

Student involvement in the Bologna process: studying the structure, character and impact of the European Students' Union

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Abstract. This article explores the working structure and peculiar characteristics of the European Students' Union as a supranational student representative association in the Bologna process. In the course of logical and systematic analysis of the main documents the fundamental principles of this organization were defined. The study focuses on ESU's experience of engagement into higher education modernization process at European level, and it was found that there are certain areas, in which student representatives managed to make the greatest influence. The Union has conducted most of its own studies and realized the biggest projects within the framework of quality assurance, financing of higher education and shaping a strong student movement in Europe.

Keywords: *the Bologna process, the European Students' Union, student engagement, higher education modernization*

Introduction. In the era of the knowledge-based society and economy education has become a crucial factor in determining the future prospects of national states and, thus a subject to fundamental changes. With a purpose to improve the quality of higher education (HE) and become more competitive in the global context European countries joined their efforts and commenced a massive multi-year project of harmonizing and modernizing HE systems, which is known as the Bologna process (BP). According to the main Bologna documents the involvement of all stakeholders, especially the recipients of educational services (students), into HE governance at all levels is considered to be one of the core principles of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) development. However, it was found, the system of student representation and the degrees of their engagement vary considerably around Europe. In Ukraine, for instance, despite the active development of student self-government, most of student associations are formal in nature and do not really impact the decision-making process. For solving this problem it is essential to find innovative approaches in engaging students into HE management by studying the positive experience of the most influential student representative organisation in the EHEA – the European Students' Union (ESU).

Student involvement as one of the main issues in the BP and some aspects of ESU's participation in the EHEA development were investigated by such scholars as S. Bergen, Th.M. Luescher-Mamashela, A. Kasoka, M. Klemenčič and others. However, there is no separate research of innovative structure, character and achievements of the Union as a supranational actor of HE modernization process.

The purpose of the article is to analyze organizational foundations of ESU, define major principles of this association and study its positive experience in the context of the BP.

Results and their discussion. Over the thirty-year period the ESU (former ESIB) from a small information bureau has turned into a huge pan-European platform with the aim to promote educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at the supranational level. Being a representative of more than 11 million students through its member organisations (National Unions of Students (NUS)), ESU was officially recognized as a partner in the BP. In 2003 this association joined the Bologna Follow Up Group in order to monitor together with other stakeholders the implementation of major principles, and since that time has begun to take part in the policy production and deci-

sion-making processes at the institutional, national, European and even global level. As M. Klemenčič puts it, "With involvement in the Bologna process, ESIB transformed from a "sleeping giant" to a major player in European higher education politics" [14, p. 23]. For more efficient representation of students the ESU has undergone profound internal changes that resulted in the emergence of new departments and institutions with flexible innovative methods of work and cooperation.

Having analyzed the ESU's working structure we can state that it is based on the primacy of its member organisations and, thus proves to be collegial and democratic. The highest governing body, the Board, with each member country having two votes, every year elects the Union's Presidency and the Executive Committee (EC). These two offices are responsible for steering and coordinating the association both politically and financially on a day-to-day basis. Their work used to be supported by content Committees, which specialized in various areas such as academic and social affairs, gender equality, students' union development, etc. However, this department was disbanded and integrated the EC, but some of its functions were transferred to the new office of Coordinators, who are experts in issues that are of priority to ESU. This shift in the organizational structure was explained by R. Primozic (the ESU's Chairperson 2013-2014) as, "a need of a Union to have flexible working methods while strengthening its role in Europe" [5, p 24]. In other words, the reason seems to be obvious and it is a necessity to optimize the structure by reducing the number of departments with the same or similar purposes and duties.

Moreover, there are several other units, for example the Working Groups and Experts' Pools, which are responsible for a particular area of the association's activities and work on solving the most pressing issues in HE and governance. It was found, though, that the ESU's major regulative document, the Statutes, contains little information about goals and operation standards of these important institutions. Instead, certain characteristics of their competencies are provided in the Standing Orders, but, in our opinion, they are rather vague and sometimes even contradictory. For instance, this document states that the Working Group should focus on areas that are not urgent for EC, but important for the organization in general. At the same time, one of the main tasks of this department is to cooperate closely with the EC and Coordinators while producing the ESU's policy on topical issues [11].

