

## **An ehea stuck in traffic** *Un EEES atascado en el tráfico*

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### **Abstract:**

In this contribution the author gives a personal impression from a European students' point of view on the implementation of the Bologna Process' action lines in the past years and the challenges that lie ahead for the 2012 Ministerial Conference in Bucharest, Romania. Starting off with the Bologna Burns protest at the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bologna Process in 2009 the author outlines the different problems the Bologna implementation has known and the causes that are holding the European Higher Education Area from a full completion.

Looking forward to 2012 the author advises how the EHEA can revamp and become a true area for educational exchange of high quality. Not only does he cite a list of 14 priorities for 2012 created by the European Students' Union, but he also poses a demand for a more binding Bologna Process, that forces the signatory countries to commit themselves more clearly to progress in the next years and help other countries to do so as well.

**Keywords:** European Higher Education Area, Bologna Process, European Students' Union, Bologna Process, Indignados, Binding targets for Bologna, Mobility, Social Dimension, 2012 Bucharest Ministerial Conference

### **Resumen**

En esta contribución, el autor ofrece su impresión personal sobre el punto de vista de los estudiantes sobre la aplicación del Proceso de Bolonia' y sobre las líneas de actuación introducidas en los últimos años así como los retos que se avecinan en relación a la Conferencia Ministerial de 2012 en Bucarest, Rumania. Comenzando con las quemadas llevadas a cabo en 2009 en Bolonia con ocasión del 10<sup>º</sup> aniversario de la Declaración de Bolonia, el autor describe los distintos problemas que sufrido la aplicación de Bolonia y las causas que frenan la plena realización del Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior.

Mirando hacia adelante al2012, el autor sugiere cómo el EEES se podría renovar y convertirse en un verdadero espacio para el intercambio educativo de alta calidad. No sólo se cita la lista de 14 prioridades para el año 2012 creada por la Unión de Estudiantes Europeos, sino que se demanda un proceso de Bolonia más vinculante, que obligue a los países signatarios a comprometerse con mayor claridad en los avances previstos para los próximos años y en ayudar a otros países a hacer lo mismo.

**Palabras clave:** Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior, Proceso de Bolonia, Sindicatos de Estudiantes Universitarios, Indignados, Movilidad, Conferencia de Bucarest 2012

## **Introduction**

Important to remember: this is a personal contribution from Bert Vandenkendelaere, former chairperson of the European Students' Union. Though some of the positions of the European Students' Union are repeated in the contribution, the text is based on a completely personal point of view by the author and has no connection to the European Students' Union as such.

This contribution wishes to give an overview of what the European Higher Education Area has meant for European students and what challenges remain to be handled with in the future. The opinion paper starts off in 2009 with the heavy student protests in front of the Hofburg in Vienna where European Ministers of Higher Education were celebrating the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their work implementing the Bologna Process and the grand opening of the European Higher Education Area.

In this paper I attempt to paint a realistic picture of the evolution of the Bologna Process implementation in recent years and the factors related to its current situation, which is to say the least, a challenging one. I will use the protest, the protesters and their opinions as a leitmotiv to demonstrate what is playing in the development of the European Higher Education Area. I will nuance some of the claims of the protesters, I will add some of my own.

During a second part of this article I want to highlight my personal view on two particular actions on which the European Higher Education Area can really establish its reputation and create support for further implementations: social dimension and mobility. But as the EHEA creators had much more ambition than just in these two fields, I think it is appropriate after that to refer in detail to the European Students' Union's Bologna Statement in which they outline the necessary steps to take for the European Ministers of Higher Education if we want the Bologna Process to survive after 2012. Because yes, the situation is this bad. There is a threat to further Bologna implementation, as the enthusiasm to do so is declining rapidly in different circles.

After the celebrations in Vienna in 2009 it seemed the Bologna Process was no longer a priority, not for stakeholders and not for governments, and now there is a need to renew the ambitions and finish what was started, in a holistic way. Though the European Students' Union's Bologna Statement is an official opinion paper of 11 million European students, the rest of this article is merely the opinion of one person. It is built on my personal experience being part of the European Students' Union, and the discussions I have had with many of the key persons behind the Bologna Process during the past two years. I have no intention at all to write a scientific history of the Bologna Process implementation. This is just a personal impression of where the European Higher Education Area is going, written by a young European citizen, admittedly a bit upset by the way things are going.

