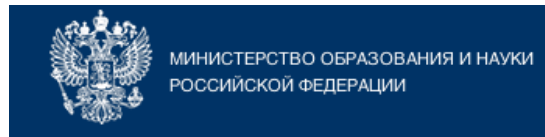




**Russian  
Chairmanship of the  
Committee of  
Ministers of the  
Council of Europe**



**Ministry of Education and Science  
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**International Conference co-organized by  
the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia together  
with the Council of Europe within the  
framework of the Russian Chairmanship of  
the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe**

**MAKING THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA  
A REALITY: THE ROLE OF STUDENTS**

**MOSCOW  
2-3 NOVEMBER 2006**

**WRITTEN CONTRIBUTIONS  
FROM SPEAKERS**

## **STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE**

*Annika Persson Pontén*

*Deputy Director*

*Division for Higher Education, Swedish Ministry of Education, Research and Culture*

### **SYNOPSIS**

Higher education in Europe is in the process of reform. If we are committed, the Bologna Process will have profound impacts on all our higher education systems. Hopefully, the Process will also have a profound and positive impact on the situation of each individual student, both during and after his or her studies, but also on the social dimension of European higher education as a whole.

The importance of the social dimension of higher education has been stressed in the communiqués of the Bologna Process since the first ministerial follow-up meeting in Prague in 2001. Although the concept has not yet been defined by the ministers involved it has been recognized as crucial for the success of the European Higher Education Area. According to my belief it is important for a democratic society to have a social dimension in higher education. All individuals should have fair and equal opportunities to qualify for and participate in higher education. Opening up study opportunities to more people means making use of all competencies within a society. The social dimension of higher education is also directly linked to democracy since the basis for a social dimension is to be able to influence your own situation. For students in higher education this means being able to influence issues that directly and indirectly affect them and their situation. But student participation in and influence on higher education is not only necessary for democratic reasons. Without equal access opportunities and an active and questioning approach from the main stakeholders in higher education – the students – the development of the quality of the education and situation of the students would be impaired.

Student influence on higher education must be both formally and informally channeled. It is important that the higher education institutions encourage the students to actively engage in questions related to the education itself, to the governance of the institutions and to all the questions related to their everyday life and future. This influence neither may nor should be exercised solely through representatives in different organs. We all know that students can be important driving forces for social and political change in societies and countries, but the exercise of student influence on higher education is – to a large extent – a process that takes place through informal co-operation with teaching staff in the course of day-to-day work. Not through conflict but through co-operation. However, student influence within higher education may only be realized if the students assume an active and engaged role on an individual and collective basis.

In 2003 and 2004 I carried out two separate surveys for the Council of Europe on the issue of *Student Participation in the Governance of Higher Education in Europe*. In the surveys this issue was divided into three parts:

- formal provisions for student participation in higher education governance based on national legislation;
- other provisions for student participation;
- actual practices of student participation.

The first report covered 48 countries. The questionnaire was sent to representatives of students, academics and governments. Replies from one or several group representatives were received from a total of 36 countries. The second report was a separate study of seven of these countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine. The second report contains an analytical study on the basis of the official questionnaires and country reports. The questionnaires were not distributed to the same three groups as in the first survey.

The surveys showed that student influence seems to be strongest on social and environmental issues at the institutions and at institutional level generally. There are legal mechanisms to ensure student representation at the higher education institutions in basically all of the countries concerned. The weakest influence is exercised on budget matters and on the criteria for admission of students. The level where student influence is considered to be the weakest is the national level.

There is a wide and positive attitude towards increased student influence in higher education governance according to the surveys. The students are viewed as the largest stakeholders with a right to influence decisions and practices. Student influence is also considered to improve the quality of higher education and support innovations and changes. But the surveys also showed that there are challenges ahead concerning student participation in higher education governance such as the relation between the provisions for participation and the actual practices, and the role and responsibility of the student organizations.

These and further findings from the surveys will be discussed during the presentation.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Educated in the fields of political science and languages Annika Persson Pontén is at present Deputy Director at the Division for Higher Education in the Swedish Ministry of Education, Research and Culture. She is currently the Chair of the Bologna Process Working Group on Social Dimension and Data on the Mobility of Staff and Students. She is also a representative of the Swedish Government in the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) and in the Council of Europe Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research (CDESR).

## **THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

*Germain Dondelinger*  
*Member of the CDESR Bureau*  
*Ministry of Education of Luxembourg*

### **SYNOPSIS**

The paper discusses the various perspectives from which the concept of “the social dimension of higher education” is addressed.

The presentation will set out to describe the trends in the understandings of the “social” in the Bologna Process, which increasingly refers to the social dimension as a constituent part of the European Higher Education Area and a necessary condition for the competitiveness and attractiveness of the EHEA. The definitions of the term “social” will evolve around equitable access to higher education, student retention and access to the labour market and they will be set against a background of the overarching concept of higher education as a public good. The argument will branch out into the values that implicitly underlie the academic community and which are the basis of higher education as a public good.

The social dimension will be set against the economic dimension of higher education: the latter will be explored in relation to the conceptualisations of higher education within a globalized context and to approaches to crossborder cooperation in higher education. The social dimension will also be set against the concept of “the entrepreneurial university” which, in the context of the knowledge society, expands into new socio-cultural, economic and technological territory.

It will be argued that the tension between the social dimension and the economic dimension will pose an essential ethical challenge to universities faced with a widening gap between the traditional academic values of the university and the market values of the knowledge society.

The presentation will argue for a more explicitly multi-dimensional approach to the social dimensions of higher education.

## **THE ROLE OF STUDENT ORGANISATIONS**

*Tatsiana Khoma*

*ESIB – the National Unions of Students in Europe*

### **SYNOPSIS**

In my speech I will present the opinion of ESIB – the National Unions of Students in Europe on the matter of the role of student organisations in higher education. Our approach is formed around the universal idea that students as well as student organizations should have a recognized active role to play as an equal partner and decision maker within Higher Education. The role of student organizations will be described from the point of student rights.

Student involvement is a key factor for the development of a diverse, high quality and democratic Higher Education. Student organisations should be representative of their members through democratic structures and transparency. ESIB has always, and will continue working in this direction.

I will also present how student organizations contribute to different areas of discussions and actions within higher education (i.e. governance of higher education, quality assurance, student well-being, student mobility, etc.) and the society as a whole drawing attention of the participants to the particular areas of ESIB concern as a European student representative organization.

### **BIOGRAPHY**

ESIB Executive Committee member 2006. Used to study international economics at Belarusian State Economic University until expulsion from University in November 2005. Currently is a bachelor student in Business Administration at University of Vienna. Before becoming ESIB Executive member fulfilled two terms as an International Officer and member of Executive Committee of Belarusian Students Association. Areas of responsibility in ESIB – student rights, gender equality and social affairs.