Expert Pools are defined as autonomous entities that carry out external assessment, counseling, training on specific issues [12]. Although the Standing orders determine the establishing procedure and basic governing principles [11], we do not find a single word about the definite goals and objectives of these innovative structures. Thus, our assumption is that not clear and in some way contradictory objectives and functioning rules of the Working groups and Expert pools on the one hand, and a lack of information about their outcomes (except for the Expert Pool on Quality Assurance) on the main ESU's web-resource on the other, testify about the indefinite concept or a certain decline of these units.

One of the important components of the ESU's structure is the Secretariat, whose principal mission according to the Statutes is to assist EC in carrying out the decisions made by the Board. The main responsibilities of this unit include: collecting and distributing information to the NUSes and other departments of the Union; establishing contacts between the NUSes and other HE structures; fundraising activities; coordinating the implementation of the decisions adopted by the Board or EC; developing external, public relations and contacts with the press [12]. It should be mentioned that, in contrast to other departments of the Union, the Secretariat may include not only students. This is due to the need for qualified specialists, who could quickly and efficiently perform administrative work and conduct financial management.

In the course of logical and systematic analysis of the main documents, which include the Statutory papers, annual Plans of work, Policy papers, Strategic Political Priorities and Board Meeting Motions, we have defined the fundamental principles, which are followed by ESU in three major areas of its activities:

1. Advocating of economic, social, cultural, political and civil rights of students:

- representativeness, as the ESU is the association, which acts on behalf of students' at supranational level;
- democracy and transparency, which means open access to any information regarding the functioning of the organization, collegiate composition of the main governing body and the adoption of important political, organizational, financial and staff decisions by voting;
- non-profit nature, as the overriding objectives of the organization are not commercial;
- solidarity at national and international levels, that is providing students with comprehensive (including legal) support in case of violations of their rights;
- equality as one of the core principles of both internal and external policy of ESU, which provides specific actions to overcome any discrimination among students or against them (campaigns for increasing awareness of existing types and forms of discrimination at campuses, support of international student exchange programs and intercultural cooperation, work on projects to fight racism and gender discrimination, etc.);
- equal opportunities in access to HE, which involves defending the human right to education regardless of people's origin, social status or welfare.

2. The development of the ESU as a partner of the BP:

- purpose-oriented approach, which provides a clear formulation of the Union's objectives in the context of BP

and consolidation of all resources in order to achieve them;

- pro-activity, which means ESU always advocates its own plans, developed from its own ideas and takes an active part in the process of EHEA development;
- impartiality and independence meaning that the Union cannot be either negatively affected or manipulated by third parties;
- constant interaction and cooperation with other actors of the BP, which is regarded by experts of the Union as the key to success of HE modernization and development of the EHEA.

3. Building the European Higher Education Area:

- democracy and transparency in decision-making, which means engaging all stakeholders, including students, into the process of the educational policy production and HE governance at all levels;
- student-centered paradigm, that is not only an approach in the teaching and learning process, but also a kind of institutional culture, when students are considered to be an integral part of the academic community;
- equal opportunities in access to mobility programs, which involves overcoming social and economic inequalities in this sphere;
- HE as a public responsibility, which is reflected in the constant struggle of the Union against the commercialization of education and transforming students into customers, consumers of educational services.

So, during the last decade ESU has become actively involved into the process of HE modernization. The current status, successes and future challenges that students see in the implementation of reforms and the Process as a whole, are highlighted in a series of analytical publications under the common title "Bologna With Student Eyes"(BWSE) issued in 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2012. In a special edition called "Bologna Process at the finish line: a report of ten years of European higher education reform" (2010), although it might not be enough time to make final conclusions, especially if the final design of the BP is ever-changing, the ESU's experts stated that the ambition of a common EHEA had not been matched by equal ambition in making it a reality [1, p. 3]. Therefore, important recommendations were developed for the next decade in order to achieve desired objectives in the most stumbling areas. This proves, as a partner of BP the Union appeared to be a professional organization with a serious scientific potential, which not only provides critical analysis of Bologna reforms, but tries to contribute to solving the problems in the Bologna discourse.