## **Bologna-indignados.**

I am stuck in traffic as some 6000 'indignados' (Spanish for upset, indignant) take over the streets of Brussels. A feisty and colourful group of people with red hair, stray dogs and no jobs. They have come by foot, all the way from Spain, to protest against the almighty power of the banks, the dependence of politicians on the financial world and the globalisation of our economies at the cost of the "new poor" in our society. The "new poor" being the young and unemployed generation that is suffering from the financial and economic crisis in Europe. On their way from Spain they have brought along people from all over Europe that face the same pitiful situation and want to express the same anger towards the –guilty- institutions: the bank, the stock exchange and the European Union. Some of them might indeed be suffering, but when I see them walking by my car I cannot help but consider that most of them are there to protest and nothing more: anarchism in its purest form. It was partially the same kind of crowd that I saw blocking the streets in Vienna, when Ministers and student representatives were queuing to enter the illustrious Hofburg for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bologna Process gala night and the official opening of the European Higher Education Area. They were also 'indignados', then under the name of 'Bologna Burns' claiming that the Bologna Process had ruined their future, their personal development and was a plan dictated by the European captains of industry. I am an indignado too. But not like them.

## **Not just an indignado: nuancing the reasons to protest.**

I can agree with the fact that the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary gala night and official opening of the EHEA was a very expensive and elitist way of celebrating a non-event, but that the Bologna Process has ruined the lives of many young Europeans goes too far. It is true that a lot still has to be done, and a list of things to be done will follow in this contribution, but the possibilities that have opened up for European students thanks to the reforms in the last ten years are immense.

Firstly we should consider that a reform that levels all education systems in Europe, though so influenced by their surrounding cultures, in just ten years is an utopia which almost came true in the past ten years. Overseas American, African and Asian colleagues are admiringly looking at Europe for the fast pace of reforms, the easily found harmony in systems and for the rather peaceful way this has all happened. Despite all the protests, let's not forget that studying a part of your studies abroad has been a wish of many students, which became closer to reality than ever before and is less bothered by red tape than ever before.

Secondly, students have indeed experienced a growing pressure on workload and a change in how things are being taught in higher education (more applied work, papers), but instead of fighting this as a threat to our personal freedom, we should embrace this as a change to modern forms of education as student-centred learning and a change to an education which is fit for both our personal development and a successful transition to the labour market.

Thirdly, it is absolutely normal that a change comes with protest, and a significant change like the Bologna Process has been for European higher education comes with significant protest. But there were also a lot of 'indignados' amongst the protesters in Leuven, in Vienna, in many European cities: there to protest, to raise anarchy and to defeat European higher education cooperation. Or as a general message of the Bologna Burns movement appeared to be: *'Because when Ministers meet, they are up to something. When things change top down in our society, there must be an economic agenda behind it. And there already is no more place for individualism and particularities in our society. So the Bologna Process is just another form of globalisation, and we will all become numbers.'*

### **There were righteous claims...**

Forgive me for generalising the Bologna Burns movement of 2009: I am convinced there are some righteous claims that came out of the movement: indeed not the entire Bologna Process had been implemented in the right way up to 2009. There has been a partial implementation, Ministers preferred to implement politically popular changes first, rather than going for a steady and complete implementation on all the Bologna action lines. This was not in line with the original intentions of the Bologna Process, where the action lines have never been ranked in importance, though in practice this happened. That partial implementation furthermore has been promoted and explained minimally, leading to confusion and hence frustration because nobody entirely knew what was happening, where it came from and where it was going to. If you don't over-inform the subjects that will undergo the change, they are likely to get frightened by the sudden change, especially because they don't know the big story. And even as of today, when talking to students, the Bologna Process, or the EHEA seems to have become a much more widespread name, but the end goals of the EHEA or the origins of it remain to be unknown to the large public. Every change needs advertising, and this has lacked during the first years of Bologna implementation. This was a serious misjudgement in the implementation of the European Higher Education Area and has resulted in the protests, in a negative name for the Bologna Process in some circles and in a reform fatigue amongst students, academic staff and even government officials. Because we should not be mistaken: the academic staff on every level and the government officials on every level were also uninformed and frustrated because of it.

More than that, if the protesters were to be concerned their poorer colleagues, they were right in protesting as of all the action lines in the Bologna Process the work on the Social Dimension in European Higher Education has gone the slowest of all and today I have little hope for short term improvement in the ways of access and success for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, let alone a significant increase in mobility possibilities for those generations. The European Union is backing a pan-European loan scheme and European governments can't wait to copy the example of the United Kingdom where public funding for higher education is decreasing rapidly and much more linked to economic return than before. It is not the fault of the Bologna Process that this happens, it is not the fault of the Bologna Process that our

society elected more liberal politicians that have the nerve and enough public support to back out of public funding for higher education, and it is not the fault of the Bologna Process that it is and will be more difficult for young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds to have access to higher education, or a mobility experience. It is the fault of the Bologna Process players though, that the promises that were made in the past years around Social Dimension in the EHEA have not been fulfilled. But it remains a question if the same willingness to fulfil them from when the promises were made is still around the table, especially given the changed circumstances. I will continue to hold – together with the European Students' Union – that despite the economic downturn and the changed European voting behaviour, it is a matter of priority and of insight in how to rebuild a society and an economy, and there are no excuses for not moving forward on more social dimension in the EHEA.

