority and 17 as a medium priority. Priority of the social dimension in higher education institutions is perceived as even worse, with as many as 12 member unions stating it is a low priority for institutions in their country. These views are supported by the Eurydice report on modernisation of higher education in Europe, claiming, »the social dimension has not generally become a significant driver for higher education policy« (Crosier et al 2011).

table 2   To what level does your National Union of Students see that the social dimension is a priority for different stakeholders?

	High priority	Medium priority	Low priority	Not a priority
National governments	**(8)** Bulgaria, Hungary, Iceland, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Malta, Poland, Slovenia, United Kingdom	**(17)** Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium (VSS), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania (LSS and LSAS), Norway, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain	**(5)** Czech Republic, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Romania, Ukraine	**(4)** Italy, Latvia, Sweden, Switzerland
Higher education institutions	**(6)** Bulgaria, Hungary, Iceland, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Malta, Slovenia	**(15)** Austria, Belgium (VVS), Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Lithuania (LSS and LSAS), Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, United Kingdom	**(12)** Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Netherlands, Serbia, Sweden, Ukraine	**(1)** Switzerland
Student unions	**(27)** Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium (VVS), Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Hungary, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania (LSAS), the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Malta, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Ukraine	**(6)** Latvia, Lithuania (LSS), Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden		

National action plans

In 2007 ministers committed to report on national action plans and polices for the social dimension and to integrate these in the stocktaking report. In the report of the Social Dimension Coordination Group to the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve conference it was pointed out that the national reports submitted on the social dimension were lacking congruence—with some reports being extremely detailed and others not including suitable data for further analysis (Rauhvargers 2009).

The situation cannot be said to have improved much over the past three years. Only 12 member unions claim that their country has a national strategy or action plan for the social dimension, which is only three more than in 2009. These are unions from Austria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Poland, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

Nine unions said that their country had no action plan for social dimension. While, eight more admitted that they have no knowledge of such plans, suggesting little attention has been brought to the issue if they happen to exist.

Anti-discrimination laws and equality policies

Half of the member unions answer that there are anti-discrimination laws for higher education in place in their country. However, procedures outlining how to address discrimination in higher education institutions are, in many cases, still not clear enough. Furthermore only 8 out of 33 unions confirmed that there are affirmative action programmes in place to ensure equality within the institutions. Thirteen unions pointed out that the government or the local authorities provide funding for equal opportunities programmes.

Commitment for Data Collection

Even though the available data on social dimension indicators has improved, especially through reports by Eurostudent, Eurostat and Eurydice, the challenge to collect comparable evidence persists. Since 2001 nearly all of the communiqués have committed to improving the data available on the socioeconomic situation of students. The lack of data provides an excellent excuse for not taking any real action. The latest challenges to securing sufficient funding for conducting the Eurostudent V survey, demonstrate the procrastination within this field. A concrete step that could be taken immediately would be to commit all EHEA countries to participate in the next Eurostudent survey.

On the national level, only one third of the unions replied that there is data available on the social conditions of students and the participation of different groups to higher education. On the other hand, one third of the unions confirm that no efforts have been given to collect data on the social conditions of students by the public authorities. If it really is the case that the majority of countries make no effort to collect and publish data on the social dimension, it is difficult to imagine how progress in reducing drop out rates and widening access and participation is likely to happen.

Although all countries report that they monitor the composition of the student body, they usually focus only on a limited number of groups within the student population. Furthermore, systematic feedback on the relationship between monitoring and the actual impact of this monitoring is not always visible (Crosier et al 2011). The processes of data collection and what the data takes into account need to be transparent and available to the public in order to develop the different processes and policies within higher education, ensuring they become comprehensive. Setting up a European level project to support the collection of information, share of best practice and monitor progress could contribute to overcoming this problem.

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT

There is no universal definition of what student support services are, to whom they should be available to and by whom they should be organised. Student support services are influenced by the general welfare or social support systems of a given country and depending on the aims of the services available to students in varying degrees. For example some countries do not have specific healthcare for students as far as the general system covers them. This part of the chapter gives an overview of the different aspects of student support services, irrespective of the body responsible for providing them and the perception of the quality and importance of the services from a students' unions perspective.

fig. 15   Availability and quality of service
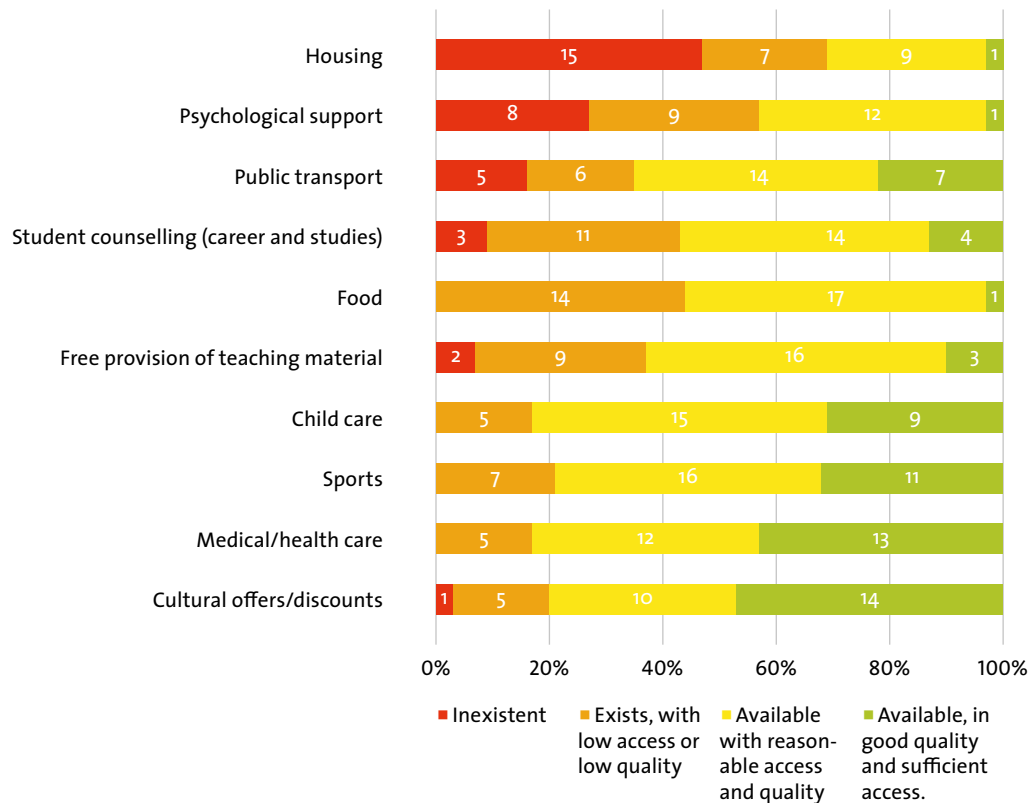
RELEVANCE OF SERVICES

Member unions were asked which support services they perceive as the most crucial in order for students to complete their studies. 23 unions ranked housing as one of the most crucial services, followed by food mentioned twelve times. At the same time the unions were asked which support service they felt lacked resources. Twelve unions replied that resources for housing provision the most is lacking. In general, the services that have the highest demand appear to have the least resources. The fact that housing is perceived to be the biggest issue for student support services comes as no surprise. Accommodation is the largest burden on a student's finances in most of the EHEA countries. (Orr et al. 2011) and at the same time the least satisfyingly provided student support. Targeting support towards housing can play an important role in improving the living conditions of students.

Availability and quality of services
In order to provide a picture of the current perceptions regarding student support services in Europe, member unions were asked to score the availability and quality of the most common services. The general outlook is quite positive. More than half of the unions felt that the majority of services are accessible with reasonable or good quality. Nonetheless, as mentioned

before, student accommodation has been identified as the area with greatest shortage. As many as 22 member unions claim that student housing is either not provided at all, or only provided with low access and low quality. The deplorable scarcity of housing calls for far greater investment into the improvement of accommodation for students in Europe.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

During the last three years the economic crisis has exercised tremendous pressure to reduce public expenditure. Reductions in the level of student financial support or changes in the conditions for access have been seen as a quick and easy route to budget savings by several countries. Reductions to student support over the last three years has been reported by Czech Republic, Ireland, Italy, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Netherlands, Switzerland and Ukraine. While at the same time, the costs of studying have been climbing, as witnessed by 20 national unions of students. This is combination of reduced support and increasing costs is adding to the obstacles for access and success in higher education. Out of 33 countries, only students' unions from Belgium (vvs), Bosnia-Herzegovina (surs) and Malta (ksu) considered the current student financing as sufficient to cover the level of students' costs today.

Since student finance has dimensions of accessibility and sufficiency, national unions of students were asked to evaluate the development of their systems over the last three years (2009-2012). The responses are mapped below. Only Azerbaijan, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Sweden showed notable progress in improving student finance. However, full satisfaction with accessibility and the level of financing is only the case for Azerbaijan. The majority of member unions reported no progress or even reductions in student financial support. Estonia, Ireland and Spain were arguably worst affected, with reductions both in terms of accessibility and sufficiency of financial support.

Grants and loans

Grants and loans are the main forms of student financial support. However there are large differences across the EHEA in the design of grants and loans systems. For example differences between who provides funding, the criteria for eligibility, the proportion of students receiving grants and loans, and a range of other variables makes detailed comparisons complicated.

For grants, the key question is about whether support is provided on a means tested or academic performance, or a combination of the two. The largest share of countries combine the two criteria, providing some grants on the basis of financial need and others on the basis of academic performance. (Crosier et al 2011). Only in Denmark, Finland and Sweden are grants awarded universally irrespective of means testing or academic performance. Such criteria can determine the proportion of students accessing grants. There are only a few countries where more than 60% of the students receive grants. This is the case in Finland, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Spain. Our research suggests that in the majority of EHEA countries less than 60% of students benefit from grants. There are some countries where less than 20% of the student population is supported by grants. This is the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Estonia, Latvia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Slovakia and Switzerland.

The opportunity to access a publicly supported student loan is provided in two-thirds of the countries in Europe. However, the actual take-up rate of loans varies strongly between countries, and is in some cases affected by the level of fees (Crosier et al 2011). Loans can only be said to be common for students in the minority of countries. In the Czech Republic, Iceland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK more than 60% of students benefit from loans. It seems that loans are not the primary mechanism for student in the most of the EHEA countries yet.

table 3   Student Financing 2009–2012

ACCESS				
Improving or maintained, and the proportion of students able to access financing is satisfying			Sweden, Iceland	Azerbaijan, Luxembourg, Norway, Finland
Catching up, more students are able to access financing, but still not satisfying		Lithuania (LSAS)	Lithuania (LSS), Poland, Romania, France	Bulgaria (NASC)
Not improving, the proportion of students able to access financing is not sufficient	Netherlands	Belgium (VSS), Czech Republic, Germany, Latvia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Switzerland, UK	Bosnia and Herzegovina Lithuania (LSAS)	
Reduced, less students are able to access financing.	Estonia, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Hungary	Ukraine		
	Reduced, the level of financing has been cut compared to costs.	Not improving, and the level of financing is insufficient.	Catching up, the level of financing is improving, but still not satisfying.	Improving or maintained, and the level of financing is satisfying.

SUFFICIENCY

Participation rates in higher education have increased since the inception of the Bologna Process, following both political ambitions and demand from students. Commitments to create more flexible learning pathways into and within higher education and to widen participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity where made at the London ministerial conference (Communiqué 2007) and in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve. The latter aimed to ensure widening access into higher education by fostering the potential of students from underrepresented groups and by providing adequate conditions for the completion of their studies (Communiqué 2009).

In the last few years almost all countries claim to be working towards a policy goal of increasing and widening participation in higher education. Two main approaches are followed to reach this. The first approach involves adopting certain measures targeted at the participation of underrepresented groups, while the second strives for increasing and widening overall participation, thus hopefully also increasing the number of higher education participants from socially disadvantaged groups (Crosier et al. 2011).

Latvia is an example of the targeted approach. The national union of students LSA explains »underrepresented groups are defined in the Law on Institutions of Higher Education and in the National Development Plan, where the rights and duties of all groups of students are mentioned.» The general approach to widening participation has been adopted, as a prioritised target in the EU's Europe 2020 Strategy, where increasing attainment rates in tertiary education to 40% by 2020 is a key benchmark. Although quantitative expansion of tertiary education contributes to lowering inequalities, the relationship is not always evident (Koucky et al. 2010). Therefore, whilst increasing student numbers can include new groups of students, a combination of approaches is likely to be needed in order to effectively reduce inequalities.

Although some countries set public benchmarks or targets in relation to participation of underrepresented groups, this practice is not well developed. The impact of measures taken to increase and widen participation is difficult to gauge at European level as countries not only combine different measures but also monitor different aspects of the composition of the student body (Crosier et al 2011). If widening overall participation and increasing participation of underrepresented groups is to be reached by the end of 2020, the impact of the various activities needs to be properly monitored and measures need to be set where they do not yet exist.

Students facing major barriers to access and completion

Students that are working during their studies and students with children are clearly the two student groups that face the biggest barriers in accessing and completing higher education. From ESU's members, 20 unions felt that students with children faced barriers accessing higher education. Although the challenges for students working during their studies are different, it is perceived as an equally influential barrier. 16 unions mentioned that students with physical or learning disabilities have access barriers, while 14 unions mentioned that mature students are a student group that faces barriers in their country.

Students working during studies

According to the Eurostudent report (Orr et al. 2011), many students start working in order to fund their studies but that they later have problems with balancing these two commitments. In half of the EUROSTUDENT countries, at least 40% of students are regularly employed during term time. The employment rate is especially high among students from lower social backgrounds. (Orr et al. 2011). The member union from Germany, FZS, explains how students are faced with significant problems

in completing their studies due to having to spend so much time working. According to FZS study programmes are inflexible and do not take into consideration the time students spend on working during their studies.

Students with children

With an aging student population and the large share of women in higher education, the issue of students with children is of growing importance (Orr et al 2011). Differences exist between the countries, as for example in the Scandinavian countries and in Estonia about 1 in 8 students have a child. The need to reduce the barriers to students with children is more topical than ever. NSO from Norway underlines that the financial support is not as good as it should be for students with children and there is a need for specific grants and scholarships for this group. SSU from Slovenia gives an example of how there are no specific kindergartens for students, and that regular kindergartens never offer opening hours outside of the working day.

Students with physical or learning disabilities

More than a third of the unions recognise physical or learning disabilities as a barrier to access higher education. The perceived problems and situations across the EHEA are multiple and complex. FAGE and UNEF from France specified, »even if it is in progress, physical and sensorial accessibility to higher education is still far from being dealt with, especially when it comes to provision of information«. However they also noted a positive trend in universities, who are investing in equipment and constructing more accessible buildings. The member union from Austria ÖH, gives an example of the obstacles »some study programmes might not be prepared for access for disabled students, such as studies that involve working in labs.«. UDU from Italy describes that there is a lack of support-programs for students from such groups.

Mature students

When it comes to mature students, the barriers are also very different in nature as the definition, and therefore rights, of mature students vary. CREUP explains that there are entrance quotas for mature students in Spain and that they have special entry examinations. SKRVŠ, from the Czech Republic, underlines how students older than 26 do not have access to most forms of financial support. Despite lifelong learning being promoted as an important tool to support access to higher education at any point during their life, age discrimination exists to a wide extent, keeping people from fulfilling their potential and upgrading. It is important to note, however, that several countries recognise the need to open or broaden access to higher education to the older population, and some are acting accordingly within the context of lifelong learning strategies (Crosier et al 2011).

It is evident that the action lines and tools in the Bologna Process that are meant to support widening access and completion of studies are not yet properly implemented and therefore not recognised as a solution. If the use of, for example, recognition of prior learning, qualification frameworks and learning outcomes were in place, these student groups would face fewer obstacles in entering, participating and completing higher education. The challenges for students who work during their studies and for students with children face can be seen as an indicator that higher education systems and study paths are still not flexible enough.

Students that face barriers upon access and completion—or do they?

Certain student groups may not face barriers upon access explicitly, but are more likely to face discrimination or other problems that hinder the completion of their studies. Examples of groups that are prone to these challenges are students from religious minorities or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students (LGBT). Other groups of students that are likely to face barriers upon access, but where no comparable data is available in most countries, are students from rural areas and in some cases the different genders, although this usually is related to certain fields of study being dominated by one gender.

Migrant students and students with immigrant background often face access barriers and/or face problems during their studies due to language barriers and their parents' education attainment. Yet another group of potential students on whom no data is available are asylum seekers and students without a residence permit.

Barriers to completion

There is no data in most countries on the issues of attitudes, personal motives or discrimination during studies, and so determining if this is a factor that contributes to drop out rates is unknown. More than two thirds of the unions answered that it is no access barrier for LGBT people nor for individuals of religious minorities. However, Norway, Sweden and Italy highlighted that this was an issue in their countries. When it comes to students from religious backgrounds, FZS from Germany explains that religion is normally not a problem, but there is a correlation between being from a migrant background or being a refugee and religion. This could be seen as a factor that might hinder integration into higher education, especially in heterogeneous study environments. NSO from Norway refers to national surveys that show that students from religious minorities are lonelier than other students and that the drop out rate is higher.

Ethnic minorities

The national union of students in Romania, ANOSR explains that students from some ethnicities, especially Roma students are highly underrepresented and policies, though existing, are largely ineffective in properly reducing this inequity. NASC from Bulgaria also mentioned ethnic minorities as a group that is underrepresented in higher education along with a few other unions. Action to encourage participation of specific ethnic groups is more pronounced in Northern Europe, with some countries able to demonstrate very successful outcomes. In Norway, for example, although 16% of all immigrants entered higher education in 2010, the corresponding figure for second-generation immigrants in the age group of 19-24 was 38%. (Crosier et al 2011).

Students without residence permits and asylum seekers

An example of a structural barrier that students without resident permits face is provided by KSU Malta stating »students without a residence permit may face some obstacles during the period between the end of their studies and graduation as they may be forced to leave the country as soon as they finish their course before actual graduation, because the study permit only applies to the end of their enrolment in courses«.

Drop out and completion rates

Different policies aiming to reduce drop out rates and improve completion rates are in place across the EHEA. More than half of the countries surveyed said they have policies that aim to increase the level of completion and even more countries require higher education institutions to report on student completion rates. The reporting is usually provided to the ministry in charge of higher education. However, only Denmark, Austria, Finland, the United Kingdom and Norway make this data publicly available online. There are also two countries (Bulgaria and Ireland) with specific policies to increase the level of completion rates, but no requirement of higher education institutions to report on it. In these cases, understanding of the effectiveness of policies may therefore be limited (Crosier et al 2011).

8.3   CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The failure of the BFUG and the Bologna countries to prove efficient follow-up commitments so far, challenges us to consider new ways of implementing the social dimension. Subsequently, innovative ideas are called for in the future.

Stringent follow-up of national commitments and development of an EHEA indicator

The commitment made to set up measurable national targets to be reached by 2020 needs to be urgently followed-up. It is all too obvious that widening participation will take time to implement on local and national level. The postponement of setting the actual targets only adds to this. To make this commitment effective it will be necessary to collect the information on the targets and tie these to European indicators so progress can be benchmarked. A deadline for completing this should be set for 2015.

Widening participation through early inclusion to higher education

One potential path for improving access rates to higher education could be to invest in early inclusion of children and young people in higher education. Early inclusion activities refer to activities carried out by higher education institutions as a way to engage children and young people in specific subject areas (e.g. science), which as an end result encourages the participation of socially, excluded groups in higher education. To maximise the potential of such activities, it is necessary to evaluate them carefully in order to ensure that the target groups are truly those that need most support in reaching higher education. Many students' unions have showed interest in the concept and were willing to be involved in such activities, viewing them as a way to widen participation. Opportunity should be created for higher education institutions, students and student organisations to cooperate in making an accessible higher education a reality.

Better monitoring, advising and sharing practice

At a European level, the Bologna Process can contribute to implementing the social dimension through improving the available evidence and comparability of student participation, financial; situations and outcomes of studies. Effective monitoring, collection, sharing of data and best practice and analysis of the impact of practice can support a greater drive towards reaching a more equitable EHEA in 2020. In this context, the preparations for a Peer Learning Initiative is a welcomed step.