## THE ROLE OF STUDENT ORGANISATIONS

*Professor JERZY WOŹNICKI*  
*President of the Polish Rectors' Foundation*

### SYNOPSIS

The Bologna Process has entered a stage that will determine the degree and extent to which it will ultimately succeed. We already know the principal goals of Bologna and the proposed solutions to be implemented as part of this Process. Implementation is being handled by governments as well as international and national organizations, including conferences of rectors, associations of universities, non-governmental organizations as well as students and their international and national organizations.

The students will not be effective in what they do in this area if they form an atomised and poorly organized body. An alternative to this unwelcome situation are well organized student self-governments, well rooted in their respective student communities, and also other student organizations operating in the higher education institutions and in their environments.

The Council of Europe, Higher Education and Research Division, in its 2005 document titled "Higher Education Governance between Democratic Culture, Academic Aspirations and Market Forces. Considerations and Recommendations", lists the following objectives for higher education systems: preparation for the labour market, maintenance and development of broad advanced knowledge base, preparation for life as active citizens in a democratic society, personal development.

It is hard to imagine the pursuit of last two goals without the involvement of student organizations operating in higher education institutions. Students can, and indeed they should be making use of their powers to promote or enforce solutions they see as beneficial for them.

A few of the actions that students should be taking:

1. They should demand that proper program structures be developed for first- and second-cycle studies, especially when they are being offered only integrated master's studies, normally much preferred by the academic staff.
2. Students should be pressuring their deans to conclude agreements with other higher education institutions allowing them to spend a semester or a year studying abroad.
3. Student self-governments should demand that their higher education institutions earmark sufficient sums in their activity-and-finance plans for a scholarship fund. Money from this fund should be used to provide financial assistance to students taking part in European student exchange programs.

4. Students should demand the development of study programs and adoption of regulations that would create real possibilities for graduates of first-cycle studies to go on to second-cycle studies in a different but related field of study.

To sum up, student organizations should be playing a very major role in the Bologna Process implementation. The effectiveness of their efforts will be much enhanced if they are properly planned and consistent, and if they work together with the rectors and deans on institution level, and with the conference of rectors on the national level. In Poland we see this kind of partnership between Parliament of Students and national conference of rectors as the most important element of Bologna implementation efforts.

## **FULL TEXT**

### **Introduction**

The Bologna Process has entered a stage that will determine the degree and extent to which it will ultimately succeed. We already know the principal goals of Bologna and the proposed solutions to be implemented as part of this Process. Implementation is being handled by governments as well as international and national organizations, including conferences of rectors, associations of universities, non-governmental organizations and also international and national student organizations.

The coming years will be decisive because that is when the true extent of implementation of the new Bologna solutions relating to studies and students at higher education institutions, and hence also at faculty level, will become apparent.

We must not forget that it is not just proponents of the Bologna Process that we have in higher education institutions. It often happens that politicians and rectors are highly supportive of the Process, but as we go down, closer to grassroots level, the level of this support tends to diminish. While support for the new solutions may be considerable among senate members, many of the faculty professors might display a more conservative approach. The conclusion from this is that in many countries — Poland included — the final success in implementing the Bologna Process will depend not just on legislative solutions, that is to say on regulations embodied in laws, ordinances and statutes, but primarily on a pressure within faculties to achieve actual and effective implementation of the Bologna principles. This pressure must stem from powerful motivations which in their turn must be based on specific benefits to be gained by the interested groups in higher education institutions. We must thus turn our attention first of all to the principal beneficiaries of the new solutions, namely the students. The Bologna Process is first of all intended to serve students — it is the students who should be having more freedom and much greater possibilities of choice in the course of their studies. And this will be achieved by making the studies more flexible and divided up into cycles, by increasing student mobility and providing students with more opportunities for better jobs in European Union countries through increased readability and comparability of their diplomas.

For this to become possible, the Bologna Process must receive powerful backing — organizational, program-related and financial — both on government and higher education system levels, and in the higher education institutions themselves. As a rule, the academic staff are not additionally remunerated for the considerable additional effort they must put in to implement Bologna. The professors and teaching staff may be expected to do the extra work motivated by academic ethos, but if this effort is to be intensified, the students must demonstrate clear interest and anticipation — or better still, they must start applying pressure on the faculty members to intensify their work. Also, the students themselves should be playing an active role in the implementation initiatives.

The students will not be effective in what they do in this area if they form an atomised and poorly organized body. An alternative to this unwelcome situation are well organized student self-governments, well rooted in their respective student communities, and also other student organizations operating in the higher education institutions and in their environments.

### **European Documents on the Role of Students**

The 1999 Bologna Declaration lists the mobility of students attending two-cycle study programs among the principal goals to be attained:

*... Promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement with particular attention to:*

- *for students, access to study and training opportunities and to related services...*

The Communiqué issued by education ministers meeting in Prague in 2001 stressed the importance of student involvement:

*... Ministers affirmed that students should participate in and influence the organisation and content of education at universities and other higher education institutions. Ministers also reaffirmed the need, recalled by students, to take account of the social dimension in the Bologna process...*

The ministers' communiqué issued in 2003 in Berlin speaks of:

*... the constructive participation of student organisations in the Bologna Process and ... the necessity to include the students continuously and at an early stage in further activities...*

This document goes on to say:

*... Students are full partners in higher education governance. Ministers note that national legal measures for ensuring student participation are largely in place throughout the European Higher Education Area. They also call on institutions and student organisations to identify ways of increasing actual student involvement in higher education governance...*

In their next communiqué, issued in 2005 in Bergen, the ministers announced the following:

*... We underline the central role of higher education institutions, their staff and students as partners in the Bologna Process. Their role in the implementation of the Process becomes all the more important now that the necessary legislative reforms are largely in place, and we encourage them to continue and intensify their efforts to establish the EHEA...*

This selection of excerpts from Bologna documents is clear evidence that European education ministers are well aware of the increasing role of students and student organizations in implementing the Bologna Process.

In its turn, the Council of Europe, Higher Education and Research Division, lists the following two objectives for higher education systems in its 2005 document titled “Higher Education Governance Between Democratic Culture, Academic Aspirations and Market Forces. Considerations and Recommendations”:

*... • preparation for life as active citizens in a democratic society,  
• personal development...*

It is hard to imagine the pursuit of those goals without the involvement of student organizations operating in higher education institutions. It is the participation of students in diverse forms of student organizations that helps breed the desired civic and pro-social attitudes in them. Likewise, personal development of students is speedier and more comprehensive if they are exposed to interpersonal contacts within organized groups of people sharing the same aspiration to further their cultural development. Students should be cooperating in diverse projects that would shape their characters and develop their personalities.

