

2.4. THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE: ACCESS, RETENTION AND DIVERSITY

2.4.1. The students' perspective on access, retention and diversity

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Promoting equal opportunities for all students is a main aim of the European Students' Union (ESU) and of student unions across Europe. It still remains high on the agenda, as equal opportunities are far from a reality.

The importance of the social dimension

Higher education serves many goals. To ESU, higher education should mainly serve as a means for social development and democratic empowerment, a means of accumulating and sharing knowledge and economic competitiveness, and as a means for personal growth and well-being. ESU promotes the democratisation of higher education, so that everyone will be able to access and succeed, regardless of their background. Education is a potential tool for people to break away from poverty and should promote social mobility. We also consider education to be the main instrument for emancipation. Instead of only focusing on excellence, higher education should focus on accessibility and retention rates.

Certain conditions are needed to meet these objectives. Education is a public good and a public responsibility and therefore should be publicly funded. The accessibility of higher education should not be affected by inequalities such as disabilities, distance, economic disadvantage, age or social and cultural background. ESU objects to all discrimination equally.

Unfortunately, the reality today is that higher education in Europe is not fulfilling these aims. Higher education is reproducing, and even reinforcing, existing inequalities in society. Education opportunities are linked to background. Education is reproducing a largely “monocultural” society, preserving the values of the dominant groups. This monoculture has systematically led to the exclusion of many in society. And instead of reducing poverty, attending higher education is sometimes creating poverty, as many students live in a difficult financial situation.

In the past, political promises were made to improve the situation. But, these promises have been violated in many countries. Education funding and financial support for students has become the biggest area of concern for our member unions. Across Europe, we see tuition fees being introduced or, where they exist already, increased. The fear of debt is preventing potential students from entering higher education, especially for people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. There are constant calls for a marketisation of education to substitute for the lack of public funding for institutions. These moves are contradictory to the ministers' intentions.

³² ESU – The European Students' Union - is the umbrella organisation of 47 national unions of students from 38 countries, and, through these members, represents over 11 million students. The aim of ESU is to articulate and promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at a European level towards all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, the Bologna Follow-Up Group, the Council of Europe and UNESCO.

Data and sources

At the European level, no real comparable data regarding the social dimension exists for all the Bologna countries and this makes the policy making extremely difficult. But for those countries that have data already available, like the countries involved in Eurostudent³³, it becomes clear that more efforts need to be undertaken to include and support underrepresented groups in higher education. ESU therefore calls for a major effort to close the data gap by collecting comparable data, not only on the social living conditions of students, but also on their background.

In order to get a better view of the situation in Europe, we surveyed our members. This was part of our recent Bologna With Student Eyes (BWSE) research. ESU published the fourth edition of Bologna With Student Eyes in April 2009. BWSE brings a reality check on the Bologna Process, based on the student unions' perspective of the national implementation of the reforms. The fourth edition has a large chapter on the social dimension, that will serve as input for this article.

The primary source of data is a detailed questionnaire. Respondents were 36 national unions of students from 33 countries. The report was written in March/April 2009 and reflects the information available at that specific point in time. BWSE 2009 focuses mostly on the perceptions of the national student unions. These perceptions are a sound testimony of the level of satisfaction and involvement of the unions³⁴.

The second source of input was a European student focus group that ESU organised in Stockholm on 15 October 2009, in cooperation with EUA.

Social dimension as a political priority

In the past, many political promises were made to make the social dimension a reality. Firstly, the right to education has been recognised in international treaties. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights identifies free access to education as a human right. In 1966, the United Nations, in the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights was signed, which states that "Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, [...], in particular by the progressive introduction of free education" (article 13).

At the Unesco World Conference in Higher Education in 1998, the following was stated: "We participants are convinced that education is a fundamental pillar of human rights, democracy, sustainable development and peace, and shall therefore become accessible to all throughout life." At the World Conference on Higher Education in 2009, it was recognised that access, equity and quality as interlinking objectives are of primary importance, with an understanding that, 'the objective must be successful participation and completion, while at the same time assuring student welfare,' including '...appropriate financial and educational support to those from poor and marginalised communities.' The communiqué also clearly stresses the place of higher education as 'a public good and a strategic imperative', and adds that, 'higher education must be a matter of responsibility and economic support of all governments.'