Additionally, if the protesters were frustrated for being treated differently than their neighbours in other countries, they were right too. It is often said that the Bologna Process has known a two-speed implementation where Eastern Europe is on a slower pace than Western Europe, but I would extend this idea and pose that there are as many paces in implementation as there are countries part of the European Higher Education Area. As I will come back to later in this contribution, the fact that the Bologna Process has been a completely voluntary process has meant that the implementation level varies widely from country to country. But there is more at play: not all countries have joined at the same time. One cannot expect Kazakhstan entering as a signatory party to the European Higher Education Area in 2009 achieving the same level of implementation as a country that has started in 1999. One could first set a transition programme, or minimum standards of implementation before allowing a country to the Bologna Process though, to avoid having 47 countries at different speeds and with different implementation schedules, but this did not happen. Hence a country that started 10 years later with the Bologna implementation is as much part of the European Higher Education Area as one that started in 1999. It can get confusing for students, it can be frustrating for other countries, trying to implement at their best, too. And one can always ask the question if the more ancient or faster country will take the younger or slower one along for the better, or if the younger or slower will slow the whole process down.

It is not only the non-binding nature of the process, and the different entry dates of the various signatory countries that result in the different implementation levels across Europe, but also and in my personal view mainly because deep down in the process there are partners with different initial intentions around the table. I am aware of the unconstructive but I take the liberty in this personal contribution to state that some countries became part of the Bologna Process merely to be part of a club, merely to be part of European Ministerial conferences and nice Bologna Follow-Up processes, rather than with the idea that this would be of benefit to the students of the next generations. The intentions of the Ministers that started with the Sorbonne declaration and the Bologna Process as such was to make the national education systems comparable and exchangeable. The intentions of some Ministers that joined the Bologna Process later was to become more European and create new connections, though the 'education' part came as a collateral obligation to it. A logical consequence of this is that they take the implementation rather easily and take a lot of window

dressing measures, as there is no pressure in how to remain part of the club. It is hence not a surprise that the European Higher Education area is being established at 47 different paces, and I will return on a possible alternative solution to this, which was proposed by the European Students' Union.

### **...but there was anarchy too.**

Notwithstanding the existing righteous claims of which some described above, the indignados of the Bologna Process – being the Bologna Burns movement – consisted of anarchists too. It will unfortunately remain a dark part in the history of the European Higher Education Area and therefore I want to set things straight. During the Ministerial Anniversary conference in Vienna in March 2009 the Bologna Burns movement organised an anti-summit in the University of Vienna of which they occupied a building for the event. As a member of the European Students' Union's Executive Committee I went to speak with them and debate on the reasons of their protest and the reasons why the European Students' Union was inside the Ministerial Conference, around the table with the Ministers, instead of outside on the street with the protesters.

In general there are different ways of approaching a process: one can sit around the table and protest constructively, or one can say no to debate and protest on the street. Both ways have proven their value in mankind's history, and both are inspired by a philosophy and a careful assessment of the most effective way to express your feelings towards that process. I do not intend to judge the choice of protest against debate, but why I am generalising the Bologna Burns movement is more because of the debate I had with the protesters and the documents they produced. During the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Ministerial Conference in 2009 a leftist movement called La Vague Européenne was organising the (violent) protest, as they assumed Ministers were taking liberty out of education by installing the Bologna Process and pushing all students to become a number in society, pushed towards a job. During the debate at the University of Vienna, of which the protesters had occupied and literally dirtied a building, at numerous times I was reminded of the opinion of La Vague Européenne. Especially as a part of the audience kept on insisting that the texts of the Ministerial Communiqués were dictated by the European captains of industry, and were nothing less than a conspiracy to bring all young Europeans under one easily manageable pattern: grow up, receive education and as fast as possible get employed to pay taxes. I will not deny that this is indeed the pattern for many of us, but there is no such thing as a dictatorship of captains of industry taking over the Bologna Process. I have tried to explain in many different ways how the Bologna Process and its original intentions are positively moving towards a Higher Education Area, but how can one really react to the statement 'employability has ruined my life'?

## **The Bologna recession risk.**

Jokes apart, there are still plenty of reasons for European Ministers of Higher Education not to sit back and relax. Though the Bologna Process has formed a European Higher Education Area that is being looked at from all other continents, and though some students can already enjoy the benefits of harmonised European higher education, a lot remains to be done. And worse than that, it seems nobody is jumping to get working. The end of the anniversary gala in Vienna has unfortunately also been the end of the 'building a European Higher Education Area' feeling, and after the anniversary gala and Ministerial Conference nobody can ignore the dip in Bologna implementation, activity and discussions. As if all of the Bologna signatories were sitting at the breakfast table after the party, looking at each other to see who was going to prepare the eggs next.