8.4   CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The last few years showed that the there are policies and initiatives to progress widening access and improve completion rates. The importance of the social dimension in the Bologna Process has progressed through some improvement in data collection and political commitment, but there are obviously bumps in the road. Political declarations do not always seem to be met with coherent measures or funds to realise them or with monitoring mechanisms to evaluate their impact on national, nor on European level (Crosier et al 2011),. This will continue to impede benchmarking of progress if effective actions are not taken.

The socioeconomic crisis has precipitated the urgency of investing in the social dimension. Unfortunately, many countries have failed to prioritise this and now risk reversing the progress made by introducing through sharp austerity measures and conflicting policies. In an age where lifelong learning is becoming a necessity to enable the workforce to be competitive in a global market, maintaining traditional approaches to admission, recognition and completion appears to be a high-risk strategy (Crosier et al 2011).

To accelerate progress in the social dimension, national governments and higher education institutions should:

- Prove their commitment and priority of the social dimension on national and institutional level by taking concrete steps towards improving the progression in social dimension by the next ministerial conference in 2015. It is especially true in times of social and economical crisis that it is important that higher education opens up and invites full participation rather, than limiting access.

- Highlight the benefits of a socially progressive higher education system—encouraging wider access and participation in higher education from all groups in society. In particular, increasing participation from underrepresented groups should be a priority. Improving the social dimension provides a range of benefits that empower individuals and society—through social cohesion and equality, participation in employment, economic productivity as well as improving the capacity of citizens to participate in democracy.

- In order to reach a socially inclusive higher education system it is necessary to tackle mechanisms and obstacles holistically, throughout the education system. Making a stronger link between the social dimension, lifelong learning strategies, completion and transition from secondary education, qualification frameworks, recognition of prior learning and early inclusion and motivation for higher education, is crucial and should be explored by all stakeholders Bologna tools and policies can, if employed collectively, provide a strong policy for improving alternative access routes to higher education.

- Evaluate, in cooperation with stakeholders, the national action plans made in 2009, or where no such plan was drafted, commit to initiate a new drafting process for such a plan. The Bologna Process should, in this context, provide advice on format and expectations for national action plans. The national action plans should include measurable targets for widening participation to be reached by 2020, tied to an EHEA indicator of reference.

- Principles of social dimension should be streamlined in policies of financing and governing the higher education. In countries where performance based funding constitutes an important part of the finance system funding should provide incentives to improve the accessibility and inclusion of underrepresented groups. In governance, support-

ing diversification of higher education intuitions should be done with an underlying aim of improving accessibility.

- Student finance policies are very diverse across Europe, but investments in these are critical in advancing wider access and better completion rates. There is hard evidence that students today find the accessibility and sufficiency of student financing inadequate in most EHEA countries. Evaluating the effectiveness of how student support progresses the social dimension is an important step towards identifying any shortcomings, and towards making appropriate strategies for investments in the future. Many systems today could benefit from moving more towards needs-based funding rather than attainment based funding. At a European level, contributions can be made by providing improved advice and comparability. ESU furthermore suggests that a critical debate on student loans policies take part on EHEA level.

- With regard to student support services, the deficit of and demand for student accommodation is very evident. Prioritising and reinforcing student housing policies can be a key step towards improving economic conditions for students and improve access for students groups that find it hard to enter the private rental or housing market in Europe. Government investment in student housing can prove to be a long-term strategy for delivering good value, without necessarily causing greater costs for the student support budget.

On European level, the following actions should be pursued by the BFUG by 2015:

- Take concrete steps towards improving the data gap on the social dimension at a European level. Insufficient evidence about the progress made in the social dimension should not be an excuse for not taking real action. ESU suggests that the all EHEA countries commit to participate in the Eurostudent survey exercise, whilst providing necessary statistical information to European institutions.

- The ministerial conference in 2012 should endorse the Peer Learning Initiative, which aims to improve monitoring, the sharing of best practice and EHEA level advise capacity on social dimension questions.

- The BFUG should develop indicators for widening access and participation of underrepresented groups in higher education and agree on European reference points to be aimed at for 2020. The indicators and reference points should be developed in conjunction with national targets and strategies.

- The BFUG should develop a social dimension strategy, seeking to coordinate and empower the actions and indicators on European and national level.

- European institutions and stakeholders should come together and discuss how to make full use of the potential in European funds, such as the European Social Fund, to support the social dimension strategies and targets in the Bologna Process.

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9 STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING

9.1 INTRODUCTION

Student-centred learning (SCL) is a philosophical approach to education, one in which the needs and voice of the student are placed at the center. It is sometimes interpreted in the narrower sense as a pedagogical model, characterised by the usage of methods that involve the student in the construction of the learning process.

In SCL, learning is understood as an active and interactive process which should lead to deep learning and understanding. Students are considered as active participants of education, who are also required to take an increased responsibility for their own education. This includes the development of an increased sense of autonomy of the student (in relation to the teacher) and a need for a mutual respect within the learner-teacher relationship (Lea et al. 2003).

One dimension of student-centred learning implies taking into account the personal development of the students by focusing on relationships, fostering creative thinking and empowering them in the learning process. This includes reconsidering the personally and societally liberating function of higher education and its importance for individual development and growth. Wes Streeting, a former president of the National Union of Students in the United Kingdom (NUS UK) explains it in following way: »By connecting students with their learning they are taught to connect with themselves and with others. Education should be personally liberating—not just an exploration of course material but our individual and collective identities« (Streeting 2011). Adopting student-centred learning is offering a welcome and fresh alternative, which will enable higher education institutions to educate students in becoming active citizens, analytical thinkers and agents for change.

Of course, implementing and creating conditions for a change towards more student-centred higher education requires changes in the mindset of the actors and the structures of higher education, both at the grass roots level at institutions and at policymaking level. This requires the active participation of several agents of change and long-term action, because the consistent and continuous implementation of reforms is a long and steady process (ESU & EI 2010b).

9.2   STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING AND BOLOGNA PROCESS

While scl is a late-comer to the Bologna process, its importance needs to be underlined in the context of the overall goals of the entire Bologna concept. More flexibility geared towards the student body has the ultimate result of better suitability of the entire system to a diversified and internationalised student population. Thus, scl can be considered to be one layer in a cake consisting of various harmonisation instruments and procedures: the layer with direct impact on the learning process.

The shift of focus and attitudes is mostly perceived as the main element needed for the implementation of student-centred learning. This is of course also dependent upon administrative and structural changes that are aimed at losening the rigidity of more conservative educational systems. At the same time, structural and adminsitrative changes are by now adding often unnecessary bureaucratic red tape for both staff and students, so it is crucial to ensure that scl does not become associated with administratively imposed requirements.

These conclusions were reiterated by the launching conference of the »Time for a paradigm shift: Student Centred Learning« (t4scl)—project, held in May 2010 in Bucharest, as well as the joint esu/ei Stakeholders' Forum organised in Leuven in October 2010. Most students and staff present felt that shifting mentalities, changing methods and increasing flexibility in universities is often a gargantuan task (esu & ei 2010b). Why gargantuan? Mainly because of the already heavy bureaucratic workload for teaching staff, inherent conservative attitudes and the need to have strong financial backing for the implementation of any reforms. The elements that students and staff found important for a shift to student-centred education included:

- flexible learning paths based on learning outcomes;

- student participation in curriculum design;

- focus on the individual learner and the importance of learning to learn;

- portfolio models for assessment;

- an interactive learning process which includes peer learning;

- increased consultation and participation of students in curricular design;

All of these elements are aimed at increasing flexibility within the higher education system. This is all the more important as the massification of education has created a student body that cannot be approached with a monolithic on-size-fits-all view. Learners from nontraditional backgrounds need to be approached in an especially flexible manner appropriate to their prefered learning styles and personal situation, such as employment and family obligations.

The challenge often lies at the grassroots level. In student-centred learning, the student should be empowered, autonomous and capable of engaging in self-directed learning. This implies a shift towards scl at junior levels of education as well, and a special emphasis on changing pedagogical approaches to help make students autonomous learners.

While a change in the learning paradigm is to a large extent dependent on the classroom actors, it can be facilitated by a reconsideration of policy. Part of the fight to make the educational system flexible and learner-centred can find a valuable ally in various Bologna tools or concepts. The Bologna Process is especially helpful as it is a system change taken in by almost all European countries. Bologna Process provisions both help foster increased flexibility and usage of outcome-based learning and open up a Europe-wide debate on education that can better facilitate the exchange of good practices.

scl has been mentioned as a stand-alone topic in the official Bologna discourse in the past couple of years: »European higher education also faces the major challenge and the ensuing opportunities of globalisation and accelerated technological developments with new providers, new learners and new types of learning. Student-centred learning and mobility will help students develop the competences they need in a changing labour market and will empower them to become active and responsible citizens.« (Communiqué 2009). However, it is often the other set of Bologna tools and measures that help create and foster an environment conducive to scl. The main reason behind this is that some of the policy measures encourage the use of learning outcomes and increasing flexibility and comparability for various procedures. Thus, the shift to outcomes-based educational policies is needed to fulfill several different Bologna commitments and also offers an excellent opportunity to promote scl at institutional level.

The following elements in the main Bologna action lines can facilitate the development of scl:

Action line	Elements/opportunities that can foster SCL
Learning outcomes	Students can be consulted when learning outcomes are designed. Students' needs and characteristics of the student population are taken into account when designing the learning outcomes. The student population's characteristics can be analysed and taken into account upon drafting of learning outcomes.
ECTS	ECTS correlated with defined learning outcomes in the various courses and modules. Credits are measured based on student workload, independent of contact hours.
QA	Both staff and students can be consulted with regards to the institutional QA process. QA methodologies and guidelines can and should take into account elements of teaching/learning. External evaluations can be reformed by also placing a focus on educational issues.
RPL and Recognition	Prior learning should recognised by institutions, if relevant to the expected study outcomes. If so, it needs to go beyond waiving entry conditions wherever possible. Outcomes-based education is truly understood by all actors when institutions no longer claim a monopoly to learning. Competences gained outside the formal system should be recognised by the institution. They should also feed into gaining recognition for qualifications. The recognition process should be facilitated so as to be automatic if major differences in study tracks are not present.

Action line	Elements/opportunities that can foster SCL
Mobility	Mobile students should benefit from support in coping with the different cultural/linguistic environments, so as to avoid reducing the degree to which they attain expected learning outcomes over a set period of studies and are at the same time able to cope with a different cultural and learning environment. Students who study abroad should get their studies recognised easily. Mobile staff should use mobility experiences as a basis for sharing good practices across borders. Communities of practitioners are increasingly becoming a useful method of disseminating experiences and innovative approaches to teaching and learning.
Social dimension	Special support measures should be taken to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Learning paths should be made flexible enough so as to permit combining work and study, to better help students from non-traditional backgrounds integrate into higher education. Special counseling services need to be provided to students who are not used to an educational model in which they take control over their own education, as well as for those who have studied in poor quality secondary education institutions.

9.3 VARIATIONS OF SCL IMPLEMENTATION AT NATIONAL LEVEL—PERCEPTIONS OF THE ESU MEMBER UNIONS

OVERALL STUDENT PARTICIPATION

Overall perception on the state of reforms on teaching and learning is rather positive across a large part of the European countries whose national unions of students answered our past few surveys (ESU & EI 2010a; ESU 2009). However, progress has been deemed as rather insignificant in the past two years (2009–2011) by most unions. This is understandable in the sense that financing cuts and the short time span make progress difficult to measure, especially when compared to the effervescent period of reforms from the previous decade. There were notable exceptions however. In the UK, in the past three years, student engagement has developed to include representation on the majority of national and local decision making bodies, in addition to continous improvements in educational processes throughout most of the past decade. Also, Latvian students have taken initiative in becoming more demanding of their educators, and less willing to accept approaches that they felt were not suited to their own educational needs.

Student-centred learning is, as ESU sees it, more than just a set of pedagogical approaches. It is not possible to implement SCL in a meaningful way without the active participation of students, since it is not authentic learner-centred education if the actor who the entire concept is named after does not participate. At national level, however, the extent to which students are consulted varies greatly and is often insufficient. In many cases, tokenistic student representation is observed, but this is all too often limited to specific issues and does not go in depth into aspects of educational reform. Exceptions to this seem to be Estonia, Finland, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom, where unions reported that students are consulted on multiple levels. In some cases, this process of consultation takes the shape of an active participation by students in creating policies and procedures that foster change. NUS UK, for example, has jointly badged the new UK Professional Standards Framework, which looks to support lecturers and teachers in their continuing professional development. Most higher education institutions require all new lecturers to undertake a teaching qualification within the first three years of their career, usually delivered within the institution.

One area in which students fully participate is the assessment of teaching performance. This process now seems almost universal across Europe, though there are still cases in which it is not applied in a systematic fashion. There are countries in which this process is still in early stages (such as Azerbaijan for example), or others in which it exists but has poor follow-up mechanisms (in Hungary, for example). In some countries institutional autonomy means that the process can vary widely and be more functional in some institutions than in others. This would be the case in the Netherlands, for example. As asessment of teaching quality has grown in importance over the past few years due to its inclusion in various aspects of accreditation and quality assurance processes, numerous institutions are perfecting their procedures.

Several unions reported a situation that is significant yet difficult to measure, in which students were not engaged in formal mechanisms of consultation but were consulted by individual teachers on the way in which lectures, courses, as well as teaching and learning were supposed to be structured. This however does not offer any guarantees for permanence, as the practice is not regulated.

9.4 FLEXIBLE LEARNING PATHS AND STUDENT OWNERSHIP

ESU has tried to gauge the opinions of national unions on the issue of learning path flexiblity both in late 2009 (for Bologna at the Finish Line) and in 2011. In 2009, nine unions, from countries such as Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Austria and Slovakia replied that the changes in the level of control that students have over their own educational paths are rather small, or non-existent, while in Germany there are cases in which students have suffered as a result of reduced flexibility. Unions in several countries, such as Belgium—the Flemish community, Croatia, Norway and Spain felt that positive changes have occurred. (ESU 2010.)

Today, the situation seems to be somewhat better in terms of the control that students have on selecting the content of their studies. In most cases, unions reported that students have control over the selection of part of their subjects but only seven unions reported that students can, on average, choose more than twenty percent of their courses. Citing either high degrees of institutional autonomy, or rigid curricula associated with highly technical fields of study, unions e.g. in Norway, Belgium, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Denmark and Germany reported that there was no national benchmark on the number of electives in 2009 (ESU 2010). This seems to have further strengthened, as yet more unions have noted that institutions now have a greater level of freedom in setting these electives, and a higher degree of autonomy in doing so. This is an expected and mostly welcome trend, as institutions are often more flexible in adapting curricula and learning processes to student demographics, regional characteristics, and other factors that nation-states are not always fully in touch with. On the other hand however there are situations in which institutions that fail to implement reforms can persevere with impunity.

THE PEDAGOGICAL ASPECTS OF SCL

Accurate and measurable data on the exact developments at classroom level is hard to get through ESU's membership surveys. The main reason for this is the structure of most of our member unions, which are often federations of regional and/or local members. Hence, the information track from grassroots to ESU is quite long. Still, there are internal surveys and excercises aimed at gauging opinions, perceptions and satisfaction from the side of students in most of our member unions.

As of late 2009 when it came to outcomes-based education only the unions in Ireland and Croatia reported that all educational content is described in terms of learning outcomes, as reported in Bologna at the Finish Line (ESU 2010). In 2011, most countries report that learning outcomes exist, but very few unions—mainly from Western countries such as the UK, Netherlands or Spain—reported that their use has actual impact on the aproach to the educational process itself. It is important to note that the proper use of learning outcomes is one of the few ways in which the evaluation and measurement of educational attainment can be conducted in a fully objective and meaningful way, whilst also permitting the construction of proper learning paths in order to gain the desired qualifications.

The fact also remains that in many institutions a change in the pedagogical methods is difficult to achieve. Indeed, this also seems to be the case within innovation of teaching: in 2009 only nine out of twenty-nine unions reported widespread use of teacher-training programs for teaching-learning enhancement, and in some of these cases the programmes were not compulsory (ESU 2010). This perception was further strengthened by the T4SCL project organised jointly with Education International. Staff surveys showed that additional barriers such as breaking-point workload for staff (generated in part by excessive bureaucracy) are aggravating factors that limit the time teachers have to participate in such programmes, or in filling in outcomes attainment asessment forms (ESU & EI 2010b).

Improvements in teaching and learning processes at an institutional level are also likely to be affected by the fact that increased focus is often placed on research at the expense of the teaching/learning process. Fifteen out of twenty-nine unions reported an increasing focus on research. Our Norwegian unions reported in 2009 that «it is commonly said that academic staff have the freedom to research and a duty to teach,« and several other unions reported a similar view held amongst institutions in their own countries (ESU 2010). In 2011, most of the unions that answered the BWSE survey also tended to think that while not fully neglected, teaching and learning are almost never prioritised over research. There are of course exceptions, such as teaching-oriented Finnish universities of Applied Sciences, but this is hardly a European trend. In some countries, research has even gained a superior status in financing methodologies (e.g. Romania) or in league tables, placing pressure on institutional management to shift priorities.

Overall it is still difficult to gauge the progress in implementing SCL at ground level. ESU believes that given the amount of debate the topic is a major trend in Europe's higher education discourse. However, gauging the exact grassroots progress of learner-centred educational reforms is difficult as the decision on their implementation is often left to the invidivual professor.

ADVANTAGES AND POTENTIAL ADVANTAGES OF SCL—LLL AND EMPLOYABILITY

Some of the potential benefits of SCL are often ignored but could end up changing the educational system as a whole. One of these is its potential to strengthen lifelong learning. More autonomous learners are likely to continue to be autonomous in seeking further educational development opportunities.

Learner centred educational approaches facilitate the development of transversal skills which help foster better employability for students. According to the Eurobarometer (European Commission 2010) study on employers' perception of graduate employability, transversal skills are among the most important ones. In terms of rating certain skills and capabilities as being »very important«, graduate recruiters were most likely to highlight the importance of teamwork (67%), followed by sector-specific skills, communication skills, computer literacy, ability to adapt to new situations, first-class ability in reading/writing, and analytical and problem-solving skills (all 58%–62%) (European Commission 2010).

All of these skills are better developed with pedagogical methods often associated with student-centred learning (teamwork and peer evaluation, for instance). The development of generic competences is often ignored in mainstream education (which focuses to an overwhelming degree on subject-specific competence development) but should receive greater credit in an age of flexible and mobility-driven labour markets.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Looking at the past two surveys conducted by ESU among its member unions, we see that while the topic of SCL is difficult to measure or analyse fully, students across the continent support a more flexible and learner centred approach to education. We also see that more unions are getting involved in concrete projects and activities aimed at encouraging the development of student-centred learning in their national contexts.

These measures need of course to be replicated at more levels and by more stakeholders. Our main recommendations to decisionmakers is to encourage autonomous development of student-centred learning practices by the way of incentives and support measures. Quality assurance procedures for example should include more references to teaching than they currently do. At the same time, teaching should be incentivised at both system-wide and institutional level in a manner similar to which research has been thus far.

We may conclude that there has been considerable progress on the topic of student-centred learning in recent years. Progress has not been particularly significant since the Leuven ministerial conference in 2009, but this may be partially due to the very short period involved. Overall, it is not necessarily the inclusion of SCL as a concept in Bologna declarations and in the European public discourse as much as the flexibility-oriented measures in the process that have helped enhance the approaches we use for educational development in Europe.

Students are still not always accepted as full partners. In an atmosphere in which many feel that managerial solutions will solve most of the problems in higher education, a new willingness to accept the substance behind «student-centred learning» is what is mostly needed to bring home the process of transformation in pedagogical and political approaches to HEIs.