In the Bologna Process too, the importance of the social dimension recurs time and again. Already in Prague in 2001, the ministers stated that they "reaffirmed the need, recalled by students, to take account of the social dimension in the Bologna Process." By 2007, so six years later, the ministers

³³ The Eurostudent project collects comparable data on the social and economic conditions of student life in Europe.
<http://www.eurostudent.eu>

³⁴ The full report can be found on our website (www.esu-online.org).

managed to define what was meant by this social dimension: “the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations.”

In the latest communiqué, under the header 'priorities for the decade to come', we read:

9. The student body within higher education should reflect the diversity of Europe’s populations. We therefore emphasise the social characteristics of higher education and aim to provide equal opportunities to quality education. Access into higher education should be widened by fostering the potential of students from underrepresented groups and by providing adequate conditions for the completion of their studies. This involves improving the learning environment, removing all barriers to study, and creating the appropriate economic conditions for students to be able to benefit from the study opportunities at all levels. Each participating country will set measurable targets for widening overall participation and increasing participation of underrepresented groups in higher education, to be reached by the end of the next decade. Efforts to achieve equity in higher education should be complemented by actions in other parts of the educational system.

But these promises are not always reflected in national and institutional policies. According to BWSE, student unions from only 14 countries consider the social dimension to be a real priority for their government. Unions from 14 countries claim that the social dimension is not a priority for the government. The unions from 5 countries state that their government claims the social dimension is important but that they do not always see it in reality. The unions also link this to budgetary decisions. Most unions believe the government is not investing enough in higher education. Some fear budget cuts as a result of the crisis or a government change.

Even fewer student unions believe that the social dimension is a priority for all the higher education institutions in their country. Nine unions claim the social dimension is a priority in HEI's, 14 state the opposite and nine unions say the situation depends on the HEI: to some it is very important, to others it is not.

Obstacles to access, participation and completion

Most of our unions report that there is a clear lack of data on the social dimension. Therefore, it is difficult to identify underrepresented groups and problems of discrimination. However, based on scattered data and their everyday experience, the unions identified several problems regarding access and retention.

Student unions from 28 countries consider the participation of students from lower socio-economic background as very problematic. Many unions complain about financial barriers that keep potential students away from higher education. The reasons given are high fees, costs for accommodation and transport, etc. Among the problems reported are: student financing insufficient to cover all costs; sometimes these students are not encouraged in the same way to go to higher education; not all students can prepare equally for entrance exams because they have to work.

Students from less economically developed regions are also reported to have access problems. The obstacles reported are differences in the quality of teaching in secondary education, an absence of higher education institutions in the region, high costs when moving to the city, poor transport links, shortage of student housing in the city, etc. Many students have to work in order to get by. But this also creates problems. 25 unions believe that students with jobs face problems accessing higher education.

The reasons given are many: inflexible curricula, lack of evening lectures, absence of part-time programmes, higher fees for part-time students, losing the grant when earning too much, lack of time and energy to study, etc.

Another group that encounters problems are students with a disability. Even though many unions say that efforts have been made to increase the participation of these students, nevertheless, unions from 23 countries state that this group faces access problems. The obstacles reported are physical inaccessibility, lack of awareness from other students and teaching staff, lack of necessary provisions, etc.

National unions of students also see problems for students from ethnic-cultural minorities. Problems reported are language, cultural expectation, social norms, low self-esteem, lack of support, prior education that does not give access to higher education, etc. Similar problems are seen for migrant children: a lack of information, language, lack of social support, etc. Some unions also report problems for students from religious minorities. They state that it is often linked to ethnic minorities. A problem can be that their beliefs and practices are not taken into consideration, for example in terms of special dietary requirements or different religious holidays. A lot of unions say they have no knowledge on the issue, which points to a lack of awareness.

Student unions believe that refugees and students without residence permits come across many barriers. They often cannot get any student financing and do not have permission to work. They have problems getting earlier qualifications recognised. These students often have to pay higher tuition fees. When applying for a visa, they then have to prove their financial independence which is difficult without a grant, loan or work permit. The situation is better for recognised asylum seekers than for people who do not have the necessary documents.

In several countries, tuition fees for non-EU students were introduced or increased if they already existed. This is, for example, the case in many German states. And non-EU students are only allowed to work 80 days per year. In several countries, for example Norway, international students have their own organisations where they can address their problems.