There was little progress in the different working groups and the Bologna Follow-Up Group, the official body in which government representatives come together between the Ministerial Conferences to plan and monitor the actual implementation of the Bologna action lines, started discussing language regimes, reporting methods and what to have for dinner rather than seeing to it that the positive vibes coming out of the Vienna Ministerial Conference were transformed into a levelled implementation over all Bologna countries. In various Bologna circles frustration started to be vented: some countries were absolutely ridiculing the implementation duty, some countries were absolutely ridiculing the to-do-list, and many started questioning why they were still showing up few times a year for Bologna Follow-Up meetings, when the enthusiasm that once meant the biggest reform in worldwide higher education history, has been turned into a lack of motivation and disappointment in others.

The Bologna Process, as of early 2011, had stagnated in its implementation and the different stakeholders were looking at each other, doubting if they still wanted to invest in what they had created, or pull back and enjoy at least what had been done. If it weren't for a hard working EHEA Secretariat that was pulling the cart at that time, and a number of stakeholders (including teacher representatives, the Council of Europe and student representatives) some players around the table would have given up on the Bologna Follow-Up work, as they already called for a contemplation on the use of the Bologna Process after 2010. And let's face it, the Bologna Process costs money. Especially to the country or countries hosting the secretariat that runs the practical, administrative (and political) organisation of the Bologna Process. But also to all the governments having to devote representation to the Process, and to all the stakeholders around the table trying to steer the Process in a way which is right for them. It is obvious that in times of economic recession the analysis of cost versus benefit can be done, and especially so when questions are being raised about the 'meaning' of being a Bologna signatory country, because of the wide variety in implementation levels, intentions behind the accession and cultures of signatory countries.

The EHEA was risking a recession in implementing enthusiasm itself, and is in my view still dangerously depending on the outcomes of the 2012 Bucharest Ministerial Conference to justify the expenditure of Bologna Follow-Up work in the coming years. Not that there is no more work to do, but once the willingness to do the work disappears, the work will never get done anymore. 2012 will be the moment to renew the vows, to renew the will to implement, and to find a solution for the 47 paces of implementation and for the challenges in higher education of the second decade of the new millennium. And the solution can be simple: a positive outcome of the Bucharest Ministerial Conference would simply be to stay on track, and to complete what has been promised. We should not lose ourselves in new promises when the old ones haven't been kept and we should not create even bigger distance between the signatory countries' implementation levels by starting new actions before the old ones are implemented everywhere.

In the following, I want to point out in brief how I personally see the next years of successful Bologna implementation ahead. Although this contribution has up to now been a very personal one, I will moreover add a more elaborate 'Bologna wish list' mainly based on the European Students' Union's ambitions for the 2012 Ministerial Conference in Bucharest. Not only does it elaborate on more topics than the ones I am referring to in the text above and reflection below, but I also feel it deserves to be heard and published and is spot on pointing out the large challenges that lie ahead of the European Ministers of higher education, and us, European directors, actors, subjects and spectators of the Bologna implementation.

### **In brief: Back to basics.**

As already mentioned, the values and the complete range of intentions behind the European Higher Education Area when its construction would be completed entirely as intended, should be supported heavily. It is only sad that the signatory members are not able to stay on the track they promised to follow. They divert because of the national context, because of the economic downturn, because of institutional reluctance of implementation partially because of a lack of information, or simply because of unwillingness to comply with what exactly they – or their predecessors – have assigned themselves to at a certain moment in time.

What is especially of concern for the next years of Higher Education reform is the paradigm change in interpreting the Bologna objectives. Slowly getting away from the value of European cooperation in the strict sense of intra-European trust building of the late nineties, the EHEA signatory countries have evolved to a more competitive state of mind,- think of friends becoming business partners. Just imagine a picture of the heads of state of the European Council in 1999 and one today, and you will see the changes this European Union has known in the past years. The same counts for the European Higher Education Area and it is not entirely negative, as the implementation and Bologna agreements will be more realistic when working from a pragmatic background, but it cannot start to conflict with the initial key values and objectives behind the process and the needs of higher education to truly influence and help societal development. And there I am afraid that it is happening: European Ministers have once agreed to work hard on the social dimension in European higher education,

but seem to decide against it in recent years. We have not seen enough efforts to create more study places for socially or ethnically underrepresented groups. Not only is the access an issue, but in most of the higher education reforms of the past years we have experienced a prioritisation of research and innovation over student welfare and student support services, although everyone knows a good researcher is born in a well-surrounded undergraduate and graduate study. Everyone knows the social dimension starts way before higher education, in primary and secondary education with proper support for access and success of youth from every background. But governments these days are investing more in clear cut research missions by the talent currently at the top that serve technological innovation and economic results than in providing education to a wider basis in society (to have more talent at the top of the pyramid later on). Installing or raising tuition fees immensely, as happened in the United Kingdom, is reducing access to higher education drastically. It halts students in secondary education and makes them think twice before accessing to higher education. It demotivates a vast number of them from even considering a curriculum in higher education. It is reducing the number of opportunities for talented young people to educate themselves further, and it could leave our societies in intellectual deficit in the long run.