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10 QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

10.1 INTRODUCTION

Qualification frameworks (QF) are a very important topic, in the sense that they provide one of the key flexibility tools for higher education systems, and are one of the frames on which numerous other processes such as general education reform, the integration and use of learning outcomes in the teaching and learning process, recognition and mobility can rely on for further enhancement.

The focus on qualifications frameworks started in 2003, but the creation of functioning national qualification frameworks has been generally slow, cumbersome and ineffective. There are multiple reasons for this, from the lack of understanding of the topic at national level—many European Higher Education Area (EHEA) countries do not have previous experience in using learning outcomes, for example—to the difficult task of trying to adapt national education systems to the multitude of reforms envisaged by the Bologna Process. The existence of both the EHEA QF and the European Qualifications Framework has also been a problem as, while not incompatible, there has been much confusion at national level. Originally meant to be up and running no later than 2010, the deadline has been pushed back to 2012 and now even this seems to be a long shot.

Even more worrying, ESU surveys show that while learning outcomes—which are at the core of a properly functioning qualification framework—are a known concept across most of Europe, there are still serious shortcomings in their implementation and actual usage at institutional level. This raises questions on the degree to which they are understood, not necessarily as a concept but rather in terms of potential usefulness. As such, we can anticipate a significant struggle to have the learning outcomes included in national qualifications frameworks move to become the basis of new, streamlined and flexible study programs.

10.2   QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORKS IN THE BOLOGNA PROCESS

Qualification frameworks are, within the Bologna process, those frameworks of comparable and compatible qualifications for higher education systems which seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile. National qualification frameworks (NQFs) are the frameworks that convey the skills, knowledge and attributes a graduate has gained through completing a qualification which should be ultimately compatible with the EHEA-wide overarching framework. In most cases, the aim is to have them equally compatible with the EQF-LLL, the European Qualifications Framework that extends beyond the level of Higher Education.

Qualification frameworks are not a new, nor necessarily a European idea. Countries such as Australia, New Zealand and South Africa have been working on developing such frameworks even before the process started in Europe. In South Africa, for example, the use of recognition of prior learning tools and a national qualification framework has lead to the integration into higher education of some of the victims of Apartheid deprivation. In each country, the reason for the development of qualification frameworks has been different, and this shows that the concept can help reach a wide array of public policy goals: social integration, improved links between education and the real economy, increased flexibility of learning paths and recognition of studies and qualifications across borders. In fact, qualification frameworks can even support the recognition of study modules undertaken by various minorities or disadvantaged groups, such as the native Maori in New Zealand or persons with learning disabilities in Scotland. (Hunt & Bergan 2009; New Zealand Qualifications Authority 2012)

Qualification frameworks, as a concept, were endorsed in the Bologna process by the Berlin ministerial summit (Communiqué 2003), and the need for an overarching framework for the future European Higher Education Area was identified. Having national qualification frameworks in all Bologna countries and setting up an overarching European one was meant to improve recognition of both qualifications and degrees, to facilitate the mobility of students, teachers and staff, and to enhance employability. This ultimately met the goals that most stakeholders had in regards to higher education, and there has been limited opposition to the idea of qualification frameworks as a whole. At the same time, the level of support for the creation and use of qualification frameworks in higher and overall education has in many contexts been restricted to the groups of experts that understand their usefulness, and has thus not benefited from the same sense of urgency that other Bologna action lines have had attached to them. We can see this partially reflected in the speed of implementation: the overarching framework was already finished by the Bergen ministerial summit (Communiqué 2005), but further progress at national level proceeded significantly slower.

10.3 OVERVIEW AND EVOLUTION

After the concept was first mentioned in the Bologna context, progress was fairly fast, and by 2005 an overarching framework for qualifications had been created in advance of the expected development of compatible and coherent national frameworks. The development of national qualification frameworks that was set to follow took on very different speeds, depending on the national contexts. The first countries to self-certify their NQFs were Ireland and Scotland, which already had a head-start of several years in working on creating their NQFs, and had extensive communication with other Anglophone nations that were working on the topic. Several instruments were devised to help national-level actors cope with the change of approach brought about by the development of qualification frameworks, for example the creation of the Dublin Descriptors[4]. Also, regular and regional meetings of national level experts working on the topic contributed to knowledge, information and experience sharing among the diverse national bodies responsible for drafting up NQFs.

Despite the fact that in London in 2007, ministers committed themselves to »fully implementing (…) national qualifications frameworks, certified against the overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA, by 2010« (Communiqué 2007), setting up these frameworks was and is at times very problematic. The deadline was moved to 2012, and while most countries started working at full speed on NQF establishment, at the beginning of 2010 only seven countries had finished the process of self-certification. The speed seems to have picked up after this, as numerous European-level exchanges between the authorities that were drafting the NQFs, the looming 2012 deadline, and the time-lapse that permitted national bodies to make necessary headway all pushed the drafting process ahead.

At this point in time, it is expected that a majority of EHEA countries will have a national qualification framework in place by 2013, but red spots are likely to persist on the implementation map.

ESU included questions on the state of QF development in its 2011 survey sent to member unions. The results showed marked progress as compared to previous surveys in 2006 and 2008 (ESU 2007; 2009), but also major delays in several areas. The most frequently mentioned delays were those for elaborating a QF for general education, vocational education or the third cycle. There are some exceptions—such as Norway—where qualification frameworks exist and function for areas other than higher education. In Germany for example, while a QF for higher education is now largely in place, there is still work to be done on a general one. In Slovenia, however, there is considerable room for progress, and there is no functional qualifications framework yet, at any level.

PROBLEMS AND CURRENT OUTLOOK

NQF proposals have already been approved in a majority of EHEA countries, and there is significant progress across the continent in developing them (as compared to 2009). This includes significant progress in numerous countries outside the ›core‹ of Northern and Western European countries that was the first to start drafting and using qualification frameworks. There are still significant doubts about when functional NQFs will be established across Europe, but the steady progress—including in countries outside of North-Western Europe—is promising.

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4   The Dublin descriptors are a general statement of the expected attributes of a student following the completion of a cycle. They were developed by the Joint Quality Initiative (»an informal network for quality assurance and accreditation of bachelor and master programmes in Europe«); the descriptors are called Dublin Descriptors because they were drafted in Dublin, Ireland. (Bologna Glossary 2012. *bologna.owwz.de*)

The way in which national qualification frameworks have been drafted in many countries has also been problematic, with some of them not being able to create overarching NQFs to cover all forms of education. This is to a certain degree understandable, as the work at European level started significantly earlier for higher education, with the EQF for all education only being adopted in 2008. In ESU's opinion, qualification frameworks should be developed for all forms of education at the same time, so as to permit the possibility for advancement between level and forms of study. This, while contributing to greater equity, would make education more flexible and learners more autonomous in attaining the best possible qualifications for their personal life choices. It would also help to make all the levels of higher education adept at working with notions such as qualifications, competences, skills and learning outcomes.

One major problem arose in the past few years after creation of the European Qualifications Framework for life-long learning (EQF—LLL, or simply EQF), which was endorsed by 32 countries, including the European Union members. This has lead to a certain degree of confusion and problems, whenever the two European-level frameworks were developed or perceived as separate. While the two European-level qualification frameworks are compatible, as the EHEA overarching framework levels are compatible with the ones corresponding to tertiary education within the EQF—LLL, national authorities need to make sure that they develop their national qualification frameworks to be compatible with both from the onset.

Another major problem in terms of QF design is the fact that there is not enough integration between the NQF, learning outcomes, ECTS and flexible learning paths yet. This is poignant of the risks of superficial implementation, caused by the desire to meet already extended deadlines.

According to findings based on ESU's recent survey, several of these problems were mentioned by unions for their respective national contexts. Adapting curricula and teaching methods in correlation with the defined learning outcomes is often meeting resistance at institutional level, which was reported as one of the main problems described by the Romanian student union ANOSR. Also, using of learning outcomes for program description was identified to be problematic, while many academics were not seen as being able to properly write them or dismissing them as not being useful (Latvia, Poland).

Similarly, the Slovakian student union reported that even when learning outcomes are defined, there is often little or no correlation to the core curricula, evaluation methods and workload estimates, with learning outcomes existing just because it is perceived as a»must do« part of the Bologna process implementation in the country.

According to the questionnaire sent out in 2011, the majority of unions agreed that qualification frameworks are a positive development, and pinpointed some of their benefits to the development of a educational system that uses learning outcomes and defines competences based on real learning activities. Unions were asked to evaluate 6 aspects that have been often associated to qualification frameworks, namely:

- If qualification frameworks bring about more transparency.

- If qualification frameworks have the possibility to facilitate recognition.

- If qualification frameworks are conducive to greater participation in lifelong learning.

- If qualification frameworks enhance access to HE from vocational education.

- If qualification frameworks harm diversity.

- If qualification frameworks help the commodification/privatization agenda in HE.

From the point of view of most student representatives, the first four discussed statements have a largely positive connotation, while the latter two are commonly identified threats to a functional and qualitative educational system.

Most unions considered that transparency will increase (17 responders out of 19) and that recognition will improve (15 responders out of 19) as a result of the use of qualification frameworks. There was a similar positive view on the facilitation of greater participation in lifelong learning, with 16 unions considering that qualification frameworks will help the public better understand the merits of various LLL programmes.

Unions were, however, skeptical on the possibility of improved access from vocational education to lifelong learning, even after functional national qualification frameworks are set up. Only ten unions considered that there is a chance for improved access, while nine others considered that other obstacles, including strict formal requirements, will outweigh the benefits that working NQFs can bring.

When it came to negative statements, only three unions agreed that QF can harm diversity and another three agreed that the development of qualification frameworks is part of a commodification or privatization agenda. The results of the survey were quite positive considering that the aspect of commodification or excessive influence by the private sector on education is often raised by student unions as a major concern.

STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN QF DEVELOPMENT

The level of student participation in the process of drafting national qualifications frameworks varies considerably across Europe, but there is significant room for improvement. In some cases, there is a perception by student unions that business is given a higher priority in terms of consultation—especially if qualification frameworks are viewed by the political establishment as an opportunity for increasing links between universities and the economy. In 2005, 22 ESU member unions out

of 41 were involved, to various degrees, in the process of drafting their country's NQF (ESU 2005). In the following years, the situation had improved, though there is no uniformity in the process of student consultation. In 2011, no union has reported that it has been denied participation in the process of drafting a national qualifications framework. Also, according to the recent survey, 11 student unions felt fully consulted, and 9 felt somewhat consulted when it came to developing qualification frameworks for higher education.

The scores were somewhat lower when it came to reporting on the level of consultation for the development of qualification frameworks for all education. In relation to EQF—LLL however, student participation has been a major issue from the onset. Students are not present in the Advisory Board on EQF at European level, for instance. When work on creating EQF-LLL compatible national qualification frameworks were started, only students from Slovakia and Ireland were consulted. However, by late 2008, only Irish students felt that they are fully consulted on the process of creating a NQF for all education. (ESU 2009.) In 2011, student unions from Finland, Sweden and The Netherlands perceived themselves as being fully consulted, though most perceived a certain degrees of openness and willingness to talk to student representatives as being present. Student consultation in drafting qualification frameworks for all education is often found in those countries where the NQF is created from the onset to cover all levels of education.

We have often felt that there is a lack of urgency in terms of students demanding to be consulted in the development of NQFs as opposed to other policy areas. Also, there are wide differences in the degree to which student unions have reported being consulted across the years. Students from several countries, including Slovakia, Bulgaria, Latvia, Portugal and Finland felt less consulted in 2009 than in 2007 on the issue of QF development for Higher Education (ESU 2007; ESU 2009). However, there has been a progress in student involvement the United Kingdom, Romania, Austria and Poland. In 2011, students from Finland and the Netherlands felt more consulted than before when it came to the drafting of national qualification frameworks, though in most other countries from which we have received answers on the topic across the years, the level of consultation seems to have stayed constant. One notable trait is that students were less consulted on the development of NQFs for all education, where this process was done in a different forum than the work on creating QFs for Higher Education.

National qualification frameworks have already been set up or are in advanced stages of development in several countries in EHEA, and currently we are able to identify more clearly the problematic issues in terms of student consultation and participation. One which has not been noticed before is the perceived insularity among some of our members of the work being done to foster national qualification frameworks. Our Romanian member union noted that many Romanian universities have little knowledge of what qualification frameworks will imply, and that the work on qualification frameworks is done far away from the grassroots level. In some places (such as Poland), students' unions felt that this lack of interest at the institutional level is caused by a perception of NQFs as eroding academic freedom and impositing of state-sanctioned program structures. One other problem mentioned by several unions was the difficulty caused by attempted use of qualification frameworks with regards to vocational education, as the designated levels often match only classical education paths. Hence, this has resulted in even less consultation for the representatives of learners from the vocational education streams.

10.4   CONCLUSIONS

Overall we are noticing that the rapid and enthusiastic start to QF implementation has withered down, and we are witnessing ever increasing delays. Gauging national-level situations, there is great room for skepticism even with regard to the 2012 deadline for the creation of NQFs:

- The development of national qualification frameworks is still suffering from significant delays. However, the continuous work at the national level and the emergence of examples of good practice give rise to the hope that full implementation will be achieved later this decade.

- The nature and usefulness of NQFs is not fully recognised by all relevant stakeholders. This is often not because of true opposition, but rather lack of understanding for what a fully functional national qualifications framework implies.

- Student participation in the development of NQFs compatible with EQF-LLL is very limited at this moment.

- NQFs, learning outcomes, ECTS and flexible learning paths are not integrated at this stage in most countries.

Countries that have already created a national qualifications framework should move towards making sure they have an impact at all levels. How will study programs be changed? Will designated learning outcomes bring about change in teaching and learning approaches for various subjects or will they become a bureaucratic exercise that is out of touch with academic realities? If these questions are answered with national and institutional reforms underpinned by exchanges of good practice, there is a chance that qualification frameworks can yet revolutionize the way in which we approach education.

10.5   RECOMMENDATIONS

Qualification frameworks will become truly valuable when they will be not only a tool that ensures the compatibility and compatibility of degrees, but also a bridge for the further development of life-long learning (LLL), one for access to higher education for non-traditional learners and one towards fostering greater personal development by increased recognition of learning outcomes and their role in gaining qualifications.

The future state of higher education in Europe depends heavily on the national-level will to implement qualification frameworks properly and fully. There needs to be full understanding in all Bologna signatory countries that they go far beyond previously existing frameworks that were regulating access between cycles or educational levels and need to be linked to learning outcomes and ECTS.

- The implementation should take into account the need to use NQFs as a basis for further reform of educational structures. Qualification frameworks need to be usable in restructuring curricula, especially in terms of making them relevant to students' interests and personal objectives and transparent enough to enable students to make better, informed decisions on study paths. This, in the long run, will help in making higher education more student-centred and valuable for students and society in general.

- The remaining work on qualifications frameworks must not be limited to discussions among small circles of experts, but must include students and other stakeholders. This is the only way in which ownership of the QF concept can be built, and the comprehensive nature of the resulting frameworks can be guaranteed.

- There needs to be a multi-level approach to making sure that qualification frameworks reach their goals. First and foremost, the challenge of writing and using learning outcomes is a key one in our opinion, as numerous countries do not have a culture of using them and measuring educational attainment based on them. Countries need to make sure that groups of experts are trained and are active at institutional level, where the ultimate challenge of full implementation takes place.

- The role of qualification frameworks in recognition—for both educational and employment-related purposes—needs to be better identified, especially in those countries that have until now put various obstacles in the face of academic recognition.

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11   RECOGNITION

11.1   INTRODUCTION

Full and fair recognition of higher education qualifications and periods of study is an important part of the Bologna Process. Ministers of Education have emphasised the importance of recognition as a means for of reaching a coherent European Higher Education Area;—for fostering mobility, life-long leaning, widening access and employability.

The process of synchronising recognition practices at European level began before the Bologna Process, with the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, which was developed by Council of Europe and UNESCO and adopted in 1997 (Council of Europe 1997). Since then, all Bologna signatory countries except Greece have also signed and ratified the convention. The Berlin Communiqué (2003) mentions this convention as one of the prerequisites for reaching fair recognition: »Ministers underline the importance of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which should be ratified by all countries participating in the Bologna Process, and call on the ENIC and NARIC networks along with the competent National Authorities to further the implementation of the Convention.«

In the Bergen Communiqué (2005) ministers made a step forward by saying »We will draw up national action plans to improve the quality of the process associated with the recognition of foreign qualifications« and in the London Communiqué (2007) urged the Bologna Follow-up Groups to »arrange for the ENIC/NARIC networks to analyse our national action plans and spread good practice«.

In recent years, with the growing popularity of the Erasmus programme, recognition of study periods abroad has become increasingly important and is often one of the main issues when it comes to mobility. As higher education institutions are directly responsible for recognition, as opposed to ENIC/NARIC centres, there are some specific problems students are faced with.

11.2   OVERVIEW AND CONSIDERATIONS

DIPLOMA SUPPLEMENT

The Diploma Supplement (DS) is one of the most visible tools for recognition. According to the 2009 Stocktaking report (Rauhvargers 2009), only 2 countries had failed to implement it until then. In the Bologna with Student Eyes questionnaire all respondents have reported that the diploma supplement is being issued, although some unions report that this is not yet written into legislation (NUS United Kingdom, SUS Serbia, KSU Malta). Unions from countries including Bulgaria, Serbia, Ukraine, Estonia and Italy report the problematic trend that the Diploma Supplement is not free of charge, despite the Berlin Communiqué (2003) stating the objective that every student graduating as of 2005 onwards should automatically receive the Diploma Supplement free of charge. The DS should also be issued in a widely spoken European language. Nearly all of the national unions of students that responded (30 out of 31) report that it is being issued in English.

The Diploma Supplement has achieved high levels of implementation through legislation, however, what must be highlighted is that most national unions of students noticed that a very low level of awareness about its existence among employers and the general public still prevails (the average mark of awareness amongst respondents was 2,4 out of 5 for employers and 2,1 out of 5 for the general public). This trend has also been reported in previous publications (ESU 2009; ESU 2010), indicating that no real progress was made. When asked, national unions of students also expressed their doubts as to whether the Diploma Supplement is actually used by employers as a tool to check the competences of candidates, as most of the unions reported that employers do not consider this an important instrument.

The Diploma Supplement can be a very useful tool and ESU has supported its implementation as an instrument for creating transparency and flexibility, supporting mobility and more importantly for fostering employability, as stated in the Berlin Communique (2003). Given the current state of the affairs we can conclude that the DS has mainly been implemented in formal provision but has yet to take on the challenge to fulfilling its goals as originally set.

RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS

The Lisbon Recognition Convention (Council of Europe 1997) set out the basic principles behind the process of recognition and as all the Bologna signatories except Greece ratified it, they should theoretically be in place. The ENIC/NARIC centres have helped a great deal when trying to reach fair recognition practices. Despite this, in practice it is noticed that problems still remain when it comes to recognition on the institutional level, since countries have different procedures for recognition and there are differences as to who has the main responsibility for the decision of recognition. This is not a problem in itself, though it should be noted that the recognition procedures need to be clear and well explained to applicants. As the decision-making power sometimes lies within higher education institutions but in other cases with ENIC/NARIC centres or other government institutions, this can also lead to non-transparent recognition procedures and bureaucratic obstacles.

The situation calls for a more coherent approach to recognition inside the EHEA and countries should be encouraged to review the recognition procedures that are being used. We could note that a step forward was made with the 'European Area of Recognition' manual and we hope it will prove to be a useful tool.

Tools like the DS, ECTS and Qualifications Framework are making fair recognition within the EHEA easier, however, students and graduates coming from higher education systems outside the EHEA have more problems; the recognition procedure

fig. 16 1) Do you have legislation that make diploma supplement compulsory to issue?
         2) Do students receive it automatically?
         3) Is it free of charge?