### **Roles, Tasks and Opportunities of Student Organizations**

The most important student organization is the student self-government, an organization legally required to serve the entire student body at a given higher education institution. The student self-government thus defined must be provided for by an act of law, and it is the acts regulating higher education that should define its operation and financing rules. The Act on Higher Education in force in Poland today makes the student self-government organs the sole representatives of the student body as a whole. These organs appoint their representatives to sit in collective bodies of the given higher education institution, namely in the senate, faculty councils and faculty committees. This Act requires at least 20% of seats in the collective bodies to be reserved for students, including also third-cycle doctoral students. Worth noting is that student members of these bodies enjoy the same rights and have the same powers as representatives of the professors community. As a result, the students, represented by their delegates to the collective bodies, have a say in all decisions pertaining to their higher education institution, including also decisions with regard to their professors. And we believe this is the way it should be. We cannot restrict student responsibilities and rights to what is traditionally being classified as student matters,

including, for example, social assistance issues. The current placement of students in the governance system of higher education institutions means that the role of student self-governments in the academic self-government as a whole is not marginal, merely decorative or supplementary. Rather, this role is truly constitutive: without student self-governance there would be no academic self-governance. Worth pointing out in this context is that in scientific institutes which do not teach students, the say of their scientific councils is confined to issues of scientific policy and staff development, with the collective organs playing only a restricted role in the governance of these organizations.

As we can see from the foregoing, students were given a share of governance powers at both the higher education institution and faculty levels. They can, and indeed they should be making use of their powers to promote or enforce solutions they see as beneficial for them. It goes without saying that the issue which is most important for students at this point in time is the implementation of the Bologna Process at their respective higher education institutions. What does this entail in practice? For lack of time, I will mention just a few of the actions students should be taking.

1. They should demand that proper program structures be developed for first- and second-cycle studies, especially when they are being offered only integrated master's studies, normally much preferred by the academic staff. Among other things, efforts must be made to prevent the replacement of the five-year integrated master's studies with a two-cycle system of studies, required by the Bologna Process, from becoming merely a formal exercise, avoiding significant changes in the program structure and doing without recruitment requirements for enrolment to second-cycle studies. The second-cycle studies should begin with, for example, more advanced versions of the major subjects taken by first-cycle students. An additional advantage here would be better preparation of students for the third-cycle doctoral studies.
2. Students should be pressuring their deans to conclude agreements with other higher education institutions allowing them to spend a semester or a year studying abroad. Guest-student programs of this kind require flexible study rules, the right to freely choose subjects to study, and the proper implementation of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). No less important in this context are efforts to provide adequate conditions for foreign guest-students to study at the given higher education institution (language courses, accommodation), vigorous promotion and information campaigns, etc.
3. Student self-governments should demand that their higher education institutions earmark sufficient sums in their activity-and-finance plans for a scholarship fund. Money from this fund should be used to provide financial assistance to students taking part in European student exchange programs.
4. Students should demand the development of study programs and adoption of regulations that would create real possibilities for graduates of first-cycle studies to go on to second-cycle studies in a different but related field of study. This would provide students with an education of a more interdisciplinary character.

In Poland, student self-governments are represented on the national level by the Parliament of Students of the Republic of Poland. This body is sanctioned by the Act on Higher Education, receives financial assistance from the minister with responsibility for higher education, and is the legal representation of the entire student community in the country. In virtue of the Act on Higher Education, the Parliament has the right to voice opinions and present proposals in matters relating to the entire student community, including the right to be consulted on legislation concerning students. The minister is required to seek the opinion of the student Parliament on draft legislation of this kind. This means that students can do a lot to influence the implementation of the Bologna Process in line with their own views and preferences, especially when it comes to legal regulations and ordinances issued by the minister responsible for education. Moreover, the students' Parliament is not acting alone in Poland. It works hand in hand with the Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland (CRASP) which in its turn is being supported by the Polish Rectors Foundation, a non-governmental organization established by more than one hundred rectors and intended as an independent research body providing CRASP with expertise in the fields of higher education and scientific research. In the period 2003–2005 all these organizations, working together, drafted the Bill on Higher Education and then campaigned for its passage into law. This new law includes all elements of the Bologna Process. Today all the authors and promoters of this legislation are committed to actually implementing it on all levels of the higher education system. The concerted efforts of students and the rectors' organizations in this regard are of major importance.

### **Conclusions and Final Remarks**

The student self-government, an organization that is by definition representative of the entire student body, should be playing a key role in promoting the Bologna Process, both in the student community and in organs of the higher education institution. However, we must not overlook other organizations, such as scientific, artistic, tourist, sports and other associations created by students at the various higher education institutions. Many of these associations find partners abroad, thus developing the cultural infrastructure of mutual contacts, exchange and cooperation among European higher education institutions. The Bologna climate goes a long way towards encouraging initiatives of this kind. We believe that organizations involved in these initiatives should unite their efforts in promoting the Bologna Process on various levels of the higher education system, especially within the student community.

To sum up, we believe student organizations should be playing a very major role in the Bologna Process implementation. The effectiveness of their efforts will be much enhanced if they are properly planned and consistent, and if they work together with the rectors and deans on institution level, and with the conference of rectors on the national level. In Poland we see this kind of partnership between students and rectors as the most important element of Bologna implementation efforts.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

President of the Polish Rector Foundation, Director of the Institute of Knowledge Society. Professor, PhD, DSc in Electronics Engineering.

Since 1973 he has been working in Faculty of Electronics and Information Technology of Warsaw University of Technology. He is full professor. His scope of activity covers electronics, research into higher education and the issues connected with knowledge society. He was the Rector of the Warsaw University of Technology (1996-2002). The President of the Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland. (1999-2002) and the Deputy Chairman of the Polish National Council of European Integration (2000-2002).

## **INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE: MOBILITY**

*Bernd Wächter*

*Director*

*Academic Cooperation Association (ACA)*

### **SYNOPSIS**

This presentation will try to identify, based on the results from the literature, the impacts that international mobility has on the mobile students. It should already be stated here that hard empirical evidence is rare, and that the debate about mobility impacts is governed by strong emotions, which even occasionally ‘creep into’ learned papers. The exploration of the results of international mobility is preceded by an overview of the different modes of mobility (for there is no such thing as ‘mobility as such’) and the various rationales (driving forces) for mobility. Although the speaker will try to base his presentation on scholarly work, he will make every attempt not to speak in an academic way – in order to keep the attention of the audience.

