

THE OPINION OF ESN INTERNATIONAL ON THE BOLOGNA PROCESS

Preamble

Erasmus Student Network was founded in 1990 to support and develop student exchange based on the European Commission SOCRATES/Erasmus programme. It is currently composed of 168 sections working in Higher Education Institutes (HEI) (Universities, Polytechnics and University Colleges etc.) in 24 European countries, and of National and International structures. The main goal of ESN is cultural and social implementation of all exchange students into a new environment and representing the interests of all students who are studying abroad, framed by Socrates/Erasmus program and others, and thus represents currently a total of around 100,000 students as volunteers or exchange students

Introduction

In June 1998 four countries signed the Sorbonne Declaration in order to pave the way for a united Higher Education (HE), and a discussion about setting up the common European Higher Education Area (EHEA) resulted in the Bologna Declaration, signed by 29 European countries in 1999. At the first follow up meeting in Prague in 2001, the number of joining countries increased to 31. Signed countries engage themselves for an active participation and cooperation between higher education systems. Also they set themselves 2 aims: raising transparency among HE systems and quality assurance, which has to lead to recognition of qualification. With the current paper ESN is expressing a point of view on some abstracts of the Bologna Process and actively involving itself with the process of modelling a modern EHEA.

The Social dimension

Social dimension in the future EHEA is one of the most important aspects in implementing the Bologna process. Until 2010, when the EHEA should be fully established, the economical and political situation in many countries will be changed. ESN hopes that in the future all students will have equal chances to study abroad. Students have different interests and they are coming from different levels of society but the most important thing is that everybody has the same rights and opportunities. Especially students with special needs will be those for whom positive discrimination will be needed to ensure equal possibilities for them. Therefore ESN stresses that students have to be fully supported

by all academics societies and as a part of society. ESN believes that a social support system for students (covering health care, housing, food and other social services) should be implemented and guarantee the social and health well-being of all students. Additionally, in many countries students have to work in order to cover their living costs during the study period. Therefore ESN stresses that employment should primarily be in connection with the study subject and students should not be forced to work in order to be able to continue their studies.

Mobility of students, teachers, researchers and staff

Mobility of students, teachers, researchers and staff is needed in order to improve the quality of the study process. ESN is in favour of fluent mobility of all parts of academic society in order to offer students new technologies, new teaching and researching methods and exchanging good experiences. All this would lead to subscribing new contracts, which would result in increasing the number of exchanges. ESN wants to draw attention to the reforms as expressed in the Bologna process, which supports the scheme that is making students mobility easier. For that purpose, ESN is encouraging European mechanisms to develop common regulations in order to promote and increase all sorts of mobility. ESN also wants to comment on both vertical and horizontal levels of mobility: Horizontal mobility here refers to non-degree mobility: studying for a short period as an exchange student mainly abroad. So far horizontal mobility has been the major means of mobility for a large number of students all around Europe, and it has been clearly more popular than vertical, so-called degree-mobility. Vertical mobility here refers to degree mobility studying mainly abroad for a full degree. The Bologna process offers a possibility for flexible choices, where in an ideal situation a student can easily build an individually and socially meaningful degree from available, versatile pieces. Vertical mobility can also be a mode of the so called free-mover mobility where students individually move from one university to another, completing a bachelor in one institution and continuing to a master's or further in another institution and country, making their own arrangements. ESN feels that both modes of mobility are equally important and valuable. Students must have the option of choosing the length of the period they spend abroad. Increasing mobility - inside one's own university, nationally and internationally - is one of the most central possibilities offered by the Bologna process. In order to make full use of this possibility, the problems of recognition must be solved. The most visible threat concerning horizontal mobility and the introduction of the two-tier structure (bachelor - master) is the timing of a short study period abroad. The study period should not automatically lengthen the duration of studies, and it should not be possible for the student to study abroad only between degrees. On the bachelor level, ESN stresses that the study period abroad could offer more general academic competencies, whereas on the master level the study period could reinforce the specialisation in one of the student's own fields of study.