- None of the criteria implemented
- Only one out of three criteria is in place
- Two out of three criteria is in place
- Three out of the criteria is in place
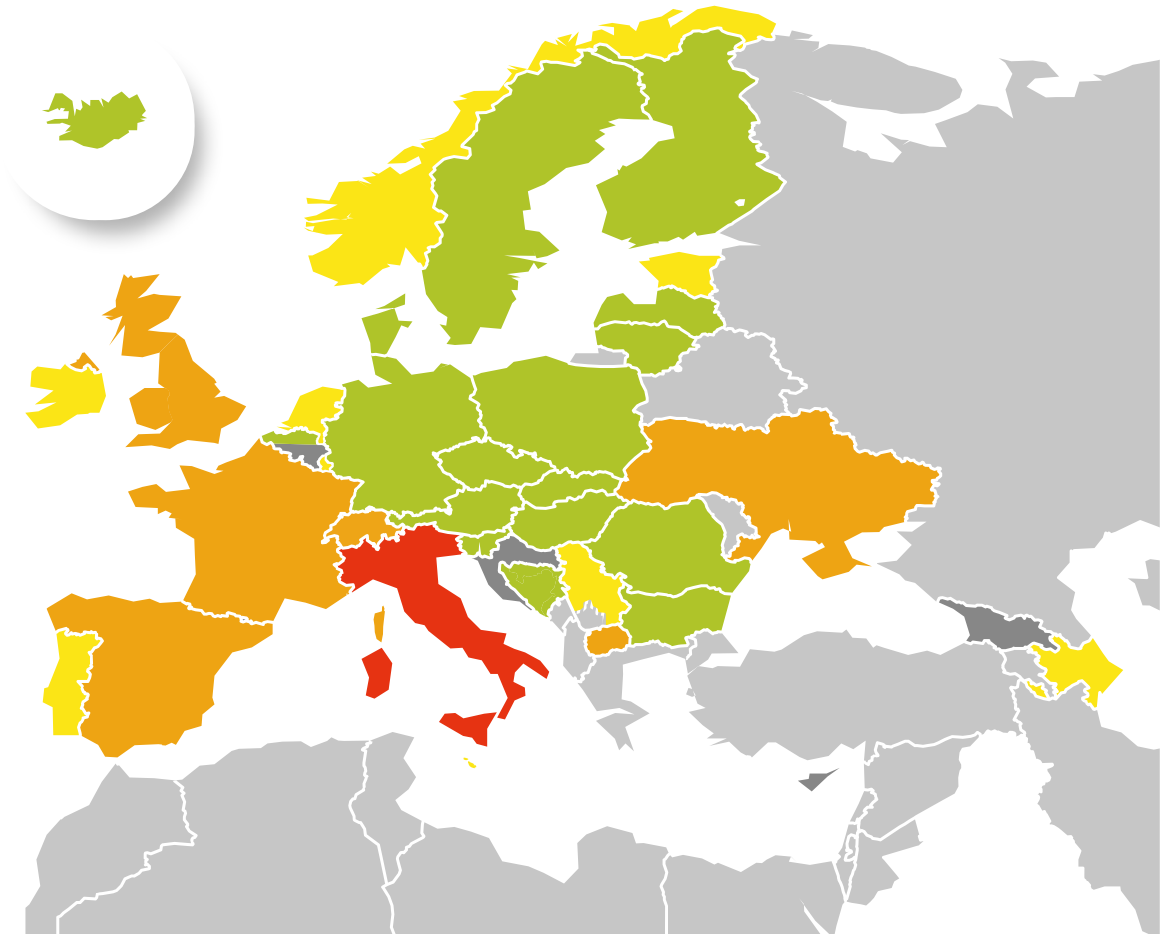
must also take this into account. So far, procedures and final recognition decisions for applicants from non-EHEA countries differ a lot, usually depending on the decision-makers. This issue should be addressed as it can also limit the mobility between EHEA and non-EHEA countries.

RECOGNITION OF CREDITS IN ERASMUS

Undoubtedly, mobility in the framework of the Erasmus Programme has become one of the most common forms of mobility. In the context of this programme, there is a special tool for ensuring recognition of the credits students receive during their mobility period. This is a Learning Agreement between the Erasmus student and their home and host institutions. The agreement states which courses the Erasmus student is completing and how many ECTS credits they should receive after the exchange. Once signed, the Learning Agreement can be changed during the exchange period, but all three parties must accept the changes. After the exchange, the host institution will provide the student and the home institution with a Transcript of Records showing which courses from the Learning Agreement were successfully completed. The Erasmus University Charter should guarantee recognition of all successfully completed courses.

Despite the creation of specific tools to guarantee full recognition of credits achieved by within the Erasmus Programme, many problems still exist. The Erasmus Student Network (ESN) conducted their PRIME study (ESN 2010), showing that only 73% of the students receive the full recognition of the credits successfully gained abroad and previously included in the Learning Agreement (in the study full recognition was defined as a situation when »all the credits earned during the exchange and that were originally present in the final version of the Learning Agreement are recognised by the home university without the need to take any further courses or exams«). Twenty four percent of students receive only partial recognition for certain courses and almost 3% did not have any of their credits recognised. Moreover, 21.6% of the students were required to repeat at least some (or all for 3.6% of students) of their courses and/or exams upon return, regardless of whether or not full recognition of their studies abroad was received. Even though PRIME 2010 showed that the situation is gradually improving, a lot of progress still needs to be made.

The PRIME 2010 study (ESN 2010) also showed that there is no common and transparent procedure to transfer the grades from host to home institution. Grade conversion tables are prepared either by the institution or faculty, although in some cases professors or Erasmus coordinators convert them individually. Sometimes grades are not transferred at all and are not recorded, or are recorded as given by the host institution.

The PRIME 2010 study (ESN 2010) identified the six most common problems Erasmus students still face during the recognition process:

1 Incompatibility of study programmes;

2 Problems with credit calculation;

3 Problems with grade transfer;

4 Bureaucratic issues (the complicated procedures connected mainly to the Learning Agreement and lack of communication with coordinators);

5 Attitudes of certain professors who refuse to recognise courses;

6 Insufficient information provision on mobility in general and in particular on the steps to undertake to ensure full recognition.

11.3   RECOMMENDATIONS

○ The Diploma Supplement should be fully implemented and automatically accessible to all students free of charge, issued in a widely spoken European language. Countries should commit to a revision of the implementation and focus on the quality of this tool. Stakeholders should commit to promote its usability among students and especially among employers through a public campaign.

○ National legislation regarding recognition should be examined and reviewed to make recognition procedures simpler and more transparent.

○ Special attention must be paid to recognition of qualifications achieved in non-EHEA countries and countries that are not signatories of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

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12 RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

12.1 INTRODUCTION

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning has been an important topic on the European level for the last decade, and was emphasised as early as 2001. »Ministers strongly encouraged universities and other higher education institutions to take full advantage of existing national legislation and European tools aimed at facilitating academic and professional recognition of course units, degrees and other awards, so that citizens can effectively use their qualifications, competencies and skills throughout the European Higher Education Area.« (Communiqué 2001)

While recognition and accreditation of formal learning across the Bologna Process countries has been constantly improving and gaining a desirable shape, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) still remains only hinting at its future potential. Very few countries have managed to develop sufficient tools for RPL at institutional level and even fewer have established the mechanisms for such practices at the national level (ESU 2010). Moreover, given the ambitious goals of the Europe 2020 strategy, seeking to reduce the number of early school leavers and increase the attainment of tertiary education to 40%, the RPL deficit calls for a more thorough analysis of the role of RPL in creating a knowledge society and why it has proved to be a deadlock for so many education systems over the years. As a result, this chapter discusses the main developments and struggles in the RPL debate including the diverse understandings of the concept itself and even more varying forms of recognition and their applicability to the European Higher Education setting.

12.2   DEBATABLE CONCEPT

While formal education and its recognition are commonly accepted and described concepts, RPL is still a topic of hot debate. However, most often it refers to the key notion of the assessment of previously unrecognised skills and knowledge an individual has achieved outside the formal education and training system. As ESU understands it, RPL should be a frame for the recognition of all assessable learning outcomes that any single individual has attained in the course of his or her lifetime (ESU 2007). Unfortunately, already at the onset, it is possible to conclude that there is nothing like a common European approach to RPL. The fact that initiatives have been taken at different points in time and within the context of different systems of education and training leaves us with a heterogeneous mix of national, institutional and sectoral approaches.

In theory, RPL procedures assess the unrecognised learning against requirements of a qualification, with respect to both entry requirements and desirable outcomes. By removing duplication of learning, individuals are encouraged to continue upgrading their skills and knowledge through formal and continuing education and training towards formal qualifications. While a rather simplistic prescription might be true in theory, in practice different perceptions and hence different forms of definitions of prior learning can be found across Europe. In fact, while some might use the concept inseparably from non-formal or sometimes even informal (unintentional) learning, others prefer to be more precise and hence limit the scope of attributes assigned to prior learning to previously gained forms of formal education. In any case, clarity is crucial in developing the mechanisms of recognition for such learning.

As people increasingly undertake courses and study at differing stages of their lives, learners acquire skills and competences across a variety of areas and sectors. Some of this learning may be certified by an institution of education, while it may also be unrecorded learning gained through work or free time activities. Consequentially, RPL involves considering a student's previous, certified and uncertified learning in order to facilitate access to a programme of study, or to grant exemptions from elements of a programme. Students' unions across Europe have confirmed that various terms are used to describe this process: Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL); accreditation of prior learning; accreditation of prior experiential learning; prior learning assessment; recognition of skills; recognition of current competencies; recognition of informal learning and similar.

The reorientation of formal (especially vocational) education and training from strictly input-oriented to outcome-oriented systems is important in order to understand activities. In countries like the UK and Finland, it is emphasised that what matters is the competencies, not how you have acquired them (ESU 2009). By accepting alternative pathways to learning, in addition to the ones provided within formal schemes, the question of assessment becomes a central one and should be treated with equal care.

12.3   WHY RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING MATTERS

The growing emphasis on lifelong learning implies a stronger focus on the link between different forms of learning in different areas at different stages of life. As a result it makes RPL a fundamental tool for developing a sustainable lifelong learning strategy. While the formal system is still predominantly focused on initial education and training, a lifelong learning system has to face the challenge of linking a variety of formal as well as non-formal learning areas. This is necessary to meet the individual need for continuous and effective renewal of knowledge, and society's need for a broad array of knowledge and competencies—a sort of knowledge reservoir to face rapid changes in the general socioeconomic environment. In fact, RPL

can enhance access to education and training of a number of individuals who have acquired knowledge through formal, non-formal and informal learning but never had the chance to enrol in higher education. However, such a shift from a completely institutionalised system of formal recognition towards a more open way of validating students' knowledge and skills requires a significant change in the nature of higher education institutions, as well as a new attitude surrounding the roles of teacher and learner. This is discussed further in the chapter on student- centred learning.

If correctly implemented and put in operation, recognising prior learning may facilitate a number of positive developments such as widening access for ›non-traditional‹ learners—people who may not have had the opportunity to attend further study become capable of obtaining higher qualifications—and enabling or at least easing the transition to other programmes of study. In addition, it also could be used to eliminate unnecessary repetition or duplication of programs that lead to previously acquired learning outcomes. Public—or private—money is thus better used, as people who already have skills and knowledge are not re-trained. Equally shortening the time to earn a qualification motivates students who might otherwise be discouraged by the length of time required to complete a course or a particular programme of study, or those people who have decided to focus on informal learning for their personal development. By acknowledging the value of learning outside a formal setting as well as recognising learning in the workplace, RPL also validates the efforts of the students themselves, enhances their pride and self-esteem for what they have accomplished as learners. As a result, it enhances awareness and understanding of the lifelong learning process altogether.

12.4   AVAILABILITY OF RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

Although different mechanisms for validating prior learning are in place in most countries, they are used for a variety of purposes. In most cases, higher education institutions use RPL for enhancing access to higher education and for accumulation of credits within study programmes. In 2009 ESU noticed that the use of credit within education systems was predominant: 20 unions stated that this was a common practice and 6 others claimed that legislation allowed such practice or that it occurred sometimes—in the 2007 edition, only 12 unions answered this way (ESU 2009). In fact, the results from the 2011 survey indicated that the number of higher education institutions using credits for RPL keeps increasing. This could signal that RPL is gaining popularity as a tool for increasing flexibility in the learning paths for students already enrolled, shortening their study periods and releasing them from typical assessment methods.

Similarly to the previous years, in 2011 a large number of unions reported a mixed situation, where national provision is coupled with legislation and rules for a specific sector and/or with local policy of the higher education institutions themselves. In fact, the existence of national legislation does not mean that the system is fully covering all higher education institutions, and many of the answers indicate that the recognition of prior learning is only applied in some sectors or types of institutions. While recognising that diversity is a positive feature in higher education, much concern arises when principles and understanding of the concept of RPL are applied differently to the same group of students without a minimum level of alignment.

Furthermore, more than half of the unions clearly highlighted the prominent role of higher education institutions themselves in the creation of local policy and thus in enabling these mechanisms to exist. In some of the cases the process was strongly facilitated and supported by local students' unions. However, it is clear that many countries still do not have clear strategy or policy at national level. Instead, the higher education institutions are left alone with the implementation of the concept without any framework of how this should be done.

Although in light of considerable developments in facilitating and developing legal provisions and procedures, the implementation of fully functioning RPL seems to be shadowed by the lack of efficient communication. Most participating unions noted that the availability of RPL is little known by either the general public or regular students. In addition, very few unions admitted having an explicit policy on the subject of prior learning. This indicates that even if in place, many cannot use the benefits of recognition due to shortcomings in communicating necessary procedures or even lack of awareness about the possibility itself.

12.5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To take everything into account, RPL has experienced considerable, though not sufficient, progress during the last couple of years. In fact, it has never been treated as a priority area under the topic of recognition and hence often ended up as random initiatives at national, regional and mostly institutional levels. With increasing attention being paid to qualification frameworks, connecting these with clear procedures for RPL should play a key role to allow learners to get their non-formal and informal learning recognised. Therefore, several recommendations should be noted:

- RPL is regarded by ESU as an important feature of a student-centred education system since all learning must be equally valued, no matter how or where it has taken place. In fact, student-centred learning should be used in promoting more efficient RPL procedures and alternative learning paths;

- Targeted communication is one of the most efficient ways of promoting and applying recognition of prior learning. As such, it should be taken into account as one of the most crucial steps in the development and operation of RPL;

- ESU stresses that recognition of prior learning should be available for both the purpose of entry to a certain education programme as well as for the purpose of replacement of certain parts (such as courses or modules) of an education programme. RPL mechanisms and procedures should be user-friendly, well defined and flexible.

ESU considers that all real learning should be recognised, as long as assessment procedures are definable.

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13 QUALITY ASSURANCE AND TRANSPARENCY

13.1 INTRODUCTION

Promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance has been one of the underlying principles of the Bologna Process (Declaration 1999) and remains a key action line in the establishment and development of the European Higher Education Area (Communiqué 2001). Quality assurance itself has multiple purposes, primarily among them is enhancing teaching and learning, increasing mutual trust between actors in higher education, enabling reciprocal recognition throughout Europe and facilitating comparability of qualifications. Moreover quality assurance intends to also hold higher education institutions accountable and at the same time provide relevant information about their activities and sometimes also performance to internal and external stakeholders and society at large (Communiqué 2007).

In this, quality assurance works as a transparency tool, mainly through publishing of external review reports that give information about the activities and performance of higher education providers. In addition, quality assurance and accreditation outcomes might be linked to decisions on recognition of qualifications or student support availability, which is why it is also important to make that information public. This is often a link between quality assurance and other transparency tools, where developments have become increasingly rapid. This primarily includes classification or rankings and information databases. Rankings, though widely criticised for their methodological inconsistencies, have become more popular and affect the views on processes related to quality and the outcomes of education. In this way, rankings challenge quality assurance to be better in providing information.

Since the Berlin Ministerial Conference (2003) there has been significant positive development in setting quality assurance frameworks, systems and mechanisms throughout the Bologna Process countries, also regarding the student involvement therein. One of the key factors here is the adoption of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) by the ministers in 2005 (see ENQA 2005). The ESG are credited for their developmental purpose in setting up or reforming of national frameworks as well as impacting directly on the work of quality assurance agencies. The ESG have become the basis of a European dimension in quality assurance, promoting and advancing a set of principles that can be applied in diverse settings. (ENQA 2011.)

Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve communiqué (2009) set quality assurance to be one of the priorities, while the continuing dialogue in Europe demonstrates that quality assurance is seen as a well functioning tool. Thus, perhaps there is an increasing expectation towards what quality assurance can achieve. This is primarily evident in the discussions held at various fora and the different working groups of the Bologna Follow-Up Group who all make reference and recommendations concerning

how quality assurance could better incorporate various other action lines. This perhaps also shows that quality assurance is more and more being seen as a transversal tool not as an individual action line as such. The European dimension in quality assurance that has been developing, based on cooperation of institutions, agencies, governments and students, can encourage further openness to address these new policy issues and the changing view towards quality assurance.

In the current timeframe, the external evaluation of EQAR and the recently presented outcomes of the MAPESG project[5] will be useful inputs for further developing the European quality assurance system. But key messages emerging from these relate also to the accessibility of quality assurance outcomes and the tangible impact of European reference tools in quality assurance like the ESG or the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). The trend seems indeed to be not to consider quality assurance (QA) as the main transparency tool of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), but to see it more as part of a wider system where other types of tools providing information related to the quality of studies could be better suited for specific transparency purposes (Commission 2009). However, this should not replace quality assurance as an approach, especially when it concerns accountability or quality enhancement.

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5 »Mapping the implementation and application of the ESG in the EHEA« (MAP-ESG), run by ENQA (as project coordinator), ESU, EUA and EURASHE; co-funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission. *http://www.mapesg.wordpress.com*

13.2 MAIN FINDINGS AND RESULTS

GENERAL ASPECTS

It could be appreciated that in most of the countries of the EHEA the accreditation[6] of study programmes and institutions are still one of the major quality assurance mechanism used, as it was highlighted in 2008 (Costes et al. 2008) and still perceived by more than 24 out of 26 of the National Unions of Students (NUS). However, institutional and programme evaluations (more quality enhancement oriented) are both considerably important due to the number of countries where they are used, as stated in more than 20 of the cases. However, for example, audits are quite commonly used too.

On the other hand, new mechanisms are used more and more as quality labels (14), QA awards (12) and certification of services for students (4). Interesting cases are league tables or national rankings, issue that has been discussed in several forums, and has become the topic of many other publications, but only 9 of the NUS said that they are used in their countries.

Several countries have introduced or are introducing classification of higher education institutions (HEIs), trying to group HEIs according to predetermined profiles (van Vught 2010). Together with this classification there is a trend of relating it to resources reallocation.

STUDENTS' INVOLVEMENT

The involvement of students and their role in quality assurance has been discussed since 2001, when student were recognised as competent and constructive partners in shaping the EHEA (Communiqué 2003). In 2003 ministers went even further with including a provision that by 2005 national quality assurance systems should include a reference for student participation at the evaluation of programmes (Communiqué 2003). Students' involvement in quality assurance seems to have built a positive record with several authors acknowledging it as is welcome and appreciated (Cockburn 2006) and regarded as highly beneficial (Crosier et al. 2007).
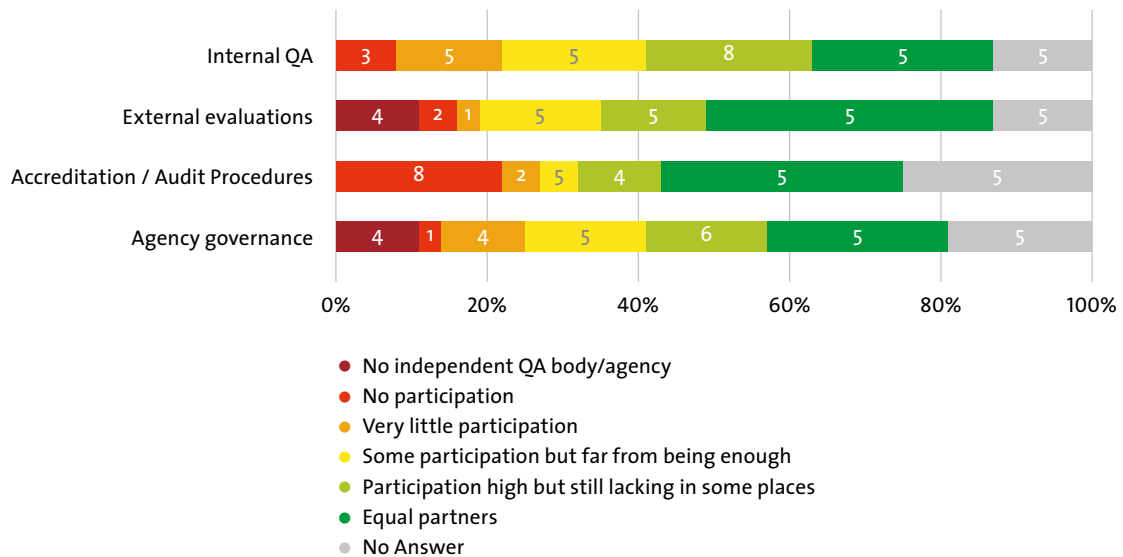
Further, the involvement of ESU within the so-called E4 group[7], based on the European principle of stakeholder involvement in quality assurance, has been a key catalyst in promoting student participation. The E4 has been cooperating and meeting regularly since autumn 2001 to discuss issues related to promoting quality assurance in the EHEA and has also drafted the ESG.