### **BIOGRAPHY**

Bernd Wächter is the Director of the Academic Cooperation Association (ACA). Like its members, which are national organizations in charge of the furthering of international higher education cooperation in their countries, ACA promotes innovation and internationalization in European higher education. Before taking up his present post, he held leading positions in the German Academic Exchange Service, in the British Council, and in a number of German higher education institutions. He has also been involved in setting up the EU Socrates Programme, as the head of the Erasmus Division in the Socrates Technical Assistance Office. Bernd Wächter has published and lectured widely on international higher education, and he is the editor of the ACA Papers on International Cooperation in Education.

## **INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE**

*Ewa Krzaklewska*  
*Vice President*  
*Erasmus Student Network*

### **SYNOPSIS**

Stay abroad for students can be arranged through the academic mobility programmes such as Erasmus, Tempus or CEEPUS or through the internship and volunteer programmes (Leonardo, EVS). There is also a growing engagement of students in the short-term activities such as summer universities, week-long trainings, cultural exchanges or festivals. All those are a source of growth and knowledge for students and allow all kinds of learning experiences (from formal to in-formal learning).

This presentation will discuss the role of student mobility in the creation of European Higher Education Area. The special focus will be given to the student's experience: how the personal growth and interactions while abroad are a tool to the better integration and better understanding between cultures, as well how they help to build the collaboration between institutions.

I will present shortly the results of Erasmus Student Network Survey (edition 2005, authors: Krzaklewska, Krupnik). According to it Erasmus students are:

1. Culturally competent (92% of respondents of ESN Survey2005 believed they have learned more about the culture of the host country)
2. Multilingual (Students evaluated their language skills before stay as 2,1 and 3,6 after the stay; on a scale from 1- not at all to 5- very well)
3. Mobile (78% Erasmus students would consider moving abroad)
4. Concerned with personal development
5. With developed social network abroad.

How to make students aware of the value of experience? How can this be communicated better to universities and their future employers in order to foster mobility and recognize the importance of foreign exchange?

Additionally, the meaning of engagement in the local community and local organisations would be discussed. Should this dimension of international experience be given more attention? How to motivate students to do volunteer work? How to show them the value of this experience? How student organisations can work together with institutions and international students themselves in order to build the European Higher Education Area?

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Ewa Krzaklewska**, Vice President Erasmus Student Network; sociologist and researcher. Graduated in July 2006 from the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland, and studied as an exchange student in USA and Italy. Her main areas of interest are student mobility, impact of studies abroad on emerging adults, internationalization of education. Participant and speaker at several international conferences, author of several articles. Currently, Vice President of Erasmus Student Network, a European network of 220 student organisations fostering student mobility and offering services to exchange students ([www.esn.org](http://www.esn.org)). Her main responsibilities within ESN are quality assurance, coordinating international research projects and representation of Erasmus students and ESN sections on educational events.

## **THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN A BROAD PERSPECTIVE**

### **THE STUDENT AND HER/HIS UNIVERSITY: BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER**

*Lars Ekholm, PhD  
Representative of EUA*

#### **SYNOPSIS**

The presentation wants to discuss the concept of learning environment in a broad context. The student is followed on her/his way through the university, but some aspects will also be highlighted relating to what happens both before her/his admission into the university and after graduation. It's a bus ride with a number of stops - and at each stop there are comments to be made from the viewpoint of higher education policy in general and the Bologna process in particular.

The student's career actually starts as early as at upper secondary schooling level. The issues here are: Much is said in a Bologna perspective about the relationship between university and labour market, much less about university and the school world. What are the relations today - is there harmonious co-operation or are there two different education systems, something like watertight bulkheads?

To many students the first contact with the university is the admission procedure, organised in different ways in Bologna countries. What students are admitted to the good learning environments that are offered? The Bologna concept is that education is a social good, and that social justice is and should be a living, European reality. Different countries try to live up to this in various ways, no one can be said to fully succeed. Both with respect to individual justice and with respect to cultural and economic life we need to strengthen our efforts in this policy field.

Next stop concerns the ways by which a pupil finds his/her choice of study programme from the broad provision that the university offers. How does this mechanism function, not in theory but in real life? What are the responsibilities of the university, and of the student? How does the student reach the best learning environment?

The student enters the university - and what learning environment does he/she meet? Well organised studies with curricula in terms of clearly stated learning outcomes, teachers that all have a PhD, teachers who are dedicated and has fully accepted a student-centred approach, teachers who burn for the teaching mission? Laboratory equipment at the forefront, beautiful and well designed lecture halls and group rooms? Or does the university show just the opposite, a poor or non-existent learning environment, with teacher-centred pedagogical methods, and non-functioning premises? Or a mixture, such as poor teachers in good buildings, or excellent teachers in poor buildings? What are our priorities, and what should they be?

The students are not clients, they are not stakeholders in the traditional sense, they are part of the academic community, although junior partners. And they have a right to participate in the running of the university. This is not discussed in this presentation, since it is the major theme of another session.

The student leaves her/his Alma mater, but the story does not end there. The university should follow their students on to the labour market, for many reasons. What is the success rate as to employment? Can the students become alumni? What good advice can former students give to enhance the learning environment for their younger fellow students? And what prospects does the university hold for their ex-students in terms of life long learning opportunities, with a learning environment adjusted to this purpose?

## **FULL TEXT**

Yesterday I congratulated the organisers of this conference to have chosen a very important theme for our discussions. The role of students is absolutely crucial in the development of the Bologna process and the realisation of the European Higher Education Area. This session focuses on the students and the learning environment. Allow me, dear colleagues and student friends, to take a broad view of the learning environment concept. I invite you to join me in a journey, where I would like to follow a student from her or his school, into the university and onto the labour market, and even later. Of course this is an ideal student, who has all the merits you can dream of! The university has splendid teachers and a perfect organisation! My student enters a labour market which welcomes the new generation! I have divided this journey into 12 stops or stages, which allows me to make some comments from the viewpoint of higher education policy in general and the Bologna process in particular.

This is the outline of my presentation. I have three major sections: Before, during and after undergraduate studies.

### **A BEFORE:**

1 Links between school and universities; 2 The age of beginners; 3 Social justice and widened access; 4 The student's choice of study program.

### **B DURING:**

5 The Classroom Learning Environment; 5.1 The importance of good teachers;  
5.2 Infrastructure: Premises.

### **C AFTER**

6.1 Employment statistics; 6.2 Content survey; 6.3 Life-long learning; 6.4 Laymen on university boards.

Needless to say, this trip has to be a swift one; many aspects have to be left aside.

