



Students and universities: An academic community on the move

EUA and ESIB Joint Declaration

Paris, 6 March 2002

ESIB – The National Unions of Students in Europe (hereafter referred to as ESIB) and EUA – European University Association (hereafter referred to as EUA), representing more than 10 million students, 32 rectors' conferences and 600 universities or equivalent institutions across the whole of Europe, present together, for the first time, a shared vision for the future of higher education in Europe

Universities are acknowledged as the main platform in which dialogue and learning between the generations take place. While students have always embraced their role in promoting reform and development, future work must be undertaken in broader partnerships. This can only strengthen the role that higher education plays in shaping and contributing towards civic society.

Students, Universities and Europe The importance of universities and students working together at local, regional, national and European level is clear. The future of Europe depends upon the ability to build together a learning society based upon the diversity of cultures and experience, and underpinned by shared values.

Both EUA and ESIB therefore signal their willingness to work together on issues of importance for the Laeken Convention on the future of the European Union, and to make a significant contribution on the changing role of higher education in an increasingly interconnected global society. Students have a unique contribution to make in the consultation of civil society that is being planned as part of the Laeken process..

EUA and ESIB are committed to joint action at the European level. While the following are current priorities – the construction of the European Higher Education Area and the globalisation process – EUA and ESIB will also discuss, further to this declaration, common fields of interest in achieving the “Europe of knowledge”.

European Higher Education Area The creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is an important objective that both EUA and ESIB support and towards which we are already contributing fully.

All key stakeholders must be involved in the process. Now that the creation of the EHEA is entering the implementation phase, the active participation of universities and students is of increased importance. ESIB and EUA are both taking a pro-active approach to inform, encourage and support our members in this respect. We are also both fully involved at European level in the various groups and fora preparing the next stages of the EHEA.

The creation of the European Higher Education Area implies the reform of some aspects of traditional existing practices in many countries of Europe. We would like to draw attention to the following issues: .

- **Mobility** Increased and more flexible mobility of students and university staff is a fundamental building block for the EHEA. Much work has already been done to identify and remove barriers to mobility. We encourage the implementation of the Mobility Action Plan developed under the French Presidency of the EU to meet and exceed the targets established by the European Commission.
- **Improving quality mechanisms** Effective and transparent quality assurance mechanisms are a necessity to ensure mutual trust and confidence across European higher education, thus facilitating the recognition of qualifications, degrees and diplomas for both academic and employment purposes. Quality assurance mechanisms must also look to enhance the overall student experience (e.g., student support services and extra-curricular development). Taken together these factors should foster a quality culture within institutions and across the EHEA.
- **A European credit accumulation and transfer system** Once the necessary quality assurance procedures are in place, our goal is to remove barriers to recognition and credit accumulation to the extent that institutions can prerecognise existing qualifications using an agreed code of practice that serves the interest of students and protects the autonomy of institutions.
- **Social Issues** Higher education in Europe should be democratic and accessible for all. Social issues are central to the creation of the EHEA. These include a thorough and comprehensive student support system including, e.g., counselling, financial support, work rights and practical legal advice. To achieve equality of opportunity in an increasingly diverse university population, such a system must ensure maximum flexibility.
- **Links with the European Research Area** The construction of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) should not be separated from the development of a European Research Area (ERA). Integrated learning, teaching and research is essential to the European vision of a democratic and dynamic university system, and the construction of EHEA and ERA should therefore be regarded as aspects of a common process.
- **South Eastern Europe** The creation of the European Higher Education Area must be a truly European process in order to gain the benefits of our continent's diversity. We do not consider South Eastern Europe as a peripheral region in this process, but fully involved as an integral partner. The full inclusion of South Eastern Europe in the EHEA will be an essential element for the success of the

Stabilisation and Accession Process leading to EU membership. EUA and ESIB are concerned by the tendency to exclude some countries in South East Europe from the developing ERA.

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Europe and the globalisation process Whilst global competition might be seen as a way to enhance the overall quality of the higher education sector, the principles behind cooperation in the EHEA and with other systems of higher education should be based on educational solidarity.

Both EUA and ESIB share the opinion that education is a public good of benefit to individuals and societies, and not merely a tradable service. We consider that current attempts to extend commitments in Higher Education Services within the GATS framework are not in the best interests of higher education institutions, students or society in general. Education is a fundamental human right. Higher education should not be reduced to a commodity. Education should not be covered by an agreement primarily concerned with promoting free trade.

EUA and ESIB promote internationalisation. However, a system of regulations must be developed from within the higher education community.

Conclusion We affirm that ESIB and EUA are ready to contribute not only to the construction of the European Higher Education Area but more generally to the development of tomorrow's Europe, in which our members and constituents will play a leading, formulative role.