

Bucharest, 23 April 2012

STATEMENT to the BUCHAREST MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE

The European Students' Union, the umbrella union for 47 national unions from 38 countries in Europe, believes that the Bologna Process Ministerial Conference in Bucharest 2012 offers a unique opportunity to set the agenda for higher education cooperation in Europe. It is also an opportunity to revitalise a stalling process, as is evident from reports including ESU's own analysis of the Bologna Process: 'Bologna With Student Eyes 2012'.

In the majority of European countries, public investment in higher education has been or is about to be cut. This effectively defies repeated pledges made at ministerial conferences to uphold public investment despite the ongoing crisis. Alarming, this has been combined with serious reductions in student supports in several countries.

In the most severe cases study costs are being driven up faster than ever, especially when tuition fees are being introduced or raised. This often happens without democratic legitimacy or support of students or stakeholders. The absence of equal access to education and the decreasing affordability of higher education is likely to increase the risk that youth unemployment today will lead to a lost generation tomorrow. If European governments do not stop these developments, neither will social cohesion be improved nor long-term growth of economies will be possible, yet this is exactly what is crucially important at this time.

The students of Europe ask the Ministers gathering in Bucharest to **reinforce their commitment to the fact that higher education is a public good and a public responsibility**. The Bucharest Communiqué should reflect this and build on previous commitments. It is absolutely necessary that the highest appropriate level of funding for higher education is secured. We insist that public funding of higher education is the single most important means of guaranteeing this.

If even in the context of austerity, ministers for higher education do not dare to fight for increased public budgets for higher education, no other minister will. It is not the case that the higher education budgets have been grossly inflated, and caused the massive public debt crisis. Solutions

to public deficits should come from budget cuts in sectors where long-term economic growth will not be jeopardised and where structural changes to public budgets are actually needed.

The ongoing meltdown of funding for student support services must be reversed in order to avoid risking the loss of the focus on the social dimension and accessibility for students of all backgrounds. The objectives of the Bologna Process in this regard will not be attainable without necessary support. Revitalising investments in higher education should be done through targeting and supporting objectives of the Bologna Process, particularly such as the social dimension, mobility and lifelong learning.

We furthermore call on the ministers to stop procrastinating on delivering policies on the social dimension. In a Europe in which demographics are changing rapidly, we cannot afford to lose a single talented young person because they are disadvantaged due to their socio-economic background. In the last three years, discussions within the Bologna framework on improving access to underrepresented groups has been impeded by a lack of reliable data and lack of agreement on having specific indicators.

The commitment made in 2009 to adopt national targets and to develop indicators, shows no signs of progress or improvement and has been ignored in the draft Bucharest Communiqué. We do not believe it is possible to shape effective policy without defining the groups that one wants to reach and without setting measurable targets. This is an area where evidence-based policy-making must come first. European students call upon the ministers meeting in Bucharest to create stronger mechanisms in order to monitor progress in this area and to accept the invitation to use peer learning and review of national systems as concrete support measures from the European level to push for greater prioritisation of the social dimension.

The commitment to adopt national targets for increasing the participation of underrepresented groups must be fulfilled by 2012. These targets should be tied to a European reference level and supported by a strategy devised by the Bologna Follow-Up Group. A lack of reference to this in the 2012 Communiqué will not be accepted as a reason to suspend the promises made in 2009 when priorities targeted towards 2020 were agreed upon. This is even more true in the current economic climate where disadvantaged groups clearly often take the biggest hit.

The many commitments to the social dimension of higher education made in the Bologna Process so far has, as experienced by the European national unions of students, not been translated into actions benefiting students. We are asking for true implementation and accountability towards progressing the social dimension and believe that adopting concrete targets and benchmarking is the first step towards ensuring a trustworthy follow-up of the vision behind the European Higher Education Area.