## **A BEFORE**

### **1 Links between schools and universities**

We shall not forget, that there is a life for the student before entering the university. In the Bologna process much attention is given to good collaboration with the labour market, and I will myself come back to this issue. Less is said about what the relationship there should be between secondary schools and universities. Do universities collaborate harmoniously with secondary schools? Do university teachers know exactly what is taught at the school level and where they can start their pedagogical mission? Or do these institutions belong to separate worlds, where the schools complain that the universities have an arrogant and domineering attitude to them, and the universities complain that they cannot recruit pupils who are well prepared for the kind of academic learning environment that is provided at this level? The conclusion is: More attention to the links between secondary schools and universities!

### **2 The age of beginners**

My pupil is about to leave school. She has to make a choice: Shall I go on to university, to another kind of post-secondary education, or try my luck on the labour market? One answer can be: University - yes, but not now, I postpone that for some years. The age pattern for beginners at university level seems to vary in Europe. When I visit a university in my capacity as assessor I usually put the question: What is the average age of the students here? A student aged 18 or 19 behaves differently from a fellow-student of 29, married with two children and with some work-experience. In my own country just one third of the newly enrolled students are 21 or younger, one third are 26 or older. The age variation affects the learning environment. This is even more obvious in a life-long learning perspective. So: Age matters!

### **3 Social justice and widened access**

The Bologna documents underline the importance of social justice when students are admitted to universities. The Bergen Communiqué clearly states that the aim is to make “quality higher education equally accessible to all...”. Many countries have ambitious programs for strengthening the position of potential students from underprivileged groups. From a Bologna point of view this is part of the creed that higher education is a social good. We all know, however, that it is no easy matter to turn this into concrete policy. It is easy to tell who should be admitted if you have to choose between a student with rich parents but without talents and a student from a poor background and of great talents. But it is of course more complicated than this. The Nordic countries by tradition have strong undercurrents of equality between various social strata, in most fields in society. Even so, we cannot say that in Sweden we have succeeded in broadening recruitment to higher education to the extent we would like. National figures are that the proportion of students (beginners) with working class background is about one fourth, as compared with one third in the corresponding age cohort. The figures for senior salaried employee background is one third in relation to one fifth. But we all have to find ways here. Let me give one single

concrete example from own practice. I'm a board member of the Swedish University College for Dance. We started specially designed preparatory courses for so-called street dancers, you know the kind of dance that many young people devote their enormous energies to. These students definitely don't belong to the social levels from where this institution normally recruits its students. The project gave the teachers new insights into youth culture, and it gave the institution a number of new students of a different social background to its regular programs.

So: To enhance social justice in recruiting students is important in a Bologna perspective - and it makes special demands on the learning environment.

#### **4 The student's choice of study program**

What is the student's road the right learning environment, that is to the course or program that she really wants to take? I must admit that this process belongs to the mysteries of higher education life. In theory the student gets all relevant information before leaving school. The universities are supposed to give perfect information of the options at hand. Of course all information is available on homepages, or even in a nationwide, comprehensive database. Again, in theory the student makes a rational and well thought out choice on the basis of these facts: What demands will this program make on me, what are the job prospects etc? We all know, however, that in real life there are a number of roads to higher education and its varying learning environments. Some students know already at school what they are aiming at, others know that they would like to go to university and perhaps have two or three vague ideas about what program to choose, that is if they are in a position to choose. Parents have an influence, not least friends have a big influence. Media reporting about unemployment in a certain job sector can have an enormous impact at a given moment. The supply of student housing, in whatever form, can be of decisive importance. It's like love, we know how it works, but very few have succeeded to describe this phenomenon (only artists have succeeded, Pushkin for instance!). One must demand from the universities that they give correct information, including the employment rate of previous graduates. But the main responsibility will always rest with the student. She is the one that makes the choice, by free will. And it is many times no easy matter. Should she enrol in a program that is advantageous as to job prospects, or should she take a programme that comes near to her own interests? If the two combine, fine. But if not? My advice has always been: The best result for the student herself is that you should choose according to your own interests - with the important comment that whatever program or course you choose, the important thing is to put all your energy to it, dive deep into the subject matter, and above all - the best learning environment is the one that puts pressure on you when it comes to independent work, papers that might grow into small research exercises etc. In the long run, that is what counts; the skills and the attitudes the student acquires - these are the ones that can follow you a long way through your professional life. I'm talking -in the new learning outcomes jargon - the generic or transferable skills. With this comment, I have already proceeded to the next stage, namely:

## **B DURING**

### **5 The Classroom Learning Environment**

The student now enters the university, full of energy and enthusiasm, ready to acquire all relevant knowledge, and skills, and attitudes, that the curriculum asks for, a curriculum that of course is expressed in terms of learning outcomes. What does she meet? Well-organised studies, so that he knows in advance what is expected from him? Well trained teachers, almost all of them with a PhD background? Dedicated educators, really wanting to help their students progress through the studies? Laboratories with the latest possible equipment, and classrooms well designed for their purpose? A well-functioning library, in combination with group rooms and individual computing facilities? The student can of course devote himself fulltime to his studies, because he is reasonably supported financially through public funds in one way or another? Or, does the student meet just the opposite to these ideals? Or perhaps more true to life - a mixture of them? Good teachers in poor buildings, or poor teachers in fine buildings?

Let me comment on a few of these issues. Time does not allow us to consider all factors that combine to form an excellent learning environment in the classroom or the laboratory. At the moment I leave out the importance of well designed curricula, stressing learning outcomes for the student and not, as has been the tradition up till now, the teacher's intentions with a course.

5.1 When I ask students if they are satisfied with their learning opportunities and their pedagogical situation they often answer that I should not put the question like this. Teacher X might be good, but his colleague at the same department, teacher Z might not be good - which means that it is difficult to talk about the teaching/learning standards of a programme in general. This focuses on the importance of creating a good learning environment for the students by providing high quality teachers. Can we all say that we live up to such expectations? Hardly, I would say. I would like to share three arguments with you on this issue.

i) An academic teacher should have a PhD as his/her educational background. Of course there are many exceptions, you also need more vocationally oriented teachers in various programs, with a more hands-on background. But in principle: PhD as a prerequisite. Few countries, if any, can boast of reaching such a goal, if they have one. In my own country, Sweden, rhetorically we talk about a 100% goal at least for the universities. The figure is 55 %, with a higher proportion for universities with full PhD awarding rights and with a lower proportion for university colleges without - or limited - such rights.

ii) Students often criticize teachers for openly showing that research is their first priority, teaching comes second. The academic teacher should ideally combine teaching and research - but how shall we safeguard the proper balance between these two major missions in university life, to protect the learning environment?

iii) How well prepared and trained are our teachers in a pedagogical sense? School teachers

are trained as teachers, but this seems to be less common with academic teachers. Again, in my country it is now compulsory for academic teachers to pass courses in academic teaching, but this is a fairly recent development. At the moment, re-structuring curricula according to the learning outcomes philosophy ranks high. Also for the third cycle teaching, at the PhD training level, there are such courses, focusing on the task of supervising.