The ESU's experience of engagement in HE modernization process at the supranational level shows that there are a number of areas, in which student representatives managed to make the greatest influence. The Union has conducted most of its own studies and realized the biggest projects in such directions: quality assurance, financing of HE and student involvement in HE governance.

The problem of HE quality has been in focus of the ESU since the first Student Convention within the BP (Göteborg, 2001), where it was stated, "accessible higher education of a high quality is of utmost importance for a democratic European society" and "to guarantee and improve the quality of higher education, a strong European cooperation of the national quality assurance systems is

needed" [4]. Since quality assurance is one of the most pressing issues for ESU, its importance was stressed in almost every analytical publication, article or speech.

A. Kasoka, a Latvian researcher and a member of the Student Experts' Pool on Quality Assurance, singled out the milestones of student engagement into the process of HE quality assurance in Europe [13, p. 252-253]:

- the first was the adoption of the Prague Communiqué in 2001, when students were recognized as competent and constructive partners in shaping the EHEA. This was also the year the so-called E4 group (the EUA, the EUR-ASHE, ESU, and ENQA) based on the European principle of stakeholder involvement in quality assurance was established;

- the turning point for involving students in quality assurance was the Bergen Conference (2005) and the adoption of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) in the EHEA. Studies carried out by ESU (BWSE 2009) concluded that there was an evident correlation between proper implementation of the ESG and a high level of student participation in quality assurance [2]. Following the adoption of the ESG, both student organisations and quality assurance agencies in many European countries began to experience the implementation of student involvement in quality assurance. For instance, to participate in monitoring studies, students created special associations, which eventually turned into national student expert committees on quality assurance;

- the third (current) stage began in 2009 with the establishment of the Student Experts' Pool on Quality Assurance (SEPQA) – an international student platform, which includes about 60 students from 28 European countries. The mission of this group is to promote students' interests as for the HE quality at all levels. In cooperation with various quality assurance agencies SEPQA develops strategies for improving the HE quality and participates in the institutional and national monitoring research across Europe [15].

Very important at this point, in our opinion, was a big project "QUEST for Quality for Students" launched by ESU together with the European Commission in 2010 with the aim to increase the level of student involvement in HE quality assurance process and to define the concept of "quality education", that would best correspond to a student-centered model of HE [10]. This project was the first pan-European research of students' attitude to quality assurance, and its outcomes, according to ESU's experts, should change the views of politicians and make a significant contribution to the development of the EHEA.

The report on the results obtained during the first phase of the project entitled "Quest for Quality for students: going back to basics" was published in 2012. In this analytical work a group of authors, including A. Le Havre, L. Ivanov, K. Shtraman and F. Palomares, highlighted major political and conceptual advances in HE quality assurance at national and European level over a decade, and singled out two main approaches to defining the concept of "quality education": contextual, when quality is considered in a certain context (curricula, students' involvement, teaching and learning, etc.); specific – quality is determined regarding various stakeholders, who have their own understanding of this concept. In addition, the researchers identified and characterized the levels of student involvement in quality assurance process.

Firstly, at institutional level, students can have three principal roles: providing information (by responding to surveys on a regular basis, focus groups, etc.); participating in the preparation of self-assessment reports (as members of the self-evaluation group, writing the report, providing feedback to the report etc.); and as members of the bodies responsible of internal quality assurance processes (either with or without voting rights). Secondly, at external level two main roles have been identified: providing information (in consultation during external reviews), and as members of external review panels of higher education institutions and/or programmes, where students can play an observer role in expert teams, have full-member status while sometimes holding the positions of chair and secretary within the teams, and a recognized role at the decision-making level (essentially in audits or accreditation of programmes). Thirdly, at the level of governance of national quality assurance agencies, students can be involved in three stages: as planners of the evaluation/accreditation programmes, as members of the consultative bodies and as members of the governance bodies. Finally, at European level, ESU has had a leading role for introducing student involvement in quality assurance, for example when it comes to the involvement of students in evaluation of quality assurance agencies [9, p. 16-17].