In their replies to the questionnaire the national students' unions were asked to provide their view on student participation on four different levels: internal quality assurance, external evaluations, accreditation and/or audit processes and governance of QA agencies.

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6   Some definitions are based on those from the Analytic Quality Glossary, (Harvey, L., 2004–11, Analytic Quality Glossary, Quality Research International, *http://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary/*)

7   the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher education (EURASHE), the European Students Union (ESU), and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

Overview of student participation (see figure above) when compared to the data from 2009 (ESU 2009) shows some improvement. Currently, a high number of national students' unions consider that in their countries students are equal partners or the level of student participation in QA is high enough (17 out of 32 at internal QA, 19 out of 32 at external QA, 16 out of 28 at accreditation/audit procedures and 15 out of 30 at governance of QAAs), but still some students' unions affirm that students do not participate or this participation is very limited (8 out of 32 at internal QA, 3 out of 32 at external QA, 10 out of 28 at accreditation/audit procedures and 5 out of 27 at governance of QAAs). The rest consider that there is some participation, but far from being enough.

The level of student involvement is, relatively, best at the external evaluation level. According to the unions' perception, in almost half of the countries students are highly involved in most of the higher education institutions, though not in all of them students are consider as equal partners. However, in three countries (Azerbaijan, Slovakia and Ukraine) the national students' unions claim that students are not being involved and in another five countries the involvement of students on the institutional level is very limited.

In general, the national unions report slight improvement since 2009: the number of countries without any student participation has decreased among the reported countries and also those with very little participation; on the other hand the number of countries where students are equal partners in quality assurance has increased significantly.

fig. 18 *Student participation in internal quality assurance*

● No participation
● Very little participation
● Some participation but far from being enough
● Participation is high, but still lacking in some places.
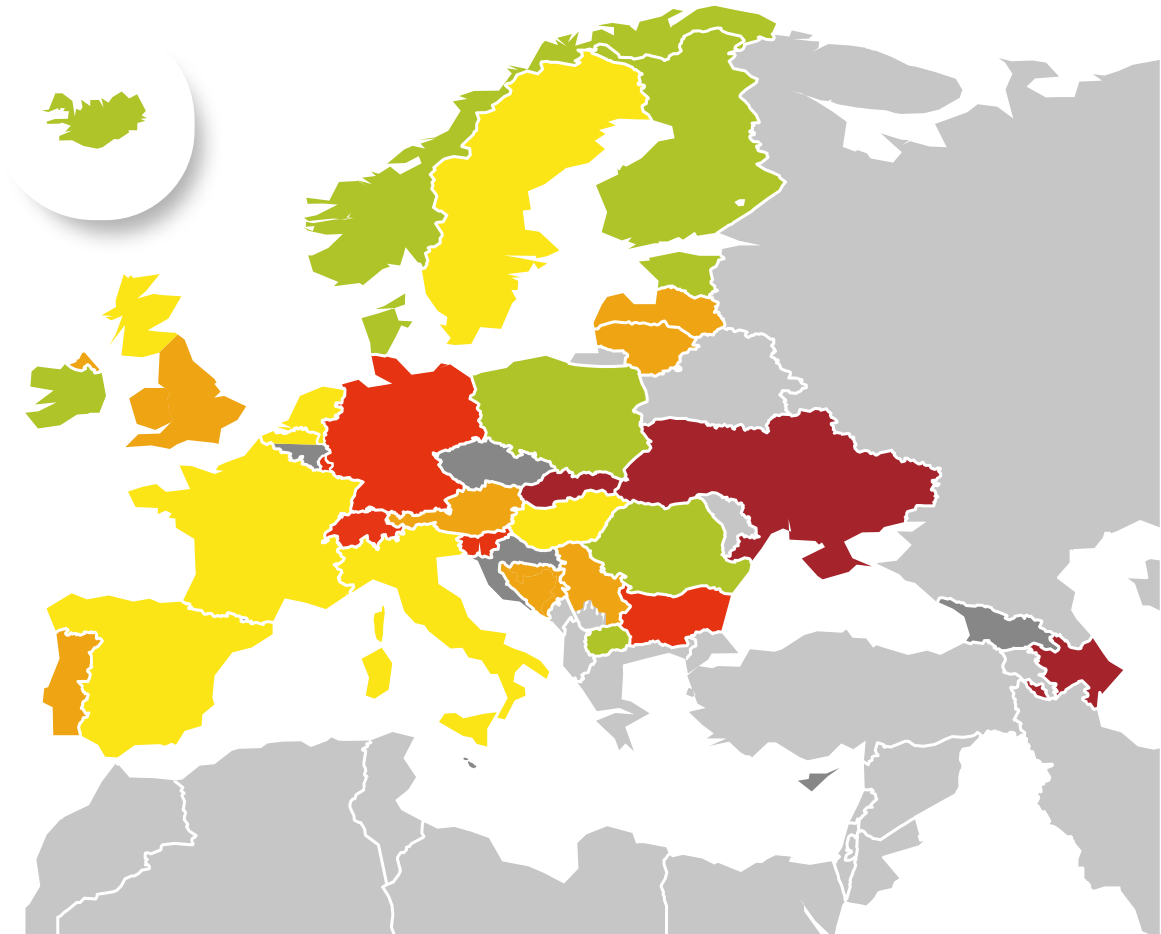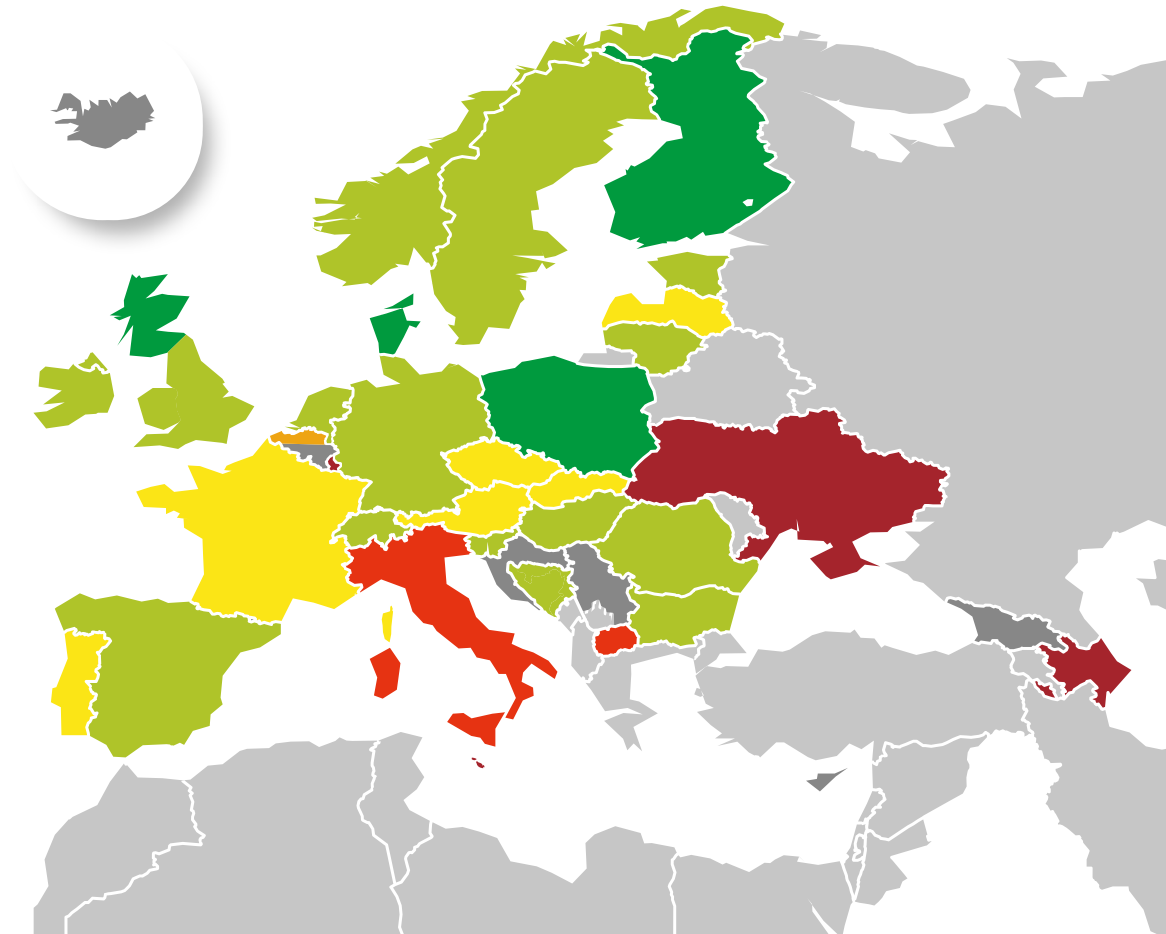● Equal partners

fig. 19   *Student participation in external quality assurance*

- No independent QA body/agency
- Students are not consulted
- Students are interviewed by the external panel.
- Observers of the external panel
- Full members in external evaluations.
- Including position of chair/secretary

Evidently, within one national system there can be different practices of involving students in quality assurance, depending on the type of an institution. In 19 cases out of 28, national unions of students report that public institutions, comparing to private ones, are much eager to engage students in the development of an institutional QA system.

In comparison, at the external quality assurance level student involvement is reported to be a little bit higher than at the institutional level. This is a particular case in at least five national systems, where external evaluations when coming to an institution, do not consult students nor give an opportunity to contribute to the process. Furthermore, in at least four countries there is not any independent quality assurance agency or body.

In most cases reported, 19 out of 32, students participate as full and equal members of the external review panels. Depending on the existing practice, students sometimes also take the role of a chair and/or secretary of the external panel, as it happens in Denmark, Finland, Poland and Scotland. However, in a number of countries such as Austria, Czech Republic, France, Latvia and Slovakia, students are involved only as observers. In a few countries, student involvement is also only now being discussed, for instance Portugal will start a testing round in the next years, after which they would evaluate the added value and success of the involvement of students.

In conclusion, there has been some improvement since 2009 even though there is still considerable room for improvement at this level, but that is often connected to the very existence of the external quality assurance system at cases.

With regard to students' involvement in governance of quality assurance agencies, there seems to be considerable improvement made since 2009. In 21 national systems students are members of the governance bodies, with a full voting right in 15 of them. There are 21 countries where students are also, or only, part of the consultative bodies of the quality assurance agencies. A link to the issue of the independence of agencies and whether they are directly part of public organisations is influencing whether it is possible to include students and stakeholders into crucial elements in decision-making in agencies such as deciding on criteria for assessment.

In the national systems with more than one agency, the level of student involvement can vary depending on the practice of the agency. This is the case of Spain, where students are full members of the consultative body and governance body in some agencies but not in all of them.

In addition, students are also being consulted when it comes to the national or regional policy-making on quality assurance as such. In such cases, the process is usually including national unions of students, but unions reported also there some variance where eight unions (Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Italy, Luxembourg, Serbia, Spain, Switzerland, Ukraine) reported that they are not being consulted by governments nor parliaments when concerning legislation whereas in 24 higher education systems policy-making is reported to be more inclusive.

The »QUEST for Quality for Students« project[8], currently run by ESU, has highlighted some of the barriers that students face striving for the full involvement in quality assurance processes and practice. »The lack of information among the student body« and »students not seen as full members of the academic community« are seen as two of the most important contributors to barriers of involvement. Further, the perception of the quality assurance processes among students is influenced by

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8   »Quest for Quality for Students« (QUEST) run by ESU (as project coordinator), sparqs, fzs and ARACIS; co-funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission. *http://www.esu-online.org/projects/current/quest*

- No independent QA body/agency
- No participation at this level
- Only members of consultative bodies.
- Members of governance bodies without voting rights
- Full members of governance bodies.
- Planners of evaluation processes, members of consultative bodies and full members of governance bodies.
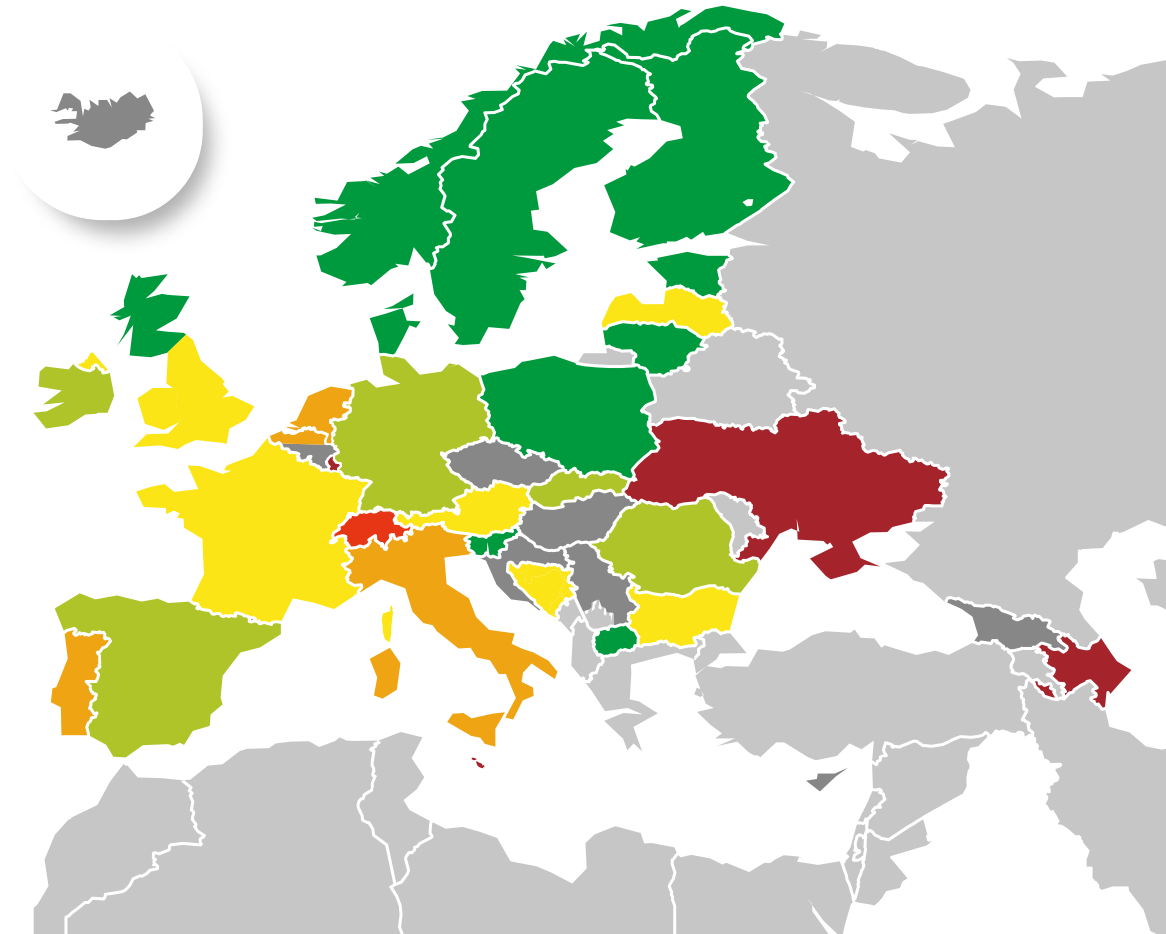
whether they witness and take part in any consequences to the quality assurance processes. If the outcomes are not visible, student interest is bound to decrease, thus also putting up barriers to the potential of quality assurance to improve higher education systems.

More recently, national unions have been building strategies in order to strengthen student participation in quality assurance processes through establishing or supporting the creation of student pools on the national level that provide students to quality assurance reviews. The pools on the one hand serve as a database for the competent individuals to join external review panels, on the other as a community of practitioners to encourage peer learning on existing practices to enhance the quality of a learning process. Similar pool on the European level was created by ESU back in 2008 with primary cooperation partners being EUA, ENQA and national agencies where international student panel members are sought.

EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES (ESG)

More than 7 years have passed since the Ministers adopted the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (ENQA 2005) in Bergen, 2005 (Communiqué 2005). It is interesting to see the impact they have had on the national and institutional quality assurance systems, when building a European dimension in quality assurance.

There has been significant improvement of the level of awareness about the ESG among the national students' unions lately. Up from 33% in 2007 to 63% in 2009 and now to 77% (20 out of 26) of the respondents said to known about the ESG in detail (ESU 2007; 2009). However, it still signifies that there are national unions, which are not fully aware of the ESG. On the other hand, even in case a union reports awareness about the ESG, it might not apply to the general student population (or student representatives on the institutional level).

Whereas it is reasonable to expect that the whole student body is not directly aware of the ESG themselves, it is more probable that they know of some national standards for quality or quality assurance, which often are based on the same principles as the ESG, and in some cases, also directly drafted based on the ESG as the MAP-ESG report has demonstrated (ENQA 2011).

At the same time within ESU's MAP-ESG consultation it became apparent that the involvement of student representatives' on the institutional level and their awareness of quality assurance within their higher education institutions differs dramatically from one institution to another, even within the same country (ENQA 2011). This is partly connected to the fact that the ESG often are translated to the institutional level through proxies like the national framework. Furthermore, in the ESU's QUEST project 15 out of 25 national students' union reported in specific that in their countries there is poor availability and lack of information about quality assurance concerning the student body and that this is seen as a direct barrier for their involvement (ESU 2012b).

Compared to the high rate of awareness about the ESG, and although all of the unions declare that they support ESG in general, the ESU MAP-ESG consultation report (ESU 2012a) concluded that several improvements are necessary. Major issues reported were use of language and phrasing and in particular, the meaning of specific quality assurance terminology used in the ESG. These are obstacles to understanding and clarity, leaving ample room for ambiguity of the ESG and thus impacting on actual processes, making them less coherent and comparable over time.

The ESU consultation shows that in all countries in the sample, as diverse as they are, there are institutions with a system of internal quality assurance in line with the ESG (ESU 2012a). At the same time, as many institutions do not have this, and as the responses from local student representatives suggest, the implementation of a quality assurance system that follows the principles of the ESG relies more on HEIs than on national governments. There are institutions where certain standards are almost completely translated into the internal QA system, and others HEIs might have a system in which a number of standards and Guidelines are lacking. This could explain why some national students' unions consider that the ESG are either not known by higher education institutions (5 out of 25) or they are known but there is reluctance by the HEIs to apply them (8).

