



**Conference of the
European Council for Student Affairs
(ECStA)
held in OSLO (Norway)
from 03.07. - 06.07.2002**

Final Communiqué

The European Council for Student Affairs (ECStA) is an independent European association formed to promote the social infrastructure within universities and colleges in Europe. The aim is to promote student mobility among programme students as well as among the so-called free movers by establishing better cooperation and improved information exchange between the European partners active in this field of work.

In this respect, the European Council for Student Affairs augments the political objectives pursued by the European support programmes as well as the policies taken by the respective national governments. The establishment of the European Council for Student Affairs is the result of various forms of cooperation at European level. The basis for this development was provided by a first conference on economic and social support for students held in Bonn in 1992 under the patronage of the European Commission. Seventy experts from all European countries attended this conference. Follow-up conferences in Brussels, Munich, Vienna, Strasbourg and Leuven saw partners from the countries of central and eastern Europe also become involved in this field. Associate memberships aim to provide these partners with an opportunity to participate in the work of the ECStA.

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This year's European Council for Student Affairs conference on "Student mobility: Social environment of student life in Europe. Aims and challenges" was attended by 94 experts from 18 European countries. The conference was chaired by François Carbon, Vice-President of the ECStA, Dieter Schäferbarthold, Director of the ECStA, and Lisbeth Dyrberg, Director for the *Studentsamskipnaden i Oslo* and host of the ECStA conference.

As a keynote speaker the Director of the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning, **Gudmund Hernes**, made a contribution on the global prospects for higher education. Mr. Hernes made the point that our societies are becoming more and more knowledge-based. Using this assumption he described the challenges that universities are facing nowadays, particularly in terms of quality. In this context he also examined the role of students, who are increasingly considered as customers within the educational system.

The first part of the conference was devoted to the presentation of the Norwegian model of providing social services to students. The structure and organisation of the local associations for student affairs, the so-called *Studentsamskipnaden*, were discussed, as well as their financial set-up. Comparative contributions from other European countries completed the presentation of new developments in the area of student affairs within Europe:

The presentation of the **Austrian** representative focused on the European framework conditions for the promotion of academic studies abroad. While the case-law of the European Court of Justice seeks to integrate students into the support system of the host countries, the agreement reached by the European Council aims to promote students via the home country. One of the main questions to be tackled is therefore: What would future financial aid for students be like under the above-mentioned diverging patterns of promotion?

The **Irish** report was dedicated to different aspects of student finance and equality initiatives. Concerning the latter area, equality, the speaker concentrated mainly on initiatives to support two specific groups of students: those from the lower socio-economic category, and students with disabilities. In this context the main innovation in recent years in the area of student financial support – namely the introduction, in 2001, of 'special rates of maintenance grants for disadvantaged students' – was described.

The **Norwegians** presented their elaborate system of health and counselling services to students. Furthermore, the introduction of a comprehensive new student card in Norway was outlined.

The report from **Slovenia** dealt with new developments in the area of student housing. In view of an increase in student enrolment, the establishment of new student residence halls has become a necessity .

In view of the internationalisation of higher education, different support services for foreign students were also discussed. Best practice models from different countries were presented:

The establishment of guest houses for students from abroad and guest researchers was set out in the **German** presentation. The speakers from **France** and the **United States** focused on specific welcome services for international students. The latter presentation addressed not only the academic issues concerning the integration of international students, but also the variety of social activities which help to integrate international students and scholars into the community (host family programmes, spouses programmes, international festivals etc.). The speaker from **Italy** described the idea of the newly established information point for students from abroad (all services under one roof). The presentation of the **Polish** speaker focused on the other aspect of internationalisation, namely on the question of how students are prepared at home before they leave for another country. Measures such as language training and specific pre-travel training groups were discussed.

It was agreed that in order to promote mutual understanding in the area of student services, an exchange of experiences on the different existing systems was crucial. Structured dialogue and enhanced knowledge transfer between the networking partners in the area of student affairs is increasingly important in an ever closer Europe - particularly in the higher education area. The establishment of a staff exchange program could be one means of achieving this aim.

The second part of the conference focused on the so-called Bologna Process. Generally speaking the European Council for Student Affairs supports this process, which aims to establish a European Higher Educational Area by 2010. Doing so should make higher education institutions in Europe more attractive and competitive.

The recent developments in, and outlook for, the Bologna Process and the present state of the preparation of the follow-up conference in Berlin in September 2003 were a major topic of the ECStA conference presented by **Marianne Hildebrand**, Head of Unit at the European Commission's Education and Culture Directorate-General, and **Prof. Hans-Rainer Friedrich**, Under-Secretary of the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research.

In this context the ECStA welcomes the fact that the Berlin conference will address not only the academic issues but also the social dimension of the Bologna Process (with special attention focused on the obstacles to mobility). In view of the creation of the European Higher Educational Area, very practical questions concerning the following areas should be tackled, i.e.:

- financial support schemes for students studying abroad,
- labour law,
- residential permission,
- insurance,
- establishment of affordable student residences,
- cultural questions.

The ECStA can rely on a pool of experts in order to carry out its work. It would like to offer its expertise by participating actively in the seminar on the social dimension of the higher educational area, to be held in Athens on 19 and 20 February 2003. This seminar, organized by the Greek Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs, is listed as one of the official seminars to be held between Prague and Berlin.

The ECStA considers the settlement of the questions related to the social infrastructure of higher education as a prerequisite for the successful promotion of academic mobility. In this context the ECStA welcomes the resolution of the European Parliament and the Council of 10 July 2001 on the mobility of students, persons undergoing training, volunteers, teachers and trainers (2001/613/EC), as well as the European Council resolution concerning an action plan for mobility (13649/00). The ECStA is committed to ensuring that concrete measures in the field of social infrastructure are taken accordingly.

Furthermore, the ECStA welcomes the fact that the European Commission has been granted special status as a full member of the follow-up group and the smaller preparatory group for the Berlin 2003 conference. According to the ECStA it is crucial to generate synergy and, therefore, to interlink the higher education initiatives on the European Union level with those taken within the Bologna Process.

Another very important presentation focused on the presentation of the results of the recently published European Student report. To mark the conference these results were presented in public for the first time by **Dr. Klaus Schnitzer** of the Hochschul-Informationssystem (HIS). The survey focuses on issues such as access to higher education, the financial aspects of studying, accommodation, the social make-up of the student population etc. Currently comprising seven EU Member States -Austria, Belgium (Flemish and Walloon communities), Finland, France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands - shows the need to collect comparable data on the social and economic situation of students in Europe.

The ECStA supports this initiative and encourages the European Commission to play a more active role in carrying out this project. Furthermore, more European countries need to participate in the next European survey.

The ECStA also supports several initiatives to enhance student mobility within Europe that were presented at the conference:

- creation of an uniform and standardized European Student card;
- development of “service packages” for students from abroad in the European partner countries (these packages should cover essential services needed for everyday life: housing, food service, insurance, cultural offers etc.)
- The financial aspects of studying play an important role not only as regards access to higher education, but also as regards participation in study programs abroad.

The ECStA advocates the further opening-up of existing national educational assistance schemes. Students funding their studies with state educational assistance should be given the opportunity to continue and complete these studies anywhere in Europe. Particularly in view of the establishment of the European Higher Education Area, the ability to transfer national educational assistance to the partner countries in the Bologna Process is of the utmost importance. Furthermore, other additional financial support schemes at the European level should be discussed.