Within the framework of QUEST project ESU also carried out a comparative analysis of students' views on HE quality in eight different European countries [8]. Due to some problems in distribution of questionnaires, this research can be considered a pilot project that laid the foundation for further investigation. However, the findings of the study paint a multi-faceted picture of students' view on quality in HE influenced by the national situations. Besides, the low level of students' awareness about instruments of quality improvement only confirms that students are mainly passive observers in this process.

In order to overcome the information gap as for the quality of education and empower student unions to lead discussions on this issue at a local level, ESU published "A Student Handbook on quality assurance" (2013). In this publication the group of experts again carried out a detailed analysis of the quality education concept, focusing on the different approaches to quality assessment; defined the core competencies that a student should obtain to take part in quality reviews; and explained the functions of ESU as a supranational participant of HE quality assurance process [7]. In our opinion, the greatest value of this edition is the practical part that might help students develop competencies and skills necessary for active participation in the process of quality assurance, especially at external and national level.

Thus, we can state that ESU has a high research potential in the field of HE quality assurance and through the work of its structural unit SEPQA plays a leading role in engaging students into this process at European level. Moreover, the Union due to its positive experience is able to provide guidance and support to national and local student associations on different aspects of effective integration of students into the HE quality assurance process.

It is obvious, that the quality and accessibility of HE depends largely on funding and that is why ESU is interested in various problems connected with financing of HE. However, it should be noted, that this issue got into the focus of

ESU's analytical studies only in 2010. In previous publications financing was sometimes mentioned in the context of tuition fees, mobility development and social support for students. In fact, the position of ESU on HE funding was clearly stated in BWSE-2012: "... one of the fundamental principles of the EHEA is to understand the HE as a public good, and thus social responsibility" [3]. However, not all member NUSes agreed with such uncompromising views, because at times of global economic crisis, massification of HE and reductions in public funding of Universities implementation of the cost sharing policy was rather justified. This forced the leaders of ESU to reconsider their position towards HE financing.

In 2011 with the purpose to increase knowledge about different HE financing systems in Europe and study their impact on the life and training of students, ESU started a new project called "Financing the Students' Future" (FINST). Within this comparative research the responsible experts gathered data from different sources, discussed the challenges of financing with students and stakeholders from all over Europe and provided recommendations for improvement of HE.

The climax of this project was the publication "Compendium on Financing of Higher Education", which contains a brief description and comparative analysis of the various European HE financing systems and resonant articles on pressing issues in this area. Particular attention in this research is paid to a prognostic analysis of possible scenarios of European HE funding in the future with a detailed description of the advantages and disadvantages for students, universities and society as a whole [6, p. 126-159]. Interestingly, ESU believes already, that the perfect model is no longer purely public funding, but the

combination of public and private investment in HE, reflecting the common European views and trends.

In order to shape a strong student movement in Europe in terms of constant modernization changes ESU repeatedly conducted studies of student national and institutional organizations. Moreover, based on the results, experts worked out recommendations on development of effective student unions and enhancing their impact on the educational policies of the state, regions or Universities. ESU publications and statements are the tools, which help NUSes lobby their governments on certain issues and protect student rights.

Conclusions. So, student involvement is one of key principles in the Bologna discourse, and the most influential student representative platform at a supranational level is the European Students' Union. The working structure of this association is based on the primacy of its member organisations and, therefore proves to be collegial and democratic. Having analyzed the main documents we defined the fundamental principles which are followed by ESU in three major areas: advocating of economic, social, cultural, political and civil rights of students, the development of ESU as a partner of BP and shaping the EHEA. Thus, it is evident that during the last decade the Union has become actively involved into the process of HE modernization, especially in the areas of quality assurance, financing of HE and development of a strong student movement. It was also proved that ESU has a high research potential and on the basis of its own positive experience provides guidance to national and local student associations on various aspects of effective student integration in decision-making process.

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