The situation changes when it comes to the quality assurance bodies/agencies and national authorities, where in 18 countries out of 25 the national students' unions consider that the ESG are known and taken into account by the QA bodies/agencies and in 13 out of 25 by the national authorities. However, the negative part is that still in 6 the cases, the students consider that there is a reluctance to apply them by the quality assurance body/agency or that the ESG are not known.

fig. 21   *ESG impact of the work of national authorities, HEIs and quality assurance bodies/agencies*
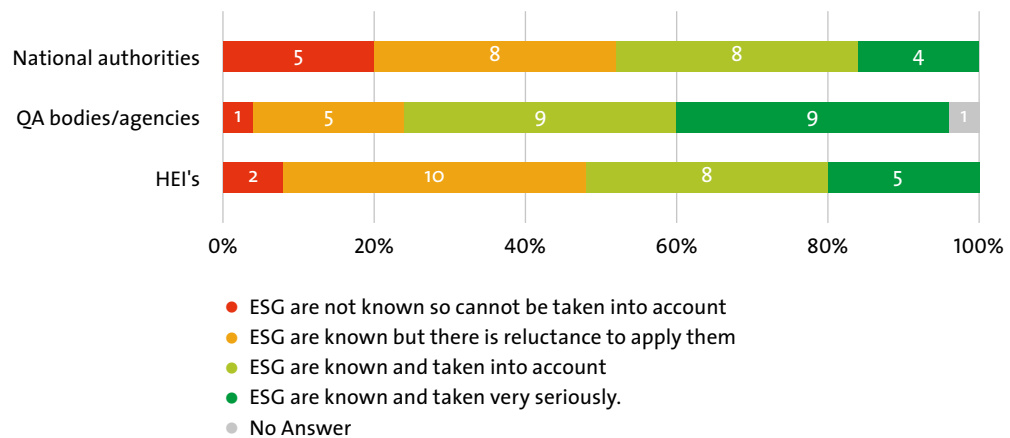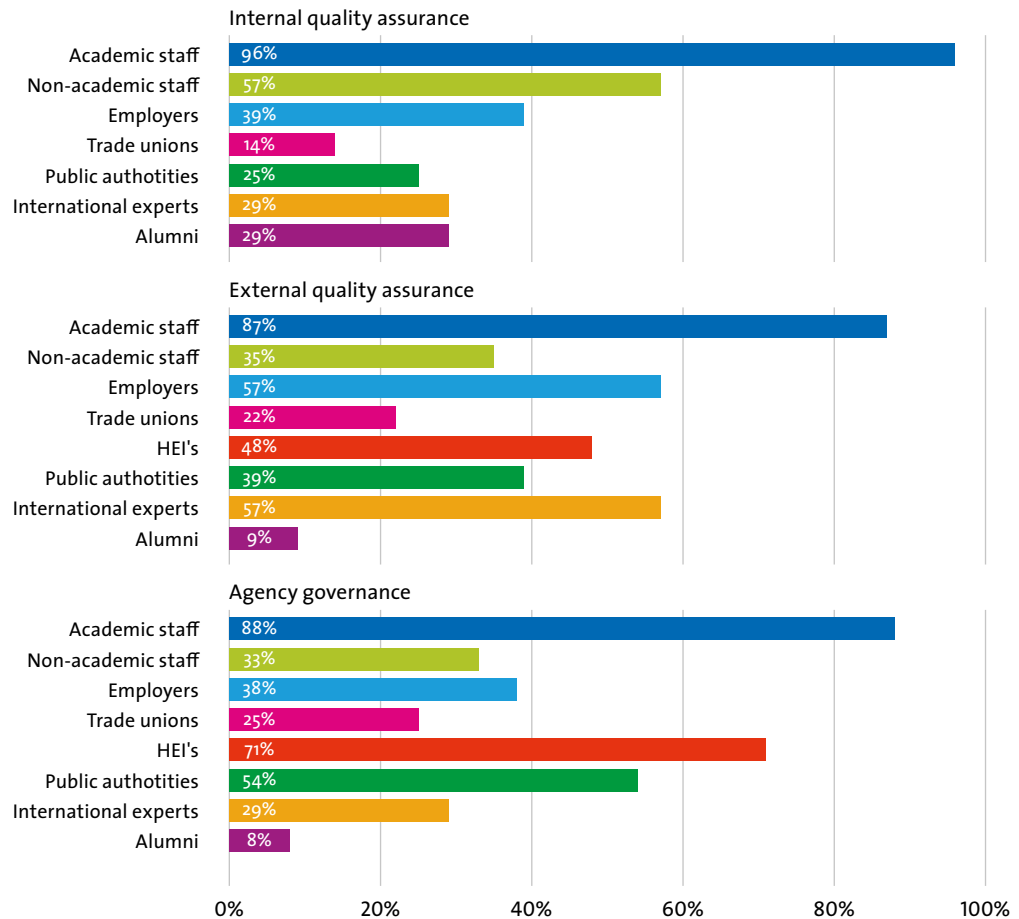

When asked about the compliance of the different parts of the ESG, only 11 unions considered that in their countries the Part 1 of the ESG was fully applied. Some unions highlighted that institutions do not pay enough attention, but that some cases this is linked to the very recent establishment of a quality assurance system. In general, in 14 national students' unions consider that Part 2 of the ESG is not fully applied. The primary reason here is that currently there still is no national system for external quality assurance, though in a few countries there is an agreement and even legislation for the establishment of one. When looking at the compliance of the ESG part 3, the ENQA membership or EQAR registration should be seen as primary proxies, which both indicate significant compliance with the ESG. In 14 countries almost all the agencies have been externally evaluated, although in at least 11 countries the quality assurance agency/body has not been externally evaluated according to ESG part 3. The ESG has had considerable impact on the national QA systems, nevertheless the analysis of the

data collected by ESU for the MAP-ESG project shows a very diverse picture of the way and extent to which the ESG are actually being implemented (ESU 2011).

Regarding the impact of the ESG, in 19 countries out of 24 that answered this specific question the NUS considers that the ESG have affected the internal quality assurance systems of the HEIs and in 16 countries the unions affirm that the ESG have impacted on the external quality assurance systems. These two answers are usually closely related as in some cases HEIs are influenced as much by external QA (ENQA 2011), however in not all of the cases did the respondents consider that the ESG influenced both levels at the same time.

fig. 22 *Stakeholder involvement in quality assurance*

Internal quality assurance

Stakeholder	%
Academic staff	96%
Non-academic staff	57%
Employers	39%
Trade unions	14%
Public authotities	25%
International experts	29%
Alumni	29%

External quality assurance

Stakeholder	%
Academic staff	87%
Non-academic staff	35%
Employers	57%
Trade unions	22%
HEI's	48%
Public authotities	39%
International experts	57%
Alumni	9%

Agency governance

| Stakeholder	%
Academic staff	88%
Non-academic staff	33%
Employers	38%
Trade unions	25%
HEI's	71%
Public authotities	54%
International experts	29%
Alumni	8%

The involvement of stakeholders in quality assurance is crucial to ensure that QA processes take in several points of view for getting better outcomes (Galán Palomares 2012). According to the information provided by the national students' unions, in internal quality assurance the involvement of academic staff stands up in almost all the cases (27 out of 28); there is involvement of non-academic staff in 16 countries; and of employers in 11. In external evaluations the involvement of academic staff is once more the highest (20 out of 23); employers and international experts are also very involved (13); and the involvement of HEIs is also significantly high (11). Academic staff (21 out of 24), HEIs (17) and public authorities (13) are the most involved in the governance of quality assurance agencies; where the involvement of employers (9) and international experts (7) is also still significant. In general, trade unions are not very involved at any level, and neither are alumni very involved in agency governance nor external evaluations.

EUROPEAN QUALITY ASSURANCE REGISTER (EQAR)

Since the European Quality Assurance Register was founded in 2008, there have been several developments not only in the organisation, but also at the national level concerning legislation regarding EQAR. Interestingly, 7 national students' unions affirm that they don't know EQAR at all or not in detail, while the percentage of unions that fully support the idea of establishing EQAR remained the same since 2009 (62%).

fig. 23   Student unions' support for EQAR

- 7% No opinion
- 4% No
- 15% Not sure
- 12% Partial support, with some concerns
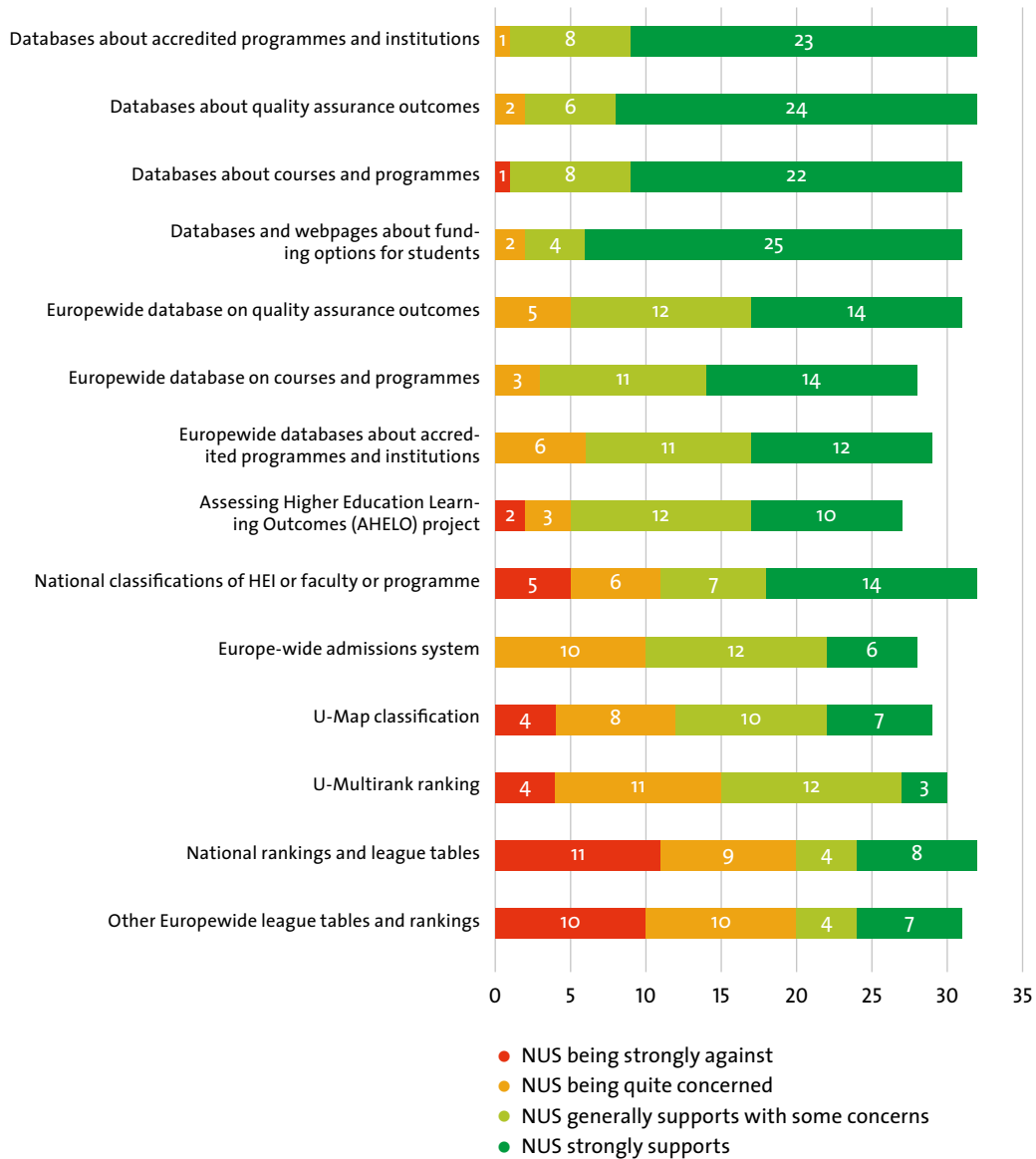- 62% Full support
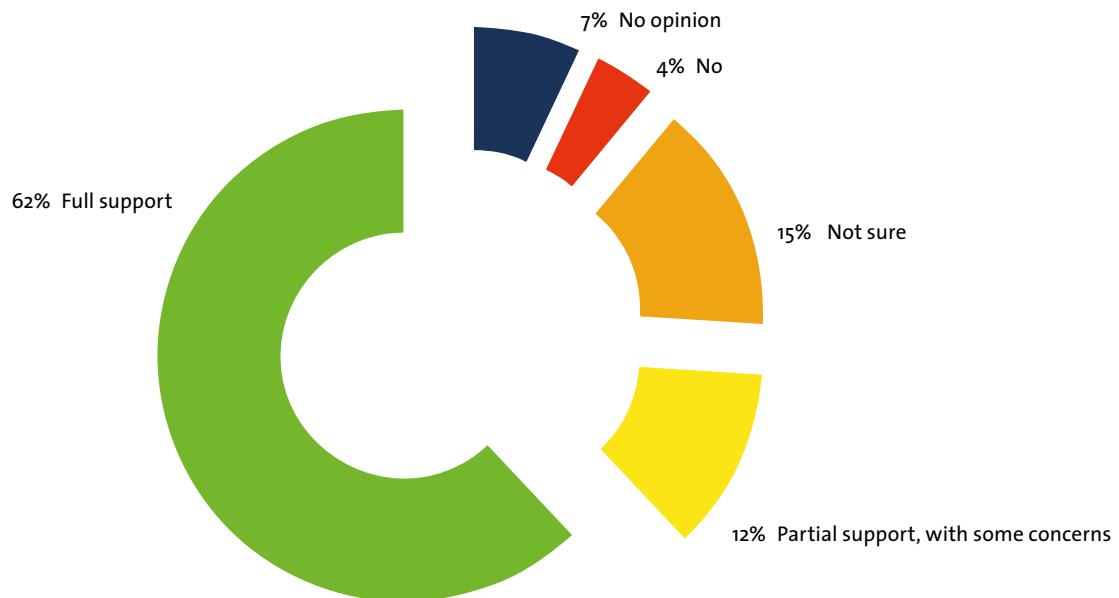
This evolution of the position of the national students' unions can be perceived also by what they expect the impact of the register to be. Together with the answers from 2007 and 2009, certain trends emerge. In 2007 the highest rated expected impact was »transparency of higher education for students« (ESU 2007), in 2009 »enforcing the ESG« (ESU 2009) and in 2012 it seems to be »opening national QA systems for agencies from abroad«. The other one that has gained relevance is »giving the HEIs the possibility to choose from any QA agency from the register«. Both together indicates a trend that students do now find it more realistic that EQAR will benefit the national QA systems in terms of enriching them when it comes to diversity in quality assurance processes and the variety of ways of conducting quality assurance, where institutions should be able to choose according to their needs. This also implies greater support and applicability of common principles advocated through the ESG since for EQAR to function, the different agencies would need to be recognised for their practices in different contexts.

fig. 24 Expected impact of the register
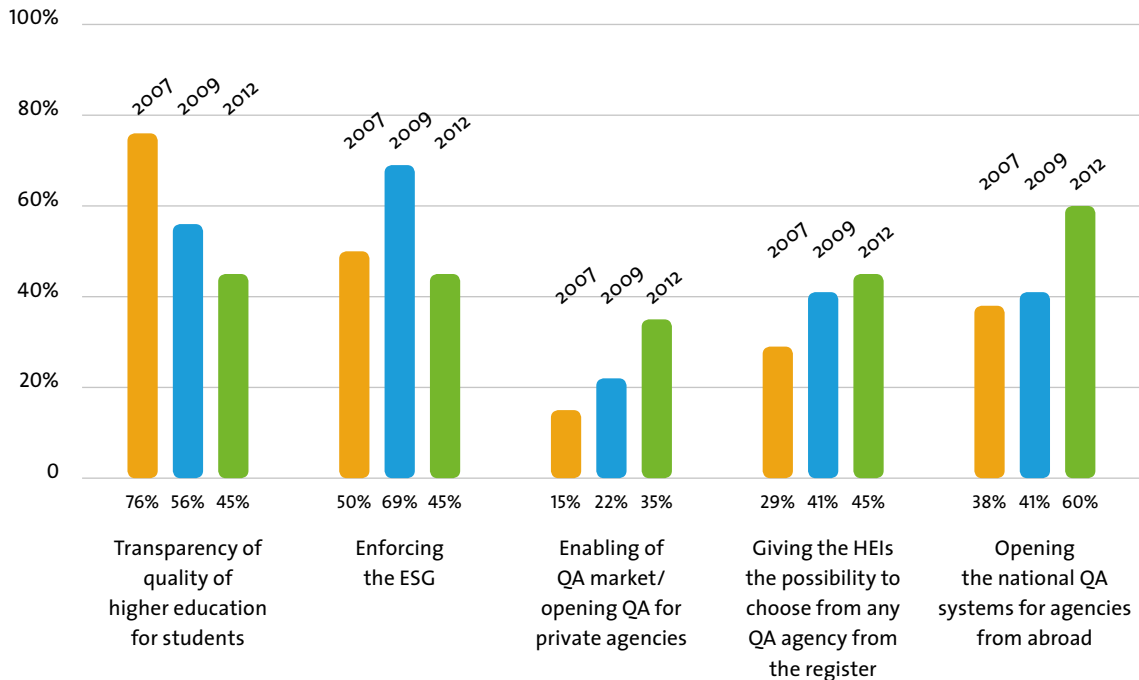
De facto, almost all the unions state that EQAR has not reached its full potential. At the same time the unions are more limited in their view now in terms of passing judgement about what EQAR can actually achieve in terms of impact. While in 2007 they still thought that EQAR could enhance transparency of quality of higher education for students, this was less expected in 2009 and is now even less so in 2012.

	NUS being strongly against
●	NUS being strongly against
●	NUS being quite concerned
●	NUS generally supports with some concerns
●	NUS strongly supports

The unions that know about EQAR add that the role of EQAR must be strengthened (14 out of 17) and all these unions agree that EQAR should be able to organise and conduct its own external evaluations of agencies applying for registration. But they differ on the level of this autonomy of EQAR: 9 out of 16 advocate that EQAR should base the decision-making only on its own evaluations; while 3 unions are of the opinion that EQAR could use both, but preferably using its own external evaluations; with only 2 unions stating that that EQAR should preferably use reports of other reviews.

It is also important for measuring the impact of the register to know the number of agencies operating in Europe and how many of them are registered. About 60 to 70 quality assurance agencies are operating in Europe. Only about 40 quality assurance agencies have undergone an external review of their activities and thus are in a position to make an application to be registered. According to the EQAR self-evaluation report by the 30th of March 2011 a total of 34 quality assurance agencies had applied for inclusion with 24 applications approved. (EQAR 2011.)

Finally, there are some countries that officially recognise EQAR registered agencies in their legislation (EQAR 2011). Nonetheless only a few National Students' Unions are aware of countries where agencies from abroad are allowed to operate in their countries; and being registered is not even always the condition for getting this permission.

SUPPORT FOR TRANSPARENCY TOOLS

One important aspect with regards to quality assurance is its function as a transparency tool to make certain aspects of quality assurance visible and understandable. Transparency has been a desired goal in the Bologna Process since the very beginning with emphasis on comparability and compatibility of systems and degrees (Declaration 1999; ESU 2010). However, since Leuven-Louvain-La-Neuve (Communiqué 2009) the discussion about transparency tools broadened to include taking into account the impact that global and national rankings and new classification tools have been making. It has thus become evident that multiple understandings of transparency tools have emerged (ESU 2010) and that these developments are in parts more relevant to the Bologna Process than before.

When national unions were asked of their support to information tools it is clear that their view is more positive when it comes to national developments over an idea of building tools for information cross-border or on a European scale. Secondly, national unions have a more positive view towards tools that are perhaps more descriptive in nature and that do not seek to create hierarchies. Most notable examples are databases that show or list courses, quality assurance reports and outcomes and accredited institutions or programmes, and where student-funding information is given. That is also more preferred when it comes to creating European tools, but there is a certain scepticism of unions towards European tools in general. It is difficult to determine the exact reason for this other than the fact that these tools are more difficult to build due to differences between national systems.

Concerning European or national tools, especially rankings and classification tools, they then remain controversial issues among unions. Detrimental effects of some of these tools have been explored in many reports and the negative view of rankings is often explained using those arguments. Interestingly, when it comes to international comparison, the view of unions towards the OECD project of Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) is generally positive although it did at first receive some criticism about its aspirations that would allow it to rank institutions. Furthermore, although unions rather strongly support European wide databases on courses, the idea of a common admissions portal that has been put forward at the discussions about EHEA mobility strategy is not convincing to half of the unions. A few comments there again pointed to the incompatibility of systems rather than anything else.