## **5.2 Infrastructure: Premises**

Of all the various factors that make up a good learning environment, let me comment on one component that is very seldom discussed at conferences of this kind. I refer to the premises, a very concrete (!) part of university and student life, but too seldom treated as part of the learning environment. Some people say: Buildings, equipment and other infrastructure - these are things that just are there, someone provides it for you. No, no, no! Those of you that have been at the head of a university knows how important investment issues are, or should be, when a university strategy is formed and carried out. When one visits European universities, it is really striking how building standards vary. I can't go into details here, but let me at least point to the following. There are different funding techniques in operation. In one model the government decides on investments separately from teaching funds, in another the government funds running and investment costs in bloc grants, in a third model the universities are left to get investment money from private sources. Etc. I have lived in both centralised and decentralised systems. My best experience is from a model where the university itself is entitled to strike the proper balance between running costs and investments. From time to time you have to put the question: Where does money best promote a good or excellent learning environment - in human resources or in buildings ?

## **C AFTER**

My ideal student now leaves her Alma Mater, the institution that has provided him with the competences that is needed for a successful professional life. What happens? First, perhaps confusion, why does not my employer make better use of all my knowledge and all my capacity? Then, gradually, the realisation that after all, it is the way in which I argue, the approaches I have in completely new situations, the methods I use for solving problems laid in front of me - that is what counts, and I'm grateful to my university that it provided a sufficiently broad learning environment to allow me to acquire such transferable skills! In more practical terms the following happens to my student.

## **6.1 Employment statistics**

One day, in fact half a year after graduation, the university asks my former student if she is has got a job or not; she proudly says, yes I have. This is obviously a university that follows its students on to the labour market, as it should.

## 6.2 Content survey

More important, after three years my ex-student is once more contacted, this time because the university makes an in-depth study of what changes should be done as to contents of the program that she once followed. She is asked: In the perspective of what you now know from the profession you chose, what was good and what was not good in your former studies? Do you have suggestions about new themes and problems that should be dealt with? The university said that their aim was to provide their students with an excellent learning environment, and that this was one way to secure this.

## 6.3 Life-long learning

There was another welcoming message from the university. First, it said, you are welcome to sign up as one of our alumni. The more important message was this: Remember, dear ex-student, whenever you feel that your professional life makes demands on you that you realise you must underpin with new knowledge, you are most welcome back to us. Many of our older students are involved in their life-long learning, and we find this, the university went on, a very important mission. Our aim is to give you the theories behind the latest developments in your field. We hope to give you another learning environment, adapted to your present needs, than the one that you met here as a young student!

## 6.4 Laymen on university boards

But the most remarkable of this story is what happened 10 years later. My ex-student was quite successful in her profession, so she was asked by her Alma Mater to sit, as an external member linking the university to society at large and the professional world in particular, on a program board, the body that decides on the structure and contents of studies. No, problem she said, I know the university from the inside. I was once a student representative and was even on the governing board of the university. This, my ex-student said, was a very positive experience that I have carried with me all my professional life!

## BIOGRAPHY

University manager in various positions at The Office of the Swedish Chancellor, the Ministry of Education and at Nobel-prize awarding Karolinska Institutet (as Registrar). From 1995 he was Secretary General of the Association of Swedish Higher Education, which is the Rectors' Conference, founded in the same year. He has been active in Nordic and European higher education organisations. He has been linked to the OECD/IMHE-programme and has done work for the European Rectors' Conference (EUA). He is now retired, and is asked to make evaluations of higher education institutions. He is deputy chairman of a Swedish university college. Dr Ekholm has been involved in the Bologna process from its start. His PhD is in history from Uppsala University.

## THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

*Lars Lyngge Nielsen*

*Acting President of EURASHE*

### SYNOPSIS

- To establish the Perfect Learning Environment: Mission Impossible!
- Learning Environment is more than just a well-equipped building
  - The mental barrier of tradition
  - The confusion between shape and content
  - However, some requirements for the physical environment
- The Learning Process: Four common fallacies
  - Ideological
  - Technological
  - Psychological
  - Utopian
- Excellence in Research does not ensure Excellence in Teaching
  - Excellence in Teaching does not ensure Excellence in Learning
- Learning Environment understood as a never-ending performance
  - The Actors: Students and Teachers
  - The Stage: The combined physical, psychological and social factors
  - The Play: To be re-written every time the actors are replaced or the stage changes
- To pursue the Perfect Learning Environment: Mission Accomplished!
  - When in doubt: Ask the students!

### BIOGRAPHY

Born 1948, Copenhagen, Denmark, MA in Psychology (Cand. Psych), University of Copenhagen.

Former positions:

- Lecturer at colleges for education, nursing and physiotherapy.
- Professional Consultant at the Danish Ministry of Education.
- Head of Offices in the Danish Refugee Council and in the UNHCR.
- Since 1995 Rector at Funen National College for Social Education.

In 2002 elected as Denmark's National Representative in EURASHE's Executive Council. In May 2004 elected Vice-President, re-elected in April 2006. In October 2006 approved by the Executive Council as Acting President of EURASHE.

## THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

*Martina Vukasović*

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### SYNOPSIS

Underscoring the importance of improving quality of learning in higher education and relating this to the success of the “official Bologna goals”, the presentation will begin by analysing the process of learning (where and how does it take place) and continue by addressing the importance of the learning environment for successful learning. Some elements of the learning environment, such as organisation of classrooms, size of classes, internet access, web-based learning, value of placements and internships etc., as well as less tangible aspects (inclusive teaching techniques, recognising learning that takes place outside of official learning arrangements etc.) will be addressed. The presentation will end with the discussion on who are those who are responsible for improving the learning environment.

### FULL TEXT

#### Introduction

The year 2010, by which the European Higher Education Area should become a reality is approaching – more or less slowly, primarily depending on how far a country has gone in the implementation of the Bologna goals.

The Ministerial Summit in Bergen in May 2005 brought us the first overview of the implementation results in the form of the stocktaking report. Even though one could argue that the indicators were not adequate enough or that some countries had got better (or worse) “grades” than they deserved, the stocktaking report at least pushed various stakeholders to look beyond the rhetoric of policy documents and legislative changes and to assess what changes took place “in the field”. Furthermore, another question appeared – “how will we know if the EHEA is a reality?”

