

Student Participation and the Bologna Process: How we can shape the future of higher education

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Everyone who is involved in higher education, be it as a student or administrator, cannot escape the Bologna Process and all the advances and frustrations it brings. So, let's take a step back and see where it began. The Bologna Process started, not so obviously, in Paris, in 1998, when the Ministers of France, Germany, Italy and the UK signed a [common declaration](#) with the intent to create a common framework for Higher Education and invited other countries to join their endeavour. The official beginning of the process took place the following year in Bologna when 29 countries signed the [Bologna Declaration](#). The process made in implementing the *Bologna frame and tools*, and as a political commitment towards further integration led the Ministers to announce the birth of the **European Higher Education Area (EHEA)** in 2010. As of 2021, 49 countries are members of the EHEA, ranging from Portugal to Kazakhstan.

The EHEA is a space where a 'common language' and 'understanding' of Higher Education is established - and sought after for those new items arising from the reality of the different countries (e.g. the micro-credentials). This understanding is based on common [tools](#) that are the backbone of EHEA: among them, the structuring of the higher education into three cycles (bachelor's, master's, PhD), plus a short cycle where it exists; the usage of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) to measure the 'weight' of the exams (a tool that helped to ease up the recognition procedures of the exams for the Erasmus programme); the creation of a common framework for the Quality Assurance of higher education, aimed both at bettering the quality of the courses and creating mutual trust between countries in recognising the degrees issued by a different member State than their own.

The Bologna Process is far from perfect, though: the automatic recognition and 'seamless' mobility have not been reached yet; the degree of implementation of the different measures varies. Furthermore, there is a more general question of legitimacy: if the general policies of the EHEA are agreed (upon consensus) at the European level by the Higher Education Ministers and then implemented at the national level, how to ensure that the policies decided and implemented are not an 'imposition' of the Ministers? In the absence of a general 'democratic' legitimacy for the framework and policies at the EHEA level (the Bologna Process is, in fact, a fully intergovernmental, international process), the specific 'stakeholders' legitimacy becomes even more critical: Higher Education Institutions, students and academic staff shall have a say in the discussions towards the design of the policy, at the European as well as at the

national level (in deciding the country's position on the different issues), and in its implementation at the national level.

At the European level, the role of representing students is performed by the [European Students' Union](#), which represents 45 National Unions of Students from 40 countries. ESU managed to carve out its own space within the Bologna Process (for more information, [read](#) 'How ESIB got into the Bologna Process', by Dr. Manja Klemenčič, Harvard scholar and Secretary General of the organisation at that time), becoming today a fundamental component of the policy-making process of the Bologna Process (it even represented the stakeholders in the drafting committee of the Rome 2020 Ministerial Communique!). At the national level, the models vary according to the country: in some of them, students (and their representatives) are non-existent; in others, it is a fundamental component of policy making and implementation.

A good example of this is Germany: The German national student representative organisation fzs (freier Zusammenschluss von student*innenschaften, eng: free association of student bodies) is part of the national Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG). The national BFUG discusses topics related to the Bologna process with national stakeholders. The national group is led by the ministry of education and science and the conference of ministers of education. This group sends a representative to the overarching BFUG. This group is overseeing the progress of the Bologna process and implementation of the communiqués between the ministerial meetings. The representative sent on behalf of Germany is a fzs member. This is an essential step in recognising students' expertise in matters of higher education, one that will hopefully spill over into other national BFUGs

The Bologna Process has been one of the major driving forces in the changes of the Higher Education systems of the European countries in the last twenty years: it is too important to be left to the Ministers alone! If you would like to contribute to student participation in the Bologna Process, check [here](#) the student union of your country! Also, before each EHEA Ministerial Summit, the European Students' Union publishes 'Bologna With Student Eyes', a report on the implementation of Bologna commitments from the perspective of the student unions of the different countries; [here](#) you can write the latest issue (2020).