CONCLUSIONS

GENERAL ASPECTS

Quality assurance mechanisms are in constant development where new approaches are starting to be used in several countries, but there are no automatic guarantees or proof that these mechanisms will directly lead to a better quality of higher education. The principle of fitness for purpose should be applied to them and developed in the common framework of the ESG.

Classifications of institutions or linking of quality assurance outcomes too directly to funding decisions are the kind of policies that can became a double-edged sword due to the reallocation of resources. That is sometimes a desired goal for these reforms, aiming to strengthen the different institutions to do better in a variety of missions, but the full effects are not yet known, while certain critiques are pointing out that instead of increasing efficiency of higher education funding, these reforms could jeopardise the quality of some institutions more than others and perhaps also undeservingly so.

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

The involvement of students has improved at all levels since 2009, but there is still considerable room for improvement. Also the involvement at the institutional level, the external evaluation level and the agency governance level is considerably different. The involvement at the institutional level is higher than in the other two, and again the involvement in external evaluation is higher than in agency governance. It seems that there is a reluctance to involve the students at the decision making stage, where the decisions can play a more relevant role.

However, as the QUEST project put in the spotlight, there are some barriers that students find in their involvement even though students are a key player in the quality culture of the universities (Sursock 2011). But the lack of witnessing and participating in consequences of quality assurance processes decrease the confidence and interest of students towards quality assurance.

The case of student pools for quality assurance is a positive action for increasing not only student participation, but also awareness among the student body, where those involved act as multipliers. It can play a significant role for creating quality culture.

In this publication and in the QUEST project, we can identify several countries with high student involvement that could be used as good practice for benchmarking by the countries with lower involvement, even though also in these cases, further development is still needed as in no country involved is perfect.

EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES (ESG)

A high number of national students' unions support the concept of ESG in general but with some concerns. Compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines has improved since 2009, however there is still not full compliance (ENQA 2011). It also differs among the three different parts of the ESG and, ipso facto, in the different institutions (national authorities, QA agencies/bodies and HEIs).

In general, QA agencies/bodies could be seen to comply more with the ESG than HEIs, but that is also due to the nature of Part 3 of the ESG being used as a more direct tool for measuring compliance. In several cases low levels of compliance is due to a very young quality assurance system, without tradition in quality assurance and where the agency is being established or has been only recently established. The trend is to involve more external stakeholders in quality assurance but also in agency governance and internal quality assurance.

EUROPEAN QUALITY ASSURANCE REGISTER (EQAR)

The European Quality Assurance Register seems to be more consolidated than in 2009, but its level of support by the national students' unions has increased very little. Still a substantial number of students' unions do not necessarily see EQAR to be supportable from a student point of view, or are not sure. This shows that for students to believe in EQAR to be a useful institution, EQAR most go beyond being just a register. However, EQAR has not reached its full potential according to the students view.

One interesting element is that although unions overall reported that visibility of quality assurance is problematic, unions' expectations towards EQAR on providing transparency have little importance. This might indicate exactly that this expectation is changing perhaps because unions have not yet seen EQAR taking a prominent role in providing transparency, thus the need for pursuing that objective for EQAR should not be underplayed.

The trend in the expected impact of the register show the support of student representatives to a register as a tool directly developed for the HEIs and agencies, giving the HEIs the option to choose QA agency and enabling QA agencies to work in other countries.

This also relates to the very few countries where QA agencies from abroad are allowed to operate, and the requirements. Nevertheless, there are only few countries that officially recognise EQAR registered agencies in their legislation (EQAR 2011).

The students' unions find it important that EQAR is empowered. This is crucial, as it was pointed out by ESU in one of its last statements (ESU 2011). Being able to organise its own evaluations and thus gather its own evidence for the decision on which agencies get registered and which do not is, in the view of the national students' unions, one of the key points as for how to empower EQAR and make it also a more robust organisation and an a more independent actor.

TRANSPARENCY TOOLS

Rankings and classifications of institutions that also aim to provide information about higher education remain controversial with some unions supporting their development and many seeing little value there. Support of unions towards a variety of tools providing information about higher education demonstrates that descriptive tools are move favoured, whereas many of them are linked or could be better linked with quality assurance. At the same time, European tools even with regards to descriptive tools seem less convincing than those at the national level. The primary reason for this difference is the diversity of systems, which seems also to discourage students' unions from supporting development of common European platforms.

13.4   RECOMMENDATIONS

○ For improving the quality of HE according to the needs of the students, change-leading Quality Assurance should be implemented with a more holistic approach. At the same time a tangible impact should be reached so as to also convince students of its usefulness and to engage them better. This holistic approach of quality assurance must be able to take into account also the organisational settings, social conditions and other circumstances affecting the teaching and learning process of higher education students, such as facilities (libraries, ICT, labs, etc.), student support services, etc. The quality assurance processes should be little bureaucratic as possible but having specific consequences leading to real change and improvement.

○ The role of the students should be enhanced in quality assurance: increasing awareness of quality assurance and looking at ways how quality assurance can contribute better to serve the needs of students when it concerns information provision should be much more in focus than before. This should be done while taking into account the students' understanding of what quality of Higher Education is and of their direct involvement (institutional QA, external evaluations and agency governance).

○ According to the outcomes of the MAP-ESG project, in which project ESU has been one of the partners, the ESG should be revised focusing on its purpose and scope; clarity and usability; and impact and implementation. The stakeholder involvement in the revision of the ESG is a key element, thus QA agencies, HEIs, students as well as academic staff, governments, EQAR and, where appropriate, labour market representatives should be actively involved in the process.

○ The European Quality Assurance Register needs to be empowered and, within its activity, become more directly focussed on students as one group of users. It is crucial that the commitment of all stakeholders, especially of national governments to create a common European Quality Assurance Area where registered agencies are recognised in any country of the EHEA is upheld and strengthened. This should be seen as a crucial foundation for the common European Higher Education to become a tangible reality for students.

○ Quality assurance is a potent transparency tool and there should be more work done to transmit the information about quality assurance outcomes to the wider public and the students, especially linked with information databases that provide descriptive information about higher education such as on programmes and courses.

13.5   CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The future of Quality Assurance should be visible on the policy making agenda and discussed by the main stakeholders with the goal being to strengthen and enhance the current QA systems and to boost their positive impact both nationally and at a European system level.

The momentum gained through the MAP-ESG project and its report needs to be capitalised on in the revision process of the ESG with getting a wide range of stakeholders involved to bring their points of view to the table, while keeping to the consensual principle in the process as to ensure continued and even better ownership of the ESG.

The external evaluation of EQAR also highlights several points for discussion and enabling improvement of the organisation and its impact. The commitment of all the stakeholders is key to keeping EQAR as an important tool for the EHEA.

In the future development of quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area it is absolutely essential to foster both internal and external quality assurance to the same extent: internal quality assurance is the necessary basis for functioning external quality assurance, as there is nothing external QA can assure if there are no functioning internal QA system.

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14 STUDENT PARTICIPATION
IN HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE

14.1 INTRODUCTION

A promise of the Bologna Process Framework was that students would be recognised as equal partners and involved at every level of decision making in higher education (Communiqué 2001). Sadly enough, ten years after this promise was made, it has not been realised. Students' voice is limited to questions directly related to the learning experience. However, one can hardly separate teaching and learning aspects of academic life from the decision-making on fundraising plans, staff policy, and election of institutional leadership.

Student participation in governance of higher education, defined as students' formal and actual ability to influence decisions made in the context of a higher education institution or public authority, has a long history. It originates from the student and academic staff revolts for more democratic and open institutions in early seventies. The underlying argument has been the public role of higher education institutions. As a part of society, they ought to be governed democratically and include the participation of all politically significant constituencies, e.g. students. (Klemenčič 2011.)

Going beyond the principle of various interest groups having a stake, it has been recognised that participatory management in higher education institutions and the participatory ownership enables inclusion in the community and active involvement in shaping the institution; it makes all groups »owners« instead of passive recipients (Fried 2006). The sense of ownership itself is vital for engaging an academic community in the quality culture of an institution, which strongly advocates a bottom-up approach to quality and quality assurance, going beyond mechanisms and practices to build a partnership to improve education.

In the Bologna declaration signed in 1999, there was no reference to students' participation or development of students' involvement. It arrived only with the Prague Communiqué (Communiqué 2001), which stated, »students should participate and influence the organisation and content of education at universities and higher education institutions.« In the same year, due to an extensive lobbying effort, the National Union of Students' in Europe—then ESIB, since 2007 ESU—received a status of an official observer to the Bologna process. This became an immense turning point for an organisation which was initially founded as a forum for information exchange between national unions of students.

In 2001 ESU published it's first policy paper on Student participation in the European Higher Education Area, outlining the main principles for good governance and decision-making in higher education. It states the following: »Students must be

listened to as equal partners and not treated merely as consumers. Students take part in shaping new policies, enhancing quality and contributing to the overall improvement of the education. In order to be able to do this, however, the students need legislation to protect them from being treated unfairly for expressing their opinions« (ESU 2001). ESU has encouraged national governments to commit to creating a legal framework to secure student participation at the national level. In the long term, this created preconditions for ESIB to focus on a two-tier approach: to make its voice heard on the European level[9] and also to assist the national unions to establish themselves as full partners in their higher education systems. A huge challenge for us as an organization and a forum—how to grow into a fierce political animal, and at the same time to keep connected to the grass-roots level.

14.2 MAIN FINDINGS

GENERAL ASPECTS

Comparing the Berlin Communiqué (Communiqué 2003), which officially recognised students as full partners in higher education governance, to the current existing practice around Europe, one might notice that genuine student participation is facing obstacles.

Various policy agendas, notably the Commission's Modernisation Agenda (Commission 2006), continuously promote the idea of more external entities becoming involved in strategic governance of an institution. The rationale behind this is that it is believed that an external eye can help an institution to better respond societal demands, spend public resources more effectively, make a profit where possible, and more closely monitor developments in the labour market and skill demands.

Over the last few years we have witnessed an increasing pressure on higher education institutions to compete against each other; this does not adequately reflect the change in the role of higher education in societies. The increasingly knowledge-intensive economies result in a higher demand for graduates. Student enrolment thus grew without being matched by adequate public spending for higher education institutions to support the increase.

Traditionally, higher education institutions were required to demonstrate their accountability through quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms. In the Berlin Communiqué (Communiqué 2003), ministers acknowledged the importance of institutional autonomy in assuring and demonstrating quality. Within a context of increased competition between institutions, they are now no longer in a situation where they only need to improve and demonstrate their quality to receive public funding. Now, institutions are fighting for continued existence as public spending for education is often cut. Institutions are frequently forced to use their autonomy to make fast decisions about long-term strategies to survive. Within this crisis management mode, there is not time and space left for including students as partners. Students are therefore increasingly seen as customers, consulted when it comes to their satisfaction rate but denied a say in top level decisions.

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9   According to the Berlin Communiqué (2003), ESIB together with 5 other stakeholder organizations and representatives of all members of the Bologna Process has been admitted to a Bologna Follow-up Group, which is responsible for the steering of the Bologna Process between the Ministerial Meetings.

The 23rd European Students' Convention, which took place on 15–18th February in Budapest, Hungary, sought to address this worrying trend. Student representatives from all over Europe were invited to assess the level of their involvement in the following aspects of decision-making in their higher education institution:

- Aspects directly related to academic and learning processes

- Financial aspects (including tuition fees)

- Staff policy aspects (hiring and promotion of staff, teacher training)

- Aspects directly related to the management of the institution (Rectors' elections)

- Aspects related to internationalisation of the institution

It is almost impossible to give a full summary of all the replies collected from the unions taking part in this mapping exercise, but the main message coming out from the student representatives, reflected in the Budapest Declaration (ESU 2011), was clear enough: »There is no genuine student participation in Europe.«

There are very concrete examples which illustrate the pessimistic tone of the Budapest Declaration (ESU 2011). ANOSR (Romania) reports the provisions regarding student leverage in election of executive positions, which reduced the share of student representatives from 25% to 10%. According to another ESU member, FZS (Germany), introduction of university boards (Hochschulräte) in some regional states lead to a reduction of the responsibilities of the academic senates, where students have had guaranteed seats, in favor of the university boards, where students are not necessarily represented. There are more alarming signals; students are loosing their influence on the strategic aspects of governance which concern them —for example, setting tuition fees. This has been documented in replies from national student unions such as ÖH Austria, HÖOK Hungary and others. Even though later we will see that overall, students' places in governance structures seem to be better regulated in the national legislation, in actuality, this either resulted in lowering students' share in the decision-making structure or limiting their participation to only academic issues, which can hardly be described as the partnership promised in 2001 (Communiqué 2001).

On the other hand, over the last two years there has been significant improvement in some areas, such as student involvement in improving teaching processes through participation as course representatives in program committees and involvement in external quality reviews. However, students' participation in quality assurance should not be minimised to what Luescher-Mamashela describes as »clients« or be limited to the solicitation of student participation for the purposes of feedback for improved quality performance (Luescher-Mamashela 2010).

The most extensive study so far on student participation in higher education in Europe was conducted in 2003 under the request of the Council of Europe (Persson 2004). In the study, students' participation was analysed from three aspects:

1   Formal provisions for student participation based on higher education governance

2   Other provisions for student participation

3   The actual practice of student participation

Those aspects also defined the future framework for monitoring developments in student participation under the Bologna Process until now. Previously, the first objective for the national unions, as seen in the main policy documents adopted in 2001-2003, was to make legal or constitutional mechanisms to ensure the existence of student representation, as full membership with a decision-making right in higher education governance at the national level. In 2003 this was a case only for half of the EHEA member states (Persson 2004). More positively, in 2003 all countries except two reported the existence of legal mechanisms ensuring student representation and participation in the governance of higher education institutions (Persson 2004).

Since 2005, ESU has been reporting overall positive changes in legal regulation of student participation at the national level, such as a separate provision for the status of national unions or minimum benchmarks regarding state support for student activities, (ESU 2005; 2007). Further progress includes an increase in student involvement measured in the minimum number of student representative positions in decision-making bodies. In 2009, ten national systems experienced this increase; two systems experienced a decrease (ESU 2009).

Following the positive trend described above, the year 2011 should have seen even higher rates of student participation and relevant regulation throughout EHEA. However, this was not the case. LUS (Luxemburg), for example, still reports that there is no official legislation ensuring a minimum number of student representatives in governance structures. As a result, any consultation process with the students happens mainly by the good will of decision-makers, which creates serious obstacles for strong student representation.

ESU's member unions have continually identified the Bologna Process as a driving force for increasing student participation (ESU 2009). In some countries (Slovakia, United Kingdom), national unions of students have recognised the positive influence of Bologna Process in empowering students as equal stakeholders in decision-making. Unions also notice the developments under European Commissions' Modernisation Agenda (Commission 2006), which promotes more efficient governance structures and involvement of externals to decide on strategic issues, such as appointing leadership of the institution, adopting the budget.

While introducing new governance structures which separate the executive leadership of the organization from the academic issues, students seem to be gradually removed from decision-making on the strategic issues or their role is minimised to a consultative level with no voting rights. The national unions fear that this defeats the concept of students as partners, turning them into the passive consumers, concerned solely about the provision of their education for personal future benefits.

fig. 26 *What is the percentage of students represented in the HEI decisional bodies:*

- Under 15%
- 15% to 20%
- 21% to 25%
- More than 25%
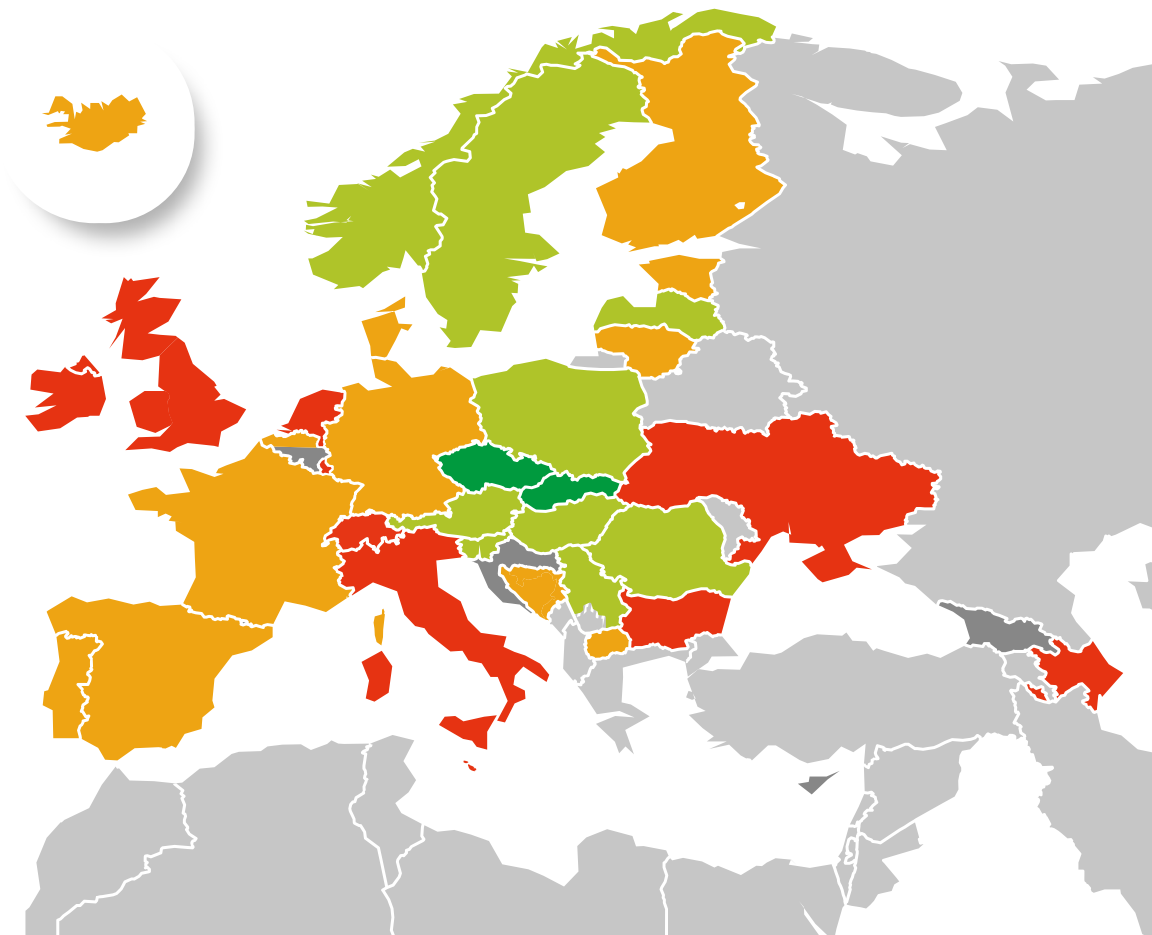
Other provisions for student participation in higher education governance which are not necessarily regulated by law, i.e. national students' unions having a representative in the national Bologna Process follow up group, are currently acceptable except for a number of cases like Azerbaijan and Luxemburg, where students are not involved in Bologna reforms on the national level. However, when it comes to input for drafting the Bologna stocktaking report, nearly 30% of ESU member unions claimed that they have not been approached. This illustrates a significant need for improvement in collection of relevant information and data within EHEA.

According to our survey, national unions of students generally report having gained quite a significant level of leverage, which can mean involvement in various expert groups, management of student support facilities, in a number of cases they are responsible for the national EUROSTUDENT[10]. This has been achieved primarily due to the active campaigning of national students' unions.

The actual practice of student representation is much more difficult to capture by our survey. The exciting diversity of organisational approaches across 38 countries within ESU member unions is remarkable. These approaches seem to be strongly influenced by the level of civic engagement in the country. Student participation often shapes itself to fit the national context.

Ultimately, it is not only the number of student representatives at the decision-making bodies which matters, but also the institutional culture built on fundamental democratic principles where students are recognised as partners and have a say on all aspects of governance.