Gender equality still remains an issue in higher education. Unions report obstacles both for male and/or female students. Underrepresentation in higher education is linked to higher dropouts in secondary education and gender stereotypes in study choice. Only two unions reported access problems for LGBT students³⁵, but 15 unions claim to have no knowledge about this. This points to a possible lack of awareness. There is also almost no research available on the issue.

Older students can also encounter problems. Unions report that certain benefits students receive are only awarded up to a certain age. These can be loans and grants, higher fees, student discounts, etc. The age difference with peers is also mentioned. Many unions reported problems for students with children, such as lack of affordable childcare provision, lack of flexibility, etc. They sometimes get more student financing, but it is still often not enough to cover the extra cost for day-care.

A high drop-out ratio is a problem in many higher education systems. Student unions see many factors leading to drop-out: failing study orientation policies, low self-esteem, lack of integration in the academic community, lack of proper student counselling, etc. Many unions believe that financial problems lead to high drop-out rates. Students that have to work too much to afford their studies often

35 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual

cannot cope and drop out. In some countries, students have to pay extra when studying over a long period, or find they are prevented from continuing when not progressing fast enough. These problems do not only lead to drop-out, but they can also increase time to completion. Several unions reported that there is no data available on drop-out rates.

Economic conditions of student life

Fees and study costs

In our research we asked our unions about the financial aspect of studying. From the answers of our unions, we must conclude that students pay a lot. The majority of unions say they have to pay tuition fees (18 countries). Unions from 24 countries claim that students pay additional fees as well. These fees are charged to cover various costs: fees for materials, copy costs, health insurance, mandatory study trips, registration fees, administrative fees, student services fees, exam fees, entry fees, diploma expenditure, regional fees, union membership fees, etc. In many countries, students pay anything from several hundred to several thousand Euros in fees.

Students from 19 countries claim tuition fees have increased in the past few years, in many cases more than inflation. In the Netherlands the government will increase the students in the coming years: these will increase by 22 euro for the next ten years. In Slovenia, the fees have increased with the justification that HEIs need more funding, while in Italy they increased because of public budget cuts. In the UK (except Scotland) fees have increased with the justification that HEIs need more funding and that the benefits of higher education are such that individuals should contribute more to the cost of its provision.

Unions from only 11 countries claimed that study costs are monitored regularly, whereas 18 unions claimed that this does not happen at all. Unions from 28 countries believe that study costs have increased in recent years, while those from 20 countries claim that grants and loans are not calculated through a monitoring of study costs.

Student income

Most NUS answered that there are grants available in their country. However, the number of students that receive a grant differs significantly. Some countries have a universal grant system where the majority of students receive a grant. Other countries have very selective grants that are only awarded to a rather small number of students, usually based on merit or income.

In some countries the grants are awarded to students, whereas in more family-dependent systems, the grant is based on family income. In some countries the student's family is still entitled to some family benefits like child allowance.

Unfortunately, many unions are not satisfied with the grant system. They complain that not enough students receive a grant, the grant amount does not cover the costs and sometimes the grants do not reach the students that need it most. In Estonia for example, students have to pay tuition fees. The state offers a limited amount of state financed places (no fees). Other students do not get any form of student financing. The free places are not awarded based on the economic situation of the students, but on merit. This leads to a situation where the free places go to students with better economic backgrounds, and not to the students with the lowest income.

In most countries there are also loans available, mostly awarded by the government or banks, or by a combination of the two. The number of students taking out a loan differs among countries. The average

debt at graduation also differs quite a lot. In Denmark, the average debt is about 14 975 EUR. In Estonia, the maximum amount that a student can borrow until graduation is about 9 600 EUR which most students take out according to EUL. In Iceland, the average debt is about 18 639 EUR, however, because of the current currency problems this may be an underestimate. In Norway, students borrow on average 30 000 EUR and about 86% of students take out a loan. In Sweden, the average debt is about 10 000 EUR. In the UK, there is no data but it is estimated by the PUSH Guide and Barclays Bank that student debt will increase by 2010/11 to about 25 000 EUR. About 80% of the students eligible for a loan take one out.

Several student unions complain that grants and loans are not sufficient to cover all the costs of studying and living. As we mentioned before, student financing in most countries is not based on a calculation of costs which can explain why they are insufficient. The current budget cuts in Europe, as a result of the crisis, are making the situation even more difficult. In the Netherlands for example, it is not clear yet what the result of the budget cuts will be, but there are suggestions to freeze the student financing (so no inflation correction) and there are even people who suggest changing the current grant system into a loan system. The students are protesting against these proposals. The portability of loans and grants for mobile students still seems to be a problem in many countries. This is making a study experience abroad difficult or even impossible for many European students.