Education has traditionally been a tool for social mobility, but this is no longer a given in our current societal situation. In my view the emancipator function of Higher Education is extremely important in the fight against poverty. Thus the obvious need for attention in the future to the problem of disproportional participation of people from lower social-economic background and migrants. Instead of having a European Higher Education Area built on drivers like international attractiveness and excellence, we should focus on accessibility and retention rates because enlightened societies should never tolerate obstacles for groups and individuals in the struggle against poverty. But has this really been an intention of the signatory countries when agreeing to work on the social dimension? Or does the attraction of foreign money for our European education prevail?

Another objective of the Bologna Process is to have an actual European Area of exchange, an open-border system of education, which I undoubtedly support. However, the target of 20% mobile students by 2020, which since the Leuven/Louvain-La-Neuve Ministerial Communiqué has become an official target of the EHEA, will remain to be a "utopia" as long as we are lacking even the basic tools to start dreaming about it. While governments have agreed to this ambition, and while the president of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso wants to give the possibility to all young people to be mobile, the financing of study periods has been declining (or in some cases at least the level of support per student has been declining) and a teacher in English literature in Italy still won't trust the quality of the same course taught by his counterpart in Germany.

Although the largest action for community cooperation in the European field of education has been within the field of mobility, through landmark programmes such as Erasmus and Tempus, only an amazingly small percentage of students today are actually mobile, and many of the more significant examples of mobility have involved developing countries being robbed of their best people, who left for better lives in more developed regions. Mobility at its best is a manifestation of personal

independence, a tool for exchange of cultures and the personification of unlimited opportunity for the individual. At its worst, it is a tool used by rich countries to gather more highly skilled workforce from developing countries.

This form of brain gain with highly negative effects for the outgoing countries is unacceptable. A more constructive attitude of balanced mobility in a global context that rejects any form of brain drain is needed. Despite the efforts made, Europe is far from becoming an area where free mobility is the norm and not the exception, and at least for the foreseeable future the various funding programmes and their design will continue to be the main driver of mobility. Moreover, when talking about a 47-speed paced Bologna implementation this certainly goes for the mobility part of the European Higher Education Area: a student being mobile in Western Europe unfortunately does not have the same amount of rights as a student being mobile in Eastern Europe (now it is up to you to think who would have most rights). There are still large discrepancies in how students are treated after a mobility period, simply depending on their national systems. European higher education has been harmonised in the past ten years, but only to a certain extent, and when you want to get your credits from abroad recognised at home it depends very much to who you are talking.

Only with a true institutional commitment and with sufficient financial support through grants – not loans or pan-European loans– a first realistic attempt to reach 20% mobility by 2020 can be made. For this, governments indeed need some more financial freedom, but more can be done already by prioritising expenditure. And next to that we need trust, trust between institutions and individual programme managers, rather than narrow-minded teachers and international offices that prevent students from receiving recognition for the work done abroad. We need to change the perception of student mobility from a ‘party-year’ abroad to a serious investment in a better personal development and career, and every government needs to encourage students to take this step as it will bring a large return on investment to have more tolerant and educated citizens taking an active role in their future societies.

Though there are much more actions that the European Ministers of Higher Education have to take care of soon in my view, I wanted to highlight especially the social dimension and mobility. One which is often forgotten and not known by the wider public (or the Vienna protesters) to be a goal of the Bologna Process, and one which everybody talks about, but is still not completely implemented. Both of these goals deserve to be prioritised after the 2012 Ministerial Conference: actions, targets on the social dimension of higher education will improve access and success in higher education, and will open up our higher education again to become the centre of innovation and societal improvement in our communities. Further investment in mobility and its recognition will create more tolerant and more active, self-helping citizens to support our future.

There are of course more objectives to adhere to after Bucharest 2012 than the ones I have put up above, but these two are to me the ones that make the European Higher Education Area stand or fall. For a more elaborate list of targets, I want to highlight the European Students’ Union’s Bologna statement, that puts 14 challenges towards 2012 on the map well beyond the social dimension and mobility alone.