Recognitions of Degrees

Degree structures should be flexible enough to encompass different skills learnt through different methods as long as they are relevant to the field of study. ESN stresses that degrees in different countries should have similar basic elements, thus containing a small degree of uniformity while giving ample space to flexibility and individuality. Before the full implementation of the Bologna process in 2010, systems in EHEA will be different. Therefore a temporary system of recognition of degrees is needed. ESN calls the attention of all institutions to the fact that recognition of degrees has to be implemented before 2010. The Bologna process is facilitating the recognition of degrees and qualifications on the European labour market but until then there will still be a gap between HE systems. ESN believes that all problems concerning recognition of degrees will be solved fast.

Implementation of credits system (ECTS) and Diploma Supplement

A proper implementation of credit systems is essential to accelerate mobility and guarantee recognition of the gained qualifications and seems essential for a large number of aspects related to the creation of an EHEA. ESN believes that it is essential that compatible and comparable credit systems be developed in all European countries. Therefore ESN believes that students must be part of this process and fully agrees with ESIB on this point. European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) has been developed in order to transfer credits and as a tool for recognition of degrees and/or qualifications. ESN is in favour of implementing the ECTS system in all HEIs in Europe. In many universities a Diploma Supplement is issued but ESN stresses that it should be issued automatically and without students requesting it and in at least in the spoken language of the HEI and in English. Compatible credit accumulation should be used for intermediate recognition in order to make it easier for students coming back from their studies abroad. The Lisbon Recognition Convention was signed in 1991. It envisages the creation of a common EHEA and it asks the signing countries to recognise the qualifications that students reach during their studies abroad. All signatory countries of the Bologna Process now need to ratify the Lisbon Convention. ESN calls upon all signed countries to remove all obstacles and ratify Lisbon Convention and remove all barriers that are stopping the process of recognitions of qualifications. Students need to be equally treated in order to be competitive on the labour market. Therefore the recognition of qualifications is very important. ESN encourages all countries that are not yet members in the ENIC/NARIC network to implement this important body into their structure.

Quality Assurance

In parallel to the process of integration in the EHEA (mobility, Bologna process ?) questions about how to ensure for the quality of the HE programs came up. Accompaniment and assurance of quality in HE courses is a ground for building consciousness about the culture of quality, responsible and synoptically

HE process. Today some parts of Europe are participating by forming basic concepts and strategies by assurance of quality in HE courses. ESN stresses that this is not the case in all countries and it should be implemented in all signatory countries; therefore ESN believes that modifications will be accepted also in countries, which are not part of the process and will oblige all countries participating in Bologna process. Nevertheless, ESN believes that increasing European cooperation in quality assurance between countries will be fruitful. ESN wishes quality education to be assured in all countries and equally for all students in Europe. The fear of unequal quality comes from the increasing number of students and study courses, changes of students' requests, definition of aims and their realization. Selfevaluation committees in HEIs are not able to guarantee quality in their courses. Accreditation of study programs has to be accompanied by a guaranteed level of high quality teaching and research, and these have to be set up where they do not yet exist. An agency has to assume the task of verifying the quality of the HE process and the accreditation of study programs. ESN welcomes the establishing of agencies and a framework of ENQA in Europe, and stresses that control and evaluation has to be done regularly and with highest sincerity. National guidelines and bodies should be developed in order to ensure both quality and accreditation. They should clearly state the responsibilities of all the different actors and must involve students, teachers, employers and other societal actors to make sure that the education system meets their expectations and demands. ESN underlines that students must be included in the process of quality assurance and accreditation in order to guarantee legality. Conclusion In the light of creating a common EHEA, the Bologna Process has the biggest role. Therefore ESN understands all problems arising from changing different HE systems, but also hopes that all the signatory countries will be careful and take into account students' social positions and assure the quality of courses. ESN is sure that cultural differences in Europe are protected. Cultural and linguistic diversity should be respected and reaffirmed. Finally, ESN would like to pay attention to the social dimension, and the promotion of mobility. All criticism, expressed by ESN, is meant to express an opinion that should contribute in a constructive way to the upcoming changes in the EHEA. It aims at assuring that students' interests will be represented and taken into consideration.