

The European Students' Union

REPRESENTING STUDENTS SINCE 1982



Student participation in higher education processes

The perspective of the European Students' Union

Supporting the Belarus Roadmap for Higher Education Reform
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Who am I?

Helge Schwitters



- **Bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Oslo**
- **Coordinator for Human Rights and Solidarity**
- **President-elect**
- **International Officer for NSO (Norwegian NUS)**
- **Member of the University Board of the University of Oslo**

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Student Representation in the EHEA

- 1999 Bologna Declaration – nothing about students mentioned
- 2001 Prague Communiqué: student participation first mentioned as a part of the Bologna Process and the Ministers agreed that:
 - “students should participate in and influence the organisation and content of education at universities and other higher education institutions”
 - “students are **full members** of the higher education community”
 - The European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), the **National Unions of Students in Europe** and the Council of Europe should be consulted in the follow-up work.

2003: Berlin Communiqué

- **ESIB** to be involved to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance
- Establishment of a Follow-up Group, which shall be composed of the representatives of all members of the Bologna Process and the European Commission, with the Council of Europe, the EUA, EURASHE, **ESIB** and UNESCO/CEPES as consultative members..
- “A Board also chaired by the EU Presidency shall oversee the work between the meetings of the Follow-up Group. The Board will be composed of the chair, the next host country as vice-chair, the preceding and the following EU Presidencies, three participating countries elected by the Follow-up Group for one year, the European Commission and, **as consultative members**, the Council of Europe, the EUA, EURASHE and **ESIB**. The Follow-up Group as well as the Board may convene ad hoc working groups as they deem necessary.”

How Is ESU Working in These Areas?



- Representation & advocacy
- Research & concept development
- Capacity-building & information exchange

**ALL THESE WORKING FIELDS ARE ASPECTS OF
STUDENTS INVOLVEMENT IN THE
IMPLEMENTATION OF EHEA**

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ESU's view on student participation

Why student involvement?



- Adapt to changes in society
- The student mass is often **more diverse** than the academic staff.
- Promotes critical thinking,
- First-hand experience of the quality of teaching and learning
- Builds trust and ensures transparency, which both contribute to the legitimacy and support for implementation of policies and change
- Creates ownership and responsibility for the students' own learning process
- It reflects the purpose and values of higher education and research

Modern Collegiality



Academic collegiality in the 21st century involves recognising that students and academic staff are united in a common purpose and should partake equally in the management of higher education institutions. The basic doctrine of modern collegiality can be described as a partnership, built on a common understanding among the participants of a shared responsibility.

How?



Modern collegiality requires that elected students are well-read, active participants in the governance, and that they maintain a dialogue with the rest of the student body via the student unions. In this way, elected student representatives can use their information flow to benefit higher education institutions.

All decision-making bodies responsible for policy-making and resource allocation affecting education and research at higher education institutions should be collegial in their composition. This also includes all informal decision-making bodies. It is especially vital that students are not shut out of the decision-making process on any level.

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Challenges and prerequisites, as reported by the students

Inclusive and accessible systems

With many student representatives being '**seen but not heard**' it is vital that student unions are accessible and foster inclusive atmospheres. There are numerous examples of student unions at local, national and international levels offering support and solidarity to each other as they face a number of common issues and share many successes. Within student unions and the heii structures, natural groupings and networks are continuously repopulated and offer student activists support and stability. These networks tend to focus on common interests such as field or study but often cross over especially in the class or faculty representation structures.

Representative and diverse student representation



- The group agreed that **representative representation means that the views of different students must be included at all levels.** They listed the importance of including diverse perspectives including the **diversity in genders, nationalities, backgrounds, ages and learning** needs as some of the groups which must be reflected in representation structures.
- Additionally, concerns were raised about the **limitations students from certain faculties or levels of study face in being included in structures.** The heavy workload of some professional courses such as medicine can be a barrier to involvement, as can the research or teaching responsibilities of Masters and PhD students.

Training and support



- With most student representatives completing 12 month mandates and many degrees lasting 3 to 4 years, the turnover of student representatives is extremely high. Training and orientation is an essential part of the handover process and excellent examples can be found across the nuses.

Heis and national bodies are essential in the induction of local and national representatives. Students who will hold seats on boards and councils should receive the appropriate practical information before their first meeting and have access to support throughout their mandate to ensure that they can participate fully without practical or administrative barriers.

Recommendations



- Legislation should be revised to ensure that student representation is guaranteed.
- Students are able to elect their own representatives without interference on all levels
- Support structures and activities are needed for new student representatives.
- NUSes and students' unions must be supported in providing training for student representatives.
- A platform for best practise exchange will be a valuable resource.

Thank you for your attention

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