## **More elaborate: the 2012 Bologna wish list of the European Students' Union**

The European Students' Union is the umbrella organisation of 45 national unions of students from 38 different countries in Europe. Since 2001 it has been a consultative member of the Bologna Follow-Up Group and it has published Bologna With Student Eyes independent stakeholder reports of the Bologna implementation since 2003. During its 2011 May 60<sup>th</sup> General Assembly the European Students' Union's membership decided on a list of demands towards the 2012 Ministerial Conference, and hence towards the next ten years of European Higher Education Area development. To the great frustration of some of the Vienna protesters, the European Students' Union has constructively supported the Bologna Process implementation and still believes in the goals it has. Throughout the years however the EHEA has become a complex framework of measures and policies, that aims at fostering greater compatibility and comparability of the systems of higher education in Europe. The process, despite the effervescence of reforms and changes it has inspired, is being confronted with several problems in bringing its goals to a full circle.

### **ESU sees a slowdown and increasing lack of depth**

After starting with a strong boom, yet accompanied by often equally strong resistance or ignorance from the students' or the teachers' side that sometimes also manifested in protest, the Bologna Process went through a rapid expansion in terms of the number of participating countries and of the policy areas it covered. This, however, has not always been followed up by an appropriate level of deepening and consistency of implementation.

This clear trend in increasing lack of commitment to fulfilling even the simplest Bologna goals in a European system is present in numerous participating countries. 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, there should be no rebate on implementing a minimum set of standards that ensure a qualitative and integrated education system. It is a question of how far one commits to a pan-European process like the European Higher Education Area. It is pitiful that the effects of becoming a signatory country of the Bologna Process or the EHEA have never been fully defined, and that the fear of creating another European competence is obstructing the minimum implementation of some standards.

As said above, member countries have joined the process at different times, and there are differences in the extent to which different member countries have implemented the action lines. This has led to an uneven European Higher Education Area where countries declare to be part of the process, but where compatibility or comparability is yet to be imagined. This is not improving either since many countries fall outside of the other integrative mechanisms that come with the EU/EEA, with one clear indication being mobility, where only EU students can expect equal treatment

and even then there is still a large discrepancy between EU countries. So far, there has been little commitment to create any facilities for the mobility of students and researchers from the wider EHEA.

Another worrying trend, according to ESU, comes in the lack of even basic consultation of national-level stakeholders, especially student bodies and teacher unions. This can be attributed either to perception of low relevance of internal stakeholders or to the perceived decline in the significance of the process, which has led to a rushed tick-box exercise and formal approach to tackling Bologna-related issues. Well over half of the ESU member unions, the national unions of students, had not been consulted in the past year on the mobility reporting exercise sent out to Bologna members.

This is ever so worrisome since student participation has been an established part of the process since the Prague Ministerial Communiqué (2001), but there are already several cases where governments are actively trying to or have rolled back on students' rights to representation by officially reducing their voice in academic bodies or in national policy consultations. When I was talking about a risk of recession of the Bologna Process earlier, this is an excellent example of what it can mean: though Bologna has improved student participation in Europe in the past, the achievements are not set in stone, and risk to regress again if that European Bologna commitment is starting to regress as well.

Also, it can be noted that often the responsibility for making educational reforms work according to the Process is being pushed around between higher education institutions, governmental level structures and the European level. This makes it impossible to reach a consistent policy framework that needs to be implemented and secured since also the topics are often renegotiated and previous commitments washed away. Despite the voluntary nature of the process, governments and institutions should take responsibility for the implementation of agreed actions. Thus far, Bologna debates indicate that there is a serious lack of willingness to work on building potential solutions even if the identification of the problems is realistic and appropriate.

The European Students' Union believes that these are signals that there is still considerable room and need for deepening the actual reforms. Limiting changes to superficial and content-empty structural aspects of the process endangers the coherence and usefulness of the envisaged reforms therefore damaging each participating system. It furthermore contributes to the frustration that is felt by students, teachers, institutional workers, governmental aides in the unequal implementation per country and the lack of information on what is happening and why it is happening. As mentioned earlier, the ESU therefore listed 14 proposals to get that Bologna Process back on track, renew the ambition in a realistic and pragmatic way for the years to come:

### ***“Proposals for the future of the Bologna Process and the functional establishment of a European Higher Education Area***

*We, the National Unions of Students in Europe, members of the European Students' Union, are a critical yet constructive and pragmatic party to the Bologna process. As such we will not only give descriptive input on what needs to change, but also come with a set of concrete proposals:*