Student employment

According to our member unions, many students have to work to help pay for their studies. Either the loans and grants provided are not sufficient, or students prefer to get a job to avoid being faced with a huge debt at graduation (debt aversion). Also, the number of older students with a job re-entering higher education is growing. The average ranges from five hours to over 31 hours per week.

The current financial crisis is also hitting students hard. In some countries it means fewer students can find a job to help them finance their studies. This can lead to an increase in the average debt of students. Student unions also believe it is difficult to combine working and studying.

Students are unable to attend classes (which are sometimes obligatory), there are not enough special programmes and the general ones are often not flexible enough, they cannot prepare properly for (entrance) exams, and they also report that public authorities and institutions do not take a lot of measures to facilitate combining work and study.

It can also lead to problems with the state student financing. In Iceland for example, there is now more funding available for loans, but the loans are not high enough to cover all the costs, so students have to work to be able to pay all their bills. But students who work while studying are punished for working, as they cannot borrow the same amount as students who do not work. Student employment could be a way to gain experience that is beneficial for the student when entering the labour market after graduating. However, the majority of student unions (from 18 countries) reported that the paid work most students do is not related to their studies.

Student support services

Student unions were asked to rate the student services provided in their country on a scale of 1 to 4 (1= non-existent, 2= exists but with very little quality/access, 3= exists, with reasonable quality and access, 4= exists, in good quality and sufficient access). These are services targeted at students, like accommodation, food provision, health care, cultural and sports facilities, counselling, etc. These services increase student well-being and can help to keep the costs lower. On average, student unions are not

very satisfied with the provisions (general average is 2.58). They are the least satisfied with childcare provisions (2.09). The best scores are given to medical care and public transport (2.85 for both).

There are some structural problems according to unions. Not all services are provided in all regions or institutions and so not all students can benefit from the same (quality of) provisions. For example, in Belgium, Flanders, there is very little subsidised accommodation for students of university colleges (hogescholen) while there is a much bigger offer for university students. In Denmark, it is much more difficult to get affordable housing in Copenhagen or Aarhus. In Norway, the provisions are different depending on the institution you study at.

Discrimination

Discrimination still remains a problem in higher education in Europe. Discrimination is every legal or factual, direct or indirect differentiation and unequal conduct (giving privileges, excluding, imposing limitations) based on race, skin colour, social, national and ethnic background, descent, birth, language, class, religious or political beliefs, sex/gender, sexual orientation, disability, marital status or any other basis when this is not relevant.

Most countries have some legislation that forbids discrimination. Many unions however complain that there are no clear procedures on how to fight discrimination in higher education institutions. In many countries, the legislation is very specific and it does not require HEIs to set up a clear procedure for complaints.

Representation by student unions

The vast majority of our members (30 unions) who took part in BWSE, state that the social dimension is a priority for their student union. They develop policy on the issue, they lobby for better conditions for students, they participate in projects, etc. For ESU, too, the topic is a priority. Currently we are running a project called 'Equity in higher education from a student perspective'. It is a two-year project in which we organised regional training where student unions could discuss the topic. We are also developing a handbook and an e-learning platform. In the recent past we have already published handbooks on equality and gender equality³⁶.

But when advocating for equality, we also have to make sure that everyone can participate equally in our student unions. Many unions run specific campaigns to get students from underrepresented groups included in the union. They also take active measures like making sure the buildings they have events at are accessible, they have contacts with specific student organisations (like organisations of international students or students from ethnic minorities), they develop a code of conduct banning all discrimination in the union, etc.

Notes from the European student focus group: student perspectives on access and retention in European HE

A European student focus group took place on 15 October 2009 in Stockholm, at the SFS office (national union of students from Sweden). The aim of the student focus group was to reflect on issues of access

³⁶ <http://www.esib.org/index.php/Publications/official-publications>

and retention in Europe and substantiate some of the evidence from the ESU surveys launched under the BWSE 2009 report.