To answer this question let’s first turn to the underlying motives behind the Bologna Process. Some would necessarily connect the Bologna Process to the Lisbon agenda of the EU that is the goal to become “the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010”. This is primarily the case with those observing the process from the outside (e.g. journalists, policy makers, educational researchers from the U.S., Australia etc.). Others, primarily the “insiders” would speak about increasing the mobility of students, academics (including researchers) and consequently the labour force across the continent, facilitating recognition of qualifications, increasing the attractiveness of higher education in Europe etc. The underlying concept in both perspectives is quality – both in terms of increasing the quality of higher education in Europe, and increasing the visibility

of that quality for the outside world. This focus on quality leads us to another problem: what do we consider as quality, if (and how) can we measure it, what can we do improve it etc.

The intention here is not to talk about various dimensions of quality and importance it has to the different stakeholders but to take one aspect of the quality of higher education which is directly related to the topic of the present discussion – the quality of students’ learning.

### **The process of learning**

When it comes to learning, the two basic questions one has to ask is how one learns and where learning takes place. The first question belongs to the realm of psychologists and pedagogues and it will not be elaborated here in almost any detail. What is important is to understand that there are different kinds of learning (memorising or rote learning, learning with understanding, learning for applying the knowledge in practice, learning by doing, learning from mistakes etc.) and different ways of learning (i.e. how an individual achieves memorisation of facts, understanding or ability to apply knowledge in practice).

With regards to the second question – where does learning take place – a simple answer would be “everywhere”. The intention is not to state the obvious but to underscore that, when it comes to student learning, it takes place both within and outside of the “official” learning setting. These two processes are separated but influence each other significantly.

Therefore, various higher education stakeholders, attempting to improve the quality of student learning, need to constantly bear in mind that students learn (or should learn):

- in the formal learning setting, i.e. within an official higher education programme - which includes the classrooms, laboratories, work placements, field trips, libraries as well as individual study to prepare for the lectures or exams;
- in the non-formal learning setting – which includes various courses and trainings (such as computer courses, language courses etc.) which take place outside of the higher education institution but in which learning is nonetheless a clearly stated goal;
- in an informal learning setting – which includes all situations where learning is not a clearly stated goal but nevertheless takes place.

Thus, one should rather speak of different learning environments instead of a single learning environment. For the purposes of this text, the formal learning setting (i.e. higher education) will be referred to as the *internal learning environment* and the other two (non-formal and informal) will be referred to as *external learning environments*.

The paper goes on to analyse the elements of the internal learning environment.

## Elements of the internal learning environment

Various elements of the learning environment could be understood in terms of their palpability. Thus, one could first focus on the elements related to the organisational setting of learning within an institution. These include:

- Organisation of programmes and class schedule  
This element is connected to the balanced distribution of student workload during the day and during the week, avoiding overlaps of classes or unrealistic schedules (e.g. 10 hours of lectures per day), problems with respect to geographical distribution of classes (especially in terms of universities that do not have a campus) etc. While it is not always possible to achieve balanced workload and avoid various problems, institutions sometimes tend to overlook the importance of a well organised schedule for students' motivation to learn and students' ability to learn. Some of the problems may be alleviated through more close cooperation between different university departments, sharing of resources etc. – an integrated university is bound to have less problems with this than universities which more resemble a loose confederation of constituent faculties.
- Size of classes  
In the era of mass higher education it is often very difficult to maintain a low student-teacher ratio. Classes with several hundreds of students, especially in the first stages of higher education and for more generic subjects are becoming less of an exception and more of a rule. This problem has many causes. It is sometimes the case that such big classes are a consequence of an open access to higher education in which the first year serves as the clearing process and only a small portion of students passes to the next year. Institutions (and governments) may adopt such a strategy for various reasons (especially if the total number of students is a part of the funding formula and the number of students to be admitted is decided by the institutions and government). Whatever the motive may be, what both governments and institutions should do is to be realistic about the capacities of higher education institutions, since the chronic overcrowding of classes is detrimental for student learning. Furthermore, closer integration and cooperation with constituent faculties/departments may also solve part of the problem since it can happen that while one department is overcrowded, another is enjoying ample space. In some countries, procedures for licensing and accreditation of institutions take into account also the maximum number of students able to attend lectures.
- Use of ICT  
Without the intention to overestimate the importance of using ICT to support learning or to claim that e-learning is the ultimate future, access to computer facilities and the Internet is a crucial part of a motivating learning environment. This is relevant both in terms of facilitating, expanding and improving students' course learning, but also in terms of developing generic (or transferable) skills they would need for their future careers and lives. In less well-off countries this is often a problem since HEI may not have sufficient resources to provide easy access to ICT,

even though it could be argued that with the prices going generally down and continuous technical advancements this is less and less an issue. However, it should be also stated that sometimes the problem is not in the acquiring the equipment but in its allocation and distribution. If most of the computers end up in offices of professors or in locked computer classrooms which are used once a week (as is the case in some institutions) then this is clearly not a problem of acquisition but of poor allocation. In addition, students should be encouraged to use ICT for their coursework on a regular basis and nowadays most of them would be able to do so at home.

- Library facilities

Similar to the issue of using ICT – this element of the learning environment is sensitive to the wealth of both the institution and the country in question. What should be noted here is that some of the problems with poor or outdated library funds could be alleviated through changes in the ways libraries are operated such as: mergers of similar libraries (again connected to having integrated universities and not confederation of independent faculties), modernising the organisation (more costly in the short run, cheaper in the long run) or even making both students and professors more disciplined when it comes to returning borrowed books.

- Physical accessibility

It should not be forgotten that a number of students in higher education has some form of physical disability. However, there are still institutions in Europe and especially in the Central, Eastern and Southern Europe which are not fully accessible to students with disabilities. This does not include only ramps for wheelchair users (which are most often referred to) but also other architectural and physical adjustments of building and classrooms which can make learning for students with disability both possible (because in some cases it is not at all) and pleasurable. Making elevators usable for blind students or providing information in a way which is accessible and understandable to all is not as expensive as it may seem. Furthermore, fundraising from various charities is also an option here. The main obstacle to achieving full physical accessibility is very often sheer neglect.

- Peer interaction

It could be considered odd that peer interaction is considered as a part of an organisational setting. However, institutions often forget that students sometimes learn best from their peers and that it is important to allow for peer interaction to take place. This includes both allowing for the time (see about “class schedules”) and the space for peer interaction to take place. Group work is not sufficiently present in the teaching strategies and its potential to enhance student learning often goes unrecognised.