1. **Minimum standards.** *The Bologna Process needs to be rebuilt on an approach based on targets for minimum expected standards of implementation. One particular consequence of the breaching of minimum standards should be that the Bologna “label” should only be reserved for areas where countries have properly implemented envisaged policy measures. Ignoring minimum standards risks affecting the coherency of the European Higher Education Area.*
2. **Incentives and monitoring.** *Governments need to establish special incentives and provide a significant level of financial and regulatory support for institutions that are trying to implement various elements of the Bologna process. There should be a system of scrutiny for the implementation of Bologna while focusing on improvement rather than penalization.*
3. **Stakeholders' involvement.** *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.*
4. **Providing information.** *While the structure of higher education systems is being reformed, little is being done to make it understandable, clear and comprehensible to the wider public, especially prospective students. 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 academic opportunities in the European Higher Education Area are about to everyone. The European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) would be a suitable institution for providing parts of this information if supported adequately in terms of finances and access to information. True shift to a European area will not happen without these support structures, rendering the EHEA as a myriad of systems that are incomparable while still carrying the same labels.*
5. **Mobility.** *In order for mobility to achieve its full potential, support must be given in a targeted manner to all types of mobility. Individual countries thus need to create infrastructural, financial and other facilities for all incoming and outgoing students regardless whether mobility is intra-EHEA or students are from outside of the EU or EHEA. These measures are indispensable in order to ensure that the 20% mobility target is reached for the EHEA in its entirety. Of course, these measures need to be correlated with a general easing of bureaucratic obstacles to recognition processes.*

6. **Recognition.** *Since the Lisbon Recognition Convention in 1997, there has been great progress in terms of the recognition of qualifications and studies, but problems persist. Students consider that the principle of recognition of studies that do not present substantial differences should be enshrined across the EHEA, and that the associated bureaucratic burden needs to be limited. Further efforts should be made in ensuring that all students have the access to all the necessary information they need on quality assurance and recognition issues readily and transparently available to them.*
7. **Qualification frameworks.** *National qualification frameworks are still not adopted in all European countries despite the fact that a deadline for their creation has been pushed back to 2012. There are fears that even this deadline will not be kept, thus stronger emphasis on the urgent drafting and adoption of meaningful national qualification frameworks in all countries needs to be put, while ensuring their certification to the existing European qualification frameworks.*
8. **Social dimension.** *The social dimension is recognized as an important principle and target on European level, however many countries still do not introduce this as a priority in national higher education policies. Lack of data or the need to create proper regulations, often within ministries other than those of education, has invoked unjustified and prolonged procrastination on any work on the topic. The implementation of full national strategies realizing higher education with a social dimension and the monitoring of equity at both entry and exit points of higher education should become useful basics. The commitments to set national targets for social dimension made in the Leuven communiqué should be made effective and adopted on national level before the 2012 Ministerial Conference.*
9. **Financing higher education.** *Current budget cuts and attempts at introducing or raising fees are both worrying signs for access to education and social dimension, compromising the notion of education as a public good on which Bologna Process was originally established. ESU therefore rejects any further proliferation of tuition fees in Europe. Institutions and policy makers should create just and equally accessible funding and support systems for all students as well as national standards on the representation of disadvantaged groups that should legitimize specific funding schemes for members of such groups.*
10. **Internal quality assurance.** *The development of external quality assurance has seen good progression since the adoption of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG) in 2005. The picture looks much less convincing with regards to internal quality assurance, with the ESG part I being seen as somewhat less important in terms of actual usage. Whilst in some higher education institutions valuable internal QA policies, mechanisms and processes have been established this development is uneven across the EHEA. Given the fundamental importance of internal quality assurance for actually enhancing teaching and learning, more focus should be put on it, complemented by full involvement of internal stakeholders (namely students and academic staff) as well as consultation of other stakeholders where appropriate.*

11. **External quality assurance.** *Using only institutional level or exclusively programme level external QA is not feasible due to some significant flaws: The former neglects to build confidence that the programmes and qualifications the HEIs offer are of good quality. On the other hand scrutinizing only programmes tends to cut the initiative of HEIs to initiate institution-wide internal QA measures that would have the potential to enhance quality of teaching and learning overall. An adequate combination of both programme and institutional level QA needs thus to be used. Generally it is essential for QA to be more focused on providing relevant information through easy accessibility and understandability of QA processes results.*
12. **Student-centered learning.** *While many institutions have gradually started to introduce changes that give students more potential for deciding about their own educational paths, student-centered learning is still a long way off from becoming a reality in most of Europe's higher education institutions. There should be a focus in institutions on implementing an actual paradigm shift that centers on the student and its learning process and experience, making education more flexible and better suited to the needs of a diversified student body. There should be increased commitment to removing major obstacles to this – such as inflexible hours, lack of choice on curricula or learning methods, use of only conventional teaching methods and lack of support for students from non-specific backgrounds. Additionally, sufficient financial support from the governments is needed to support the institutions in their efforts to train and support staff in changing educational practices.*
13. **Functionality of the ECTS.** *While ECTS has been cited as one of the best-implemented tools, problems with actual measurement of student workload still exist and proper formulation and use of learning outcomes has yet to emerge in the actual learning process. Measures of external scrutiny or incentive should be established to ensure that these processes are implemented in institutions as they were intended to.*
14. **Bologna as a priority.** *Despite confusion at the policy level between the goals of various Bologna or EU-inspired policies, which are indeed to a certain degree compatible, there is urgency in fulfilling Bologna commitments before downplaying them or going beyond. It is not problematic if countries add extra reforms to the Bologna envisaged ones, but the latter should not be ignored."*