Interestingly, financial barriers were cited extensively when an open question was posed on the biggest issues for student unions at the moment:

- In Iceland, students can get a student loan but it is not enough to cover costs. Students have to work to pay their bills. But students that work are punished, as they get a lower loan. The rental fees are too high and apartments for students are more expensive than the open market.
- In Finland, there is a reform of the student support system which includes an extra grant for students with children. Recently tuition fees for students from outside of the EU were introduced.
- In Germany, there are many systems – some have tuition fees and some not. If you come from a lower socio-economic background, the bachelor is easier to afford, and the master harder. If you are older than 30 you cannot get state funding. Non-EU students cannot get state funding either and can only work 80 days a year.
- In the Netherlands, it is not clear how much the government will cut from the budget for the education sector. The amount of money people get doesn't even cover rent and tuition fees are rising. Students with parents who have less money can get a grant, however there is the idea of freezing student loans, with no inflation correction. There is also a suggestion to change the grant into a loan. Students are against these ideas.
- In Estonia, student financing is a priority for the student union. 50% pay tuition fees. The others get a grant that only covers the tuition fee. Grants are not based on socio-economic background but on merit, which means that they go to students with a higher socio-economic background.
- In Malta, there is free state education for all, but the main problem is access to information on HE – this should be targeted at the grass roots level. There was an increase in tuition fees for international students from outside Europe,
- In Norway, students want to increase student financing from 10 to 11 months. The housing market is under pressure and prices are high. Student unions want students to have affordable accommodation, yet only one out of eight students get state funded affordable rent. There is a system of scholarships for students from developing countries (with a quota) which they don't have to pay back if they repatriate– if not, 2/3 of it becomes a loan. The problem is that sometimes they have to wait two to three months before they get the loan. International students that are not quota students have to prove they have enough money to get a visa.

A series of specific questions were also raised for the group. Of particular note was the following:

What kind of data can universities collect on what kind of social background students have? (disabled, dyslectic....). What about the privacy issue? And what do we think about quotas?

- Germany: every three years HIS collects data on social background, but not for the university. Also, there are no quotas for minorities, but there are projects to encourage women to apply for mathematics, engineering etc.
- Belgium-Flanders: No data on students from ethnic minorities. A registration system was set up for students with a disability and for ethnic minorities. This is being tested. There was a discussion on privacy issues and a solution was found. After the data is collected it's made

anonymous. The difficulty is to define ethnic minority? In the education council they came up with several parameters.

- Norway: Everybody registers online – if you have special needs you can register them there and get help with that specific issue.
- Estonia: in secondary school, a lot of boys drop out (90% of the drop outs are boys). There has been discussion on positive discrimination, but mostly for girls in higher education (60% female). The student union believes that positive discrimination makes sense. One can cite the fact that there is hardly anyone from the Russian minority in higher education.

What are student services?

Services for students that increase student well-being and make studying more affordable. There are different systems all over Europe. The student profile is changing – services need to be more diverse.

Conclusion: What do we want?

We can conclude that European higher education is far from achieving the goals that it set out to achieve regarding social inclusiveness. ESU is committed to a European Higher Education Area that promotes and delivers:

- High quality, student-centred education
- Social justice, participative equity and opportunities for mobility
- Democratic higher education institutions and societies, which create critical thinkers and active citizens and recognises that these are all equally relevant and interlinked goals. Democratic higher education institutions cannot exist without social justice and participative equity. Participative equity is a stimulating factor for high quality education because it is an enrichment for the educational environment. By letting the diverse student body participate in the higher education decision-making processes, a student-centred approach can be fostered. Therefore these goals are mutually reinforcing.

As such, the European Higher Education Area should:

- Embed a quality culture whilst enshrining academic freedom
- Reject the notion that higher education (HE) is a commodity or a tool for profit
- Work on the principle of co-operation, not competition
- Include students as co-creators and partners in the delivery and governance of the learning experience
- Recognise its own responsibility to society itself as a social good, and as such, be publicly funded.

The social dimension should not only be a priority in words, it should be high on the political agenda and active measures have to be taken. As students, we put forward the following demands:

- Establishing generous, accessible and parent-independent systems of grants that supports the student as a learner, meaning covering all costs of living and learning.

- Tuition fees should be abolished. Where they exist, measures should be taken to compensate for the burden of fees.
- Study costs should be monitored regularly.
- Student services should be subsidised sufficiently to provide student housing, transport discounts, healthy food provision, sport facilities, medical care, etc.
- Anti-discrimination legislation covering higher education must be set up so that all kinds of discrimination can be fought.