The less palpable elements of the internal learning environment include, among other things, aspects related to teaching methodology. In this respect, the key element is the teacher’s approach to learning and teaching. In other words, teachers are an essential ingredient of the learning environment. Research (especially phenomenographic research)

has shown that teachers can have various approaches to their teaching and their students' learning. The teachers form these approaches on the basis of various factors, such as the pressures and requirements from the own institution, academic standards of their discipline, wider social contexts and biographical context. These approaches vary from understanding that the primary goal is to ensure that students will pass the exam (and thus their role is to transmit information only relevant for passing the exam) to seeing that the primary goal is for students to learn to understand concepts, connect them and even change the previous conceptions they had. It is also documented that students' approaches to learning very much reflect the teachers' approaches to teaching. If the teacher sees himself or herself as a mere source of information that have to be memorised, the students will also adopt the so-called surface approach to learning, that is they would see that "the strategy to survive" is to memorise. Again, this does not mean that teachers are to blame for everything, but only that the students' approach to learning (and thus the quality of that learning) depends to a great extent on the attitude of the teacher, which in turn depends on the mixture of biographical, disciplinary, institutional and wider social conditions.

This issue is related with what has often been labelled as "inclusive teaching techniques". Classrooms are not full of average students; classrooms are full of different students. Too few teachers and institutions manage to pay attention to those students who, for one reason or other, feel or are disadvantaged in a typical higher education learning environment. Not all students come with the same cultural background, equipped with dealing with the somewhat strange language of the academics, some are minorities in the world outside higher education and even more so in the world of higher education, some are just not talkative and feel reluctant to participate. Some have difficulties in learning and some have capabilities which are not adequately recognised. All this calls for more diverse and more sensitive teaching techniques. Again, it is not possible to address the needs of individual students when one is faced with a class of 200 students but what can be done in such a case is to vary the teaching techniques so there is something for everyone.

Another important element of the learning process and the learning environment is the link between teaching and research. While many may claim that the relationship is always positive (primarily that research improves teaching), research into the question does not yield a conclusive answer. It can also happen that professors neglect their teaching in order to dedicate most of their time, energy and motivation to research, which degrades the quality of the learning environment for students. On the other hand, students may benefit from being involved at some stage in their education in more or less complex research projects (thus diversifying the learning environment students are faced with), but the questions then are: how much and what kind of research is useful for students' learning, are their differences between subjects and profiles with respect to this and can there also be too much research, that is too much "academism" in higher education? Such questions can not be answered for all subjects, all institutions, all contexts and all profiles but need to be analysed case by case, with full understanding of the possible consequences of too much or too little research in higher education and the impact this would have on the learning environment and hence on students' learning.

Similar to the research-teaching link is the learning-work link. In some fields and for some profiles it is essential to enable students to have some work-related experience which means that it is crucial to include “work” in the learning environment. This can be done in various ways, from organising internships in cooperation with industry or business (or practice in schools in case of teacher training) to simulating work environment in the classroom. Again, the amount and actual work setting is to be decided for each field, profile and institution separately.

Apart from these, more or less palpable elements of the learning environment, it would be worth drawing attention to another set of “learning environment” ingredients, which tend to be somewhat controversial. These are the so-called “non-learning” elements of the learning environment. These include, for example, various sports facilities for students. While students will probably not think of mathematical equations while playing basketball or swimming (at least not all of them), having a balanced mix of diverse activities improves the overall wellbeing and also performance in various aspects of life, including learning. The same goes for enabling and allowing for participation in cultural activities, NGOs, student unions etc, which not only provide the necessary variety, but are also a good learning environment (although considered here to be external to higher education).

When it comes to the “external” learning environments, the most important issue for various stakeholders in higher education is to recognise that learning does take place outside of the formal higher education setting. If one of the intentions of the Bologna Process is to enable more flexibility in the learning paths, it is important to develop recognition procedures in such a way as to enable recognition of prior and experiential learning. Various higher education stakeholders may not have direct influence over the external learning environment but they should recognise that there are substantial “spill over” effects from students’ learning outside of the formal learning setting and provide space and time for such learning to take place.

### **Improvement of the internal learning environment – who is responsible?**

If we accept that, in order for EHEA to become a reality, quality of student learning must be improved, which in turn means that the quality of the (internal) learning environments must be improved – the questions remain: who are those who are responsible to do this and what are their tasks?

The usual suspects are some of the higher education stakeholders, primarily public authorities (governments, quality assurance agencies, etc), higher education institutions and students, here referring primarily to student unions.

- Public authorities
  - o The primary role of the public authorities (regardless of the division on public and private higher education) is to provide good legislative framework for the work of higher education institutions, which will strike a good balance between autonomy and accountability. Legislation does not and should not define in almost any detail a good learning environment, but

it should provide incentives and possibilities for institutions to create good learning environments themselves.

- In terms of financing higher education, the way towards good learning environment within higher education institution is not only (and not always) paved with increasing public investment in higher education. A sustainable solution for financing of higher education, which will provide higher education institutions with sufficient means to maintain quality of the learning environment they offer students, needs to be found. However, this issue goes well beyond the scope of this paper.
  - In terms of quality assurance (and accreditation) procedures, due attention should be paid to the quality of the learning environment in higher education institutions and various stakeholders need to come to an agreement how this quality can be assessed.
- Higher education institutions
    - Some of the tasks of higher education institutions have already been mentioned (organising programmes, balanced distribution of student workload, efficient use of available resources such as ICT and library etc.). While there are no easy solutions for any of the aforementioned problems, the solutions nevertheless exist. Some of them may be politically challenging (e.g. integration of universities, i.e. abolishment of independent faculties) but are nevertheless the key to sustainable development and improvement, and not only in terms of the learning environment.
  - Student unions
    - As those nominated or elected to represent students' interest, student unions should primarily focus on cooperating (which includes initiating or even demanding changes if institutions or authorities show disinterest) with higher education institutions and the public authorities on issues related to improving students learning and enhancing the quality of the internal learning environment. They should also bear in mind that they can contribute to an improved learning environment themselves by providing students with a diversity of activities on campus (or on institution's premises), organising study support groups, etc.

To conclude, a high quality learning environment is essential for quality learning which, in turn, is the key ingredient of the genuine European Higher Education Area policy makers want to see by 2010. Not improving the learning environment may very well lead to a EHEA existing only in mission statements, communiqués and speeches of irresponsible politicians, rectors or student representatives.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Martina Vukasovic is currently studying towards a European Master in Higher education, at universities of Oslo, Tampere and Aveiro (part of the Erasmus Mundus Programme). She worked as a Programme Officer in the Alternative Academic Educational Network in Serbia, an Administrative Assistant in the Division for Higher Education and Research of the Council of Europe and used to be a student representative at various levels (Student Union of Serbia, ESIB – The National Unions of Students in Europe).