It is obvious that even with this list of actions, the completion of a harmonised European Higher Education Area will depend on the interests and ambitions of the different countries, and the intentions they had when getting around the table. Without a proper commitment in 2012 during the Ministerial conference I personally doubt the Bologna Process can experience a similar growth or implementation pace in the next ten years as to the first ten years of its existence. Though to take away the concerns many had in 2009 and probably still have as of today, a holistic implementation over all the lines mentioned above is needed.

I will go even further in stating that if the Bologna Process were to continue after 2012 in the way it has over the past two years, it is destined to take an ending in 2015 at its next Ministerial conference, if there will even be a next one. The choice is simple: we have to jointly revamp the Bologna implementation to come to a complete implementation through monitoring devices, benchmarks and clear cut targets and follow-up mechanisms that people believe in, before looking out for new things, or we will slowly see the initial enthusiasm regressing and resulting in a discussion about the relevance of a Bologna Follow-Up Group and the expenditures the hosting country of a Bologna Secretariat, a Ministerial Conference or the expenditures of a participating country or stakeholder have to keep the Process alive.

Without the financial will to invest in mobility, to support social dimension, to put student-centred learning into practice at every level, and without the strong political commitment to do so completely at a steady pace over the next eight to ten years, the Bologna Process will die out as a nice attempt to reform higher education for the better, but that got stuck midway.

For the holistic implementation in all signatory countries to happen the European Students' Union is asking for minimum standards of implementation: an equal line of implementation throughout the 47 countries. A standard that has to be met before you can become part of that club, before you can tell your students that they are part the great European Higher Education Area. Again, though I respect this already revolutionary attempt by ESU to set a minimum implementation standard, I personally feel the need for an even more binding Bologna Process. If we really want the European Higher Education Area to be coherent, and if we want it to be a 'brand' students from all around the world can trust and study in, knowing their rights and possibilities, then one should consider more strictly when a country can be part of the European Higher Education Area.

Why bother with time-taking Bologna Follow-Up Groups, expensive Ministerial Conferences when we are anyway not going to implement what we have agreed to during these meetings?

## **Conclusion**

I started this extended opinion paper on the past ten years and future of the European Higher Education Area by saying I got stuck in traffic because of some 'indignados' passing by. But I was not the only one stuck in traffic. The European Higher Education Area itself is stuck in traffic: blocked by an economic recession, by different signatory intentions and cultures, by a recession in enthusiasm in the governmental institutions, a reform fatigue in the higher education institutions and a lack of information and enthusiasm at the ordinary students' side.

A lot of traffic, and everybody is looking at each other to see who will be driving the car next, and where it will go to. If I have one wish for the 2012 Ministerial Conference in Bucharest, it is that the EHEA governments will continue on the road they have driven until now, with renewed enthusiasm and with realistic plans to holistically implement the promises they or their predecessors have made before and to help each other in doing so. They have to strengthen their ambition, and show

commitment in fulfilling the targets they have set for themselves before. Having a binding Bologna action list does not mean that education suddenly becomes the competence of the European Union. It does not mean that everyone who does not fulfil the set standards within a month after the Ministerial Conference in Bucharest will be kicked out of the EHEA. It means that it can make sense again to sit around the table together. It means that we, European students and citizens, can count on further improvements in our higher education system in the next years and on more possibilities to travel around freely in a high quality higher education area where our credits earned abroad are recognised. It means that countries where the Bologna implementation is close to being completed, will assist the countries they welcomed in the European Higher Education Area before to reach the same level of implementation and start the exchange of education between their countries as well. It means that the EHEA gets out of traffic in the right direction, towards a holistic implementation of all its action lines, towards the fulfilment of promises made to the European population long before.

2012 is the year in which European Ministers of Higher Education can and will have to show their true colours. Bucharest is the place in which they can decide to commit themselves for real to a stronger implementation standard of the Bologna action lines. For this will bring us a European Higher Education Area to be even more proud of, and to benefit from, as a student, as a university, as a society.

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He was a member of the Executive Committee of ESU last year, where he was responsible for the coordination of the Student Union Development Committee, membership issues and capacity building within the student movement. He has contributed to various higher education conferences, including the OECD Conference on Higher Education at a Time of Crisis in July, 2009.