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10 The main aim of the EUROSTUDENT project is to collate comparable data on the social dimension of European higher education.

fig. 27 *Effects of the Bologna Process to the enhancement of the student participation.*

- ● Reduction, bad effect
- ● No effect at all
- ● Some/little effect
- ● Significant effect
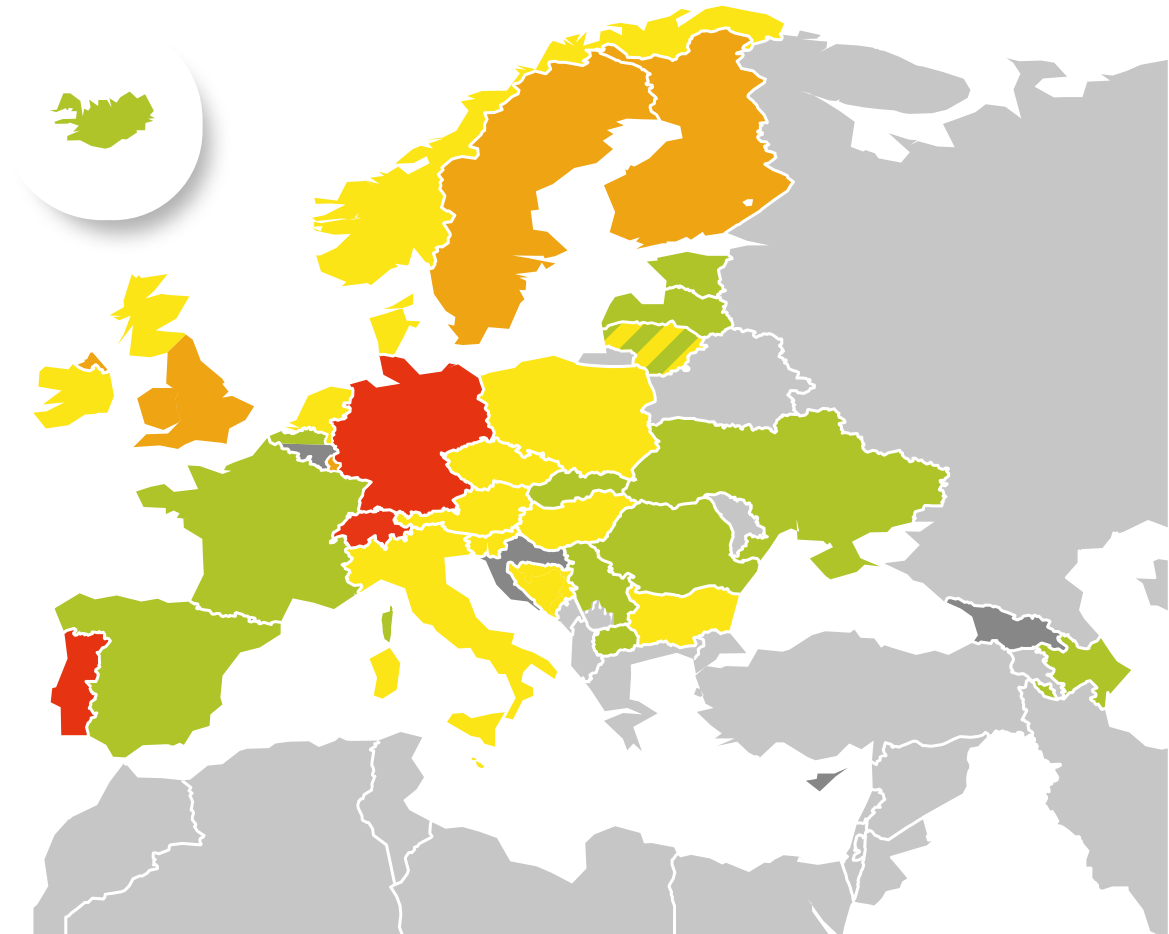
14.3   CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

○ Instead of treating students as partners with the relevant perspective and experience on higher education, there is a growing threat of students being increasingly viewed as passive customers, while the ongoing inclusion of a broader group of external stakeholders and shift to the »new managerialism« have resulted in changes in HEI governance structures. In a longer run, that can lead to the dilution of student representation in higher education institutions or minimising it to the level of completing satisfaction surveys.

○ Quality of data available on students' participation across EHEA is still considerably poor and must be improved. A possibility to launch a large-scale study on students' participation, outlining benefits of the latter for the society, higher education institution and individual should be further explored.

○ It is still too early to proclaim partnership as the level of students' participation all through EHEA. Students do have an increasing say on the matters directly related to the learning process (like curricula design), however, they are being gradually excluded from the top-level decisions. It is important that students are recognised as competent and constructive partners with a say on all aspects of governance, since decisions themselves are interlinked. For example, students allowed a seat in the programme committee but not involved in designing the academic staff policy, where they can make observations and suggestions on how to improve quality of teaching through creative and relevant incentives.

14.4   RECOMMENDATIONS

○ Students' participation in higher education governance at all levels (institutional, national, international/intergovernmental) must be secured by the national or regional legislation.

○ Students should be recognised as competent and constructive partners to have a say on all aspects of governance of higher education institutions: academic process related, financial, structural and other.

○ The emerging diversity of the student population and the importance of widening access to non-traditional learners must be taken into account by a students' representative body (i.e. developing policies to promote integration of students with disabilities). Moreover, student participation should not be limited by any criteria such as academic performance, age, gender, race, religion, or sexual orientation.

○ Participating in student union activities should be seen as an opportunity to put theory into practice and to gain useful knowledge and skills on negotiating, democratic decision making, political work, training, and organizing events. This should also be recognised as a part of a degree and awarded with credits.

○ Stakeholders' (among them, students') involvement in data collection and validation across EHEA must be improved.

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15 EHEA—TIME FOR A »NEW DEAL«?

15.1 INTRODUCTION

The goal of the Bologna Process in creating a European area of higher education has, from the beginning, been a very ambitious undertaking. However, despite the considerable progress which has been made towards more coordinated policies on the European level, Bologna With Student Eyes 2012 has documented many shortcomings in consistency and pace in implementation of the adopted targets.

The European Students' Union (ESU) has continuously made a strong effort to contribute to European integration through representing students on the European level. In the Bologna Process, ESU has taken a role of being a supportive but critical friend, evaluating the benefits of proposals and actions against the interests of students and the realities students are experiencing. Congregating the diverse opinions of 45 national unions of students and conveying these in the Bologna Process framework towards national government representatives and various stakeholders has been ESU's main aim for acting on European level. In the end, students are the group that the Bologna Process reforms are having the most impact on. Therefore, according to ESU, stronger participation of students in the development of the Bologna Process on all levels should be encouraged. It will enable student unions and individual students to better understand the purpose of the reforms and further contribute to European integration in higher education.

15.2   MAIN FINDINGS

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BOLOGNA PROCESS

The Bologna Process started explosively, and its early years were characterised by rapid expansion in terms of the number of participating countries, intensive development of policy initiatives, and the range policy areas it covered. However, in many countries it's implementation was accompanied by often equally strong resistance or ignorance from the students' or the teachers' side; that sometimes also manifested in protest.

ESU has warned several times that the Bologna aims cannot be reached as long as member states are approaching the implementation in an à la carte way, picking what is convenient and not making an effort to achieve more fundamental changes or addressing those areas and issues that are of lower priority for governments (ESU 2010). While it should be noted that governments want to naturally keep full sovereignty over a sensitive area like education and that Higher Education Institutions strive for increased autonomy, it will be difficult to achieve a true EHEA without reaching minimum standards of commitment and integration (ESU 2011b).

Essentially, the Bologna Process itself lacks any effective tools to support integrated implementation on the agreed reforms. The process possesses neither a permanent secretariat nor an independent budget, and is only supported by the small BFUG Secretariat accommodated by the host of the forthcoming Ministerial Conference.

After gaining more relevance in the minds of the national governments, the Bologna Process has been remarkably successful in including stakeholders on a European level in decision-making processes and implementation follow-up (Westerheijden et al 2010). The possibility to influence and contribute to the work of the BFUG has been crucial for ESU's overall support for the process. The backing from European stakeholders of the higher education community has been imperative for gaining support for implementing the process, rather than facing opposition.

Despite the good practice of stakeholder participation on the European level, a worrying trend related to the system level seems to be emerging. The last three years have shown a lack of even basic consultation with stakeholders regarding the national response to the stocktaking exercise and discussions while preparing for the Ministerial conferences. This can be attributed either to the perception of low relevance of stakeholders' opinion or to the noted decline in the significance of the process, which has led to a rush tick-box exercise and formalistic approach to tackling Bologna-related issues.

Over the past five years, member unions in ESU continue to perceive that the Bologna Process has a high level of relevance for the debate about higher education reforms in their country. However, impact of initiatives made by the EU is also considered widely important, both within and outside the EU-27. The last three years have been influenced by intensive reforms in governance, funding, research, and innovation policies, which in essence are not considered in depth in the Bologna Process. However, these key policy lines are viewed by national unions of students as more important than the Bologna Process reforms, from their context. All these are notable key policy lines attributed to EU strategies such as the Modernisation Agenda (European Commission 2011 and 2006a) and the European Research Area. If the Bologna Process is to remain appealing to decision-makers and various interest groups over the coming years, regenerating relevance by keeping up with important trends will be crucial.

THE BOLOGNA PROCESS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Bologna Process did not evolve in a vacuum, but was influenced by other parallel processes, having similar aims and objectives. While the Bologna Process initially was an intergovernmental initiative, it has increasingly become more dependent and intertwined with the policies of the EU, which saw creation of the European Higher Education Area as a step towards gaining more competitiveness against the outside world. Despite that many of the same actors are sitting around the table, both in the Bologna Process and the EU institutions (such as the Education, Youth, Culture and Sports Council), many policies in overlapping areas still turn out to have conflicting principles and policy targets.

Before the Bologna Process, there had already been a long history of European cooperation in higher education, indeed reaching as far back as just after the Second World War (Corbett 2007). Multiple international organisations and initiatives facilitated this cooperation, such as the Council of Europe, OECD, and the European Communities. However, it never came close to reaching the same level of comprehensiveness as instigated by the Bologna Process in 1999. While ministers of education across Europe embarked on the Bologna Process, the heads of states in the EU adopted the Lisbon Agenda in 2000, with the aim »to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world« (European Council 2000). The early years of the Bologna Process were characterised by competition between the European Commission and the national governments regarding who should play the leading role in developing European integration in higher education until the cooperation found a more harmonious tone; the ministerial conference in Berlin took note of the Lisbon Agenda and called for action and closer co-operation in the context of the Bologna Process (Communiqué 2003).

After a few years, the European Commission integrated the Bologna Process into its Education and Training 2010 Framework (European Commission 2004), followed by more intensive development of EU policies in higher education (European Commission 2005). Since this time, the Bologna Process has been characterised as »Lisbonized« (Capano et al 2011). This means that the fundamental goals of the Bologna Process had been taken on board by the Commission, but also that the development of the Bologna Process to a large degree had to be seen in close connection with the EU developments.

The conflated relation between the Bologna Process and the EU policies in higher education has been challenging from the onset, with differences in governance and decision-making on one hand, but also many common targets on the other. ESU has many times approached the relation between the Bologna Process and EU policies with calls for caution. For years, the perceived underlying principles steering the policies of the Bologna Process vs. the EU policies has been seen as prone to collide and threaten students' interest. In Bologna at the Finish Line, ESU warned that »interferences between the two processes have led to a lesser focus on the Bologna Process goals than on the Lisbon Agenda points and to contradictions between goals within the two processes; such as the governance modes of higher education institutions« (ESU 2010).

The most palpable distinction between higher education policy making in the EU and the Bologna Process is the regional scope. While policy of the EU is mainly formed between the 27 EU members, the Bologna Process now extends to 47 countries. This makes the Bologna Process the largest coordinated higher education reform in history, and brings together many European countries which would not participate in the consolidation of systems otherwise. However, the EU-funded programmes and policies also spread beyond the member states, as many more countries participate in the Lifelong Learning Programme and Tempus, which support the idea of further European integration.

Clearly, the development of cooperation within the EU operates under very different preconditions. Higher education policies as discussed and adopted in the EU framework are less independent from the overall policy framework of lifelong learn-

ing, economic and employment policies and have concrete goals to achieve. The Lisbon Agenda exploited higher education as a mean to reach other political targets, mainly prioritising economic growth. ESU has criticised this for regarding higher education too much as an economic tool. The current strategy of the EU in higher education is set by the Europe 2020 Strategy and hopes to create a smart, sustainable, and inclusive EU economy. The strategy puts great importance on more and better skills for future jobs through the benchmark of at least 40% of 30 to 34 year olds completing tertiary education by 2020. To gain more competitiveness on the international level, 3% of the EU's GDP are to be allocated on research, development, and innovation.

The higher education targets, policy recommendations towards member states, and concrete EU actions have been formulated in a renewed issue of the Agenda for the Modernisation of Europe's higher education systems (European Commission 2011a). It elaborates on the focus of the Modernisation Agenda from 2006. The capacity of the EU to put financial resources behind their decisions through the EU budget, education, and research programmes and cohesion funds give the EU a far greater set of tools for implementation and a better potential for impact. The priority the European Commission puts in higher education has been proven by the large increase in funding for student mobility proposed in the Erasmus for All programme (European Commission 2011b).

Perhaps the clearest case precipitating the fear of contention is the discrepancy between the principle of higher education as a public good and public responsibility in the Bologna Process, and the absence of the equivalent in EU policy documents. Public responsibility is frequently connected to financing of higher education in the Bologna Process, putting forward a certain commitment to fund higher education and students through public sources (Communiqué 2009, and Communiqué 2003). While the EU on multiple occasions has pushed for increased public funding of higher education, it has also called for more cost sharing and overall diversification of financial streams (European Commission 2011a). One of the private sources suggested and recommended to member states is introducing or increasing tuition fees (European Commission 2006a). The Commission has also frequently argued for seeing higher education more as a private good, often as a basis for justifying private contributions (European Commission 2006b). This view has not resonated in the Bologna Process yet. Since the fundamental view and concrete policy effects are so different, it is a potential conflict between the policy in the Bologna Process and the EU.

Reforming the structure of governance of higher education has not been a key focus in the Bologna Process. Nevertheless, certain principles have been emphasised which have great implications for steering, especially the democratic inclusion of the higher education community. Where the Bologna Process consistently stresses that students should participate in and influence the organisation and content of education at universities and other higher education institutions (Communiqué 2001), and recognises that it is ultimately the active participation of all partners in the Process that will ensure its long-term success. The process also underlines that students are full partners in higher education governance (Communiqué 2003). The EU, on the other hand, maintains that governance of higher education is a key focus, notably in the Modernisation Agenda (European Commission 2006a). In the agenda, the Commission has called for more diversification of institutional profiles, radical corporatizing of institutional management and leadership, more diversified funding streams, increasing efficiency in spending, etc. In response to this trend, ESU has pointed out that a governance structure which labels students as consumers while exclusively relying on increased power of external stakeholders and institutional competitiveness have diluted the principle of staff and student representation in governance of institutions (ESU 2011a).

The continuous blurring of policies in the Bologna Process and the EU is perhaps mainly an interesting question from inside the process and perceived less relevant for the higher education community and larger public. Bologna at the Finish Line

concluded, »When looking at the Bologna Process from a more external viewpoint there is little understanding of the differences between the Bologna Process and the Lisbon strategy.« However, as »Bologna is more widely known, it gets labelled for short-comings it is not really responsible for. Bologna is thus used as scapegoat for either the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy goals or the implementation of whatever is convenient for the national government« (ESU 2010).

From a students' point of view, the perceived difference in preference towards either the Bologna Process or EU higher education policies is probably indistinguishable. This is mainly because of the low level of information and transparency in how these processes affect individual students' learning experiences. Member unions, however, report that the general sentiments of students are more favourable more towards the Bologna Process than the EU. This could be because the Bologna framework remains more student-friendly in terms of governance and decision-making.

It seems to be the case that most students have no information or knowledge about the link between European reform agendas and their everyday situation; it seems to have no noticeable impact either way. This is an important point to consider, since the success of any creation process (such as creation of European Higher Education Area) must have the support of its main beneficiaries.

15.3 CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

With several European governance structures fuelling reforms in higher education on national and institutional levels, with agendas converging, conflicting, and excluding in equal parts, and which from the outside are largely indistinguishable from one another, some form of consolidation should be considered. Although the differentiation between the Bologna Process and EU policies is rather clear in scope and political direction, the double focus for governments and higher education institutions are bound to produce fewer results than focusing on one direction.

When member unions were asked to score to what degree they expected higher education policies would be influenced by European or international processes in the next decade (2012–2020), they still believed national policies would remain most important for higher education in the coming years. Interestingly, a higher number of unions anticipated EU influence over higher education in Europe as more likely than continued hegemony and intensification of the Bologna Process over the next year.

When looking at the past, the Bologna Process seems to be the most innovative source of new higher education policies and initiatives in Europe. The question remains how far and how fast its current status may evolve further. How far will the process be assimilated into the Commission's ambit? (Neave and Maassen 2007). If the Bologna Process is going to remain leading in delivering European cooperation in higher education, the efficacy and relevance of the process must be reinforced.

To address the shortfall in implementation tools available in the Bologna Process, the effectiveness and strategy behind the working methods require discussion. Some of the policy targets have been granted with relatively strong implementation mechanisms, such as quality assurance with the European Standards and Guidelines or mobility with a concrete benchmark by 2020. However, other areas such as the social dimension, employability, and student-centred learning still lag behind with few or no effective points of reference on the European level. The potential use and possible development of standards, guidelines, indicators, and benchmarks should therefore be discussed in order to deliver a more comprehensive implementation strategy for the Bologna Process.

15.4   CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

European higher education integration has progressed through 13 years. However, a limbo between diverse national systems and European coordination still exists. Ways to overcome slow rate of implementation and challenges created by two parallel European policies in higher education should be explored further. Renewed commitment to the Bologna Process should take advantage of both the strengths in the Bologna Process and the EU, and implement stronger policy coordination tools based on treaty regulation (the mobility treaty), new European indicators, and reinforced data collection and monitoring.

Recommendations to policy makers:

- The Bologna Process should be rebuilt on an approach based on targets for minimum expected standards of implementation. One particular consequence of failure to meet minimum standards should be the revocation of the Bologna >label<. This label should be reserved for policy areas where countries have properly implemented the correct policy measures. Ignoring minimum standards risks affecting the coherency of the European Higher Education Area. This should not become an incentive for reaching the minimum threshold, but enable the progress.

- For the overarching policy targets on social dimension, lifelong learning, and employability, clear and concrete indicators should be developed and tied to the national targets. Data collection and analysis must be improved on the European level, including independent alternatives to the current stocktaking exercise, which is too dependent on the governments' own perceptions.

- The Bologna Process implementation on the national level should be reinforced. 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. Devise and implement a system of scrutiny for the implementation of Bologna focusing on improvement rather than penalization.

- The EU should refocus the higher education policy on supporting the targets in the Bologna Process rather than developing competing policy agendas. Cohesion funds, such as the European Social Fund, can be better used to support reforms pursuing the Bologna Process.

- There needs to be consistent consultation and involvement of national stakeholders in Bologna implementation. Students as well as academic staff and other stakeholders are the ones bearing the brunt of any change and thus should be part of any discussion and decision. National BFUGs that include stakeholders should be established or revitalized and given an important mandate for Bologna coordination and promotion in every country.

- While the structure of higher education systems is being reformed, little is being done to make it comprehensible to the wider public, especially students. It is crucial for ministers to commit to establishing credible and easy to use guidance systems for different actors in higher education and to communicate what the European Higher Education Area is about.

- While improving information about the outcome of the Bologna Process reforms, the political accountability in the Bologna Process and European higher education policies must be improved, gain more public support towards the process, and meet the values of democracy and openness emphasised in multiple communiqués. Transparency

of decisions and the link between European policies and national implementation must be clear for a broader public and the higher education community. Closed bodies such as the Council of the European Union and the BFUG should improve communications about the work in progress.

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