

## **DECLARATION**

### **by European organisations in student affairs and social services Padova, October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010**

Convening in Padova for the European Forum for Student Affairs, European organisations in this field call upon governments, political representatives and other relevant stakeholders to guarantee the right to a university education by providing the student services and other social support that is necessary for students to access this right.

The Ministers responsible for education in the Bologna area have repeatedly stressed the importance of the social dimension for higher education in Europe. Meeting in Berlin in 2003, they balanced increased competitiveness “with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education area” (Berlin Communiqué 2003, Preamble). Two years later, they renewed their commitment “to making quality higher education equally accessible to all” and stressed “the need for appropriate conditions for students so that they can complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background” (Bergen Communiqué 2005, Chapter III). Consequently, they promised to continue their efforts “to provide adequate student services” (London Communiqué 2007, Par. 2.18). More recently, they wanted to widen access into higher education, to foster the potential of students from underrepresented groups and to provide adequate conditions for the completion of studies, all this by “improving the learning environment [and] removing all barriers to study” (Leuven Communiqué, par. 9), which led them to “increase our efforts on the social dimension in order to provide equal opportunities to quality education, paying particular attention to underrepresented groups (Budapest-Vienne Communiqué 2010, par. 11).

Concerning Europe, UNESCO has similarly stressed that the student body should reflect the diversity of the population in a given country or region, that access to higher education should be widened, which involves improving the learning environment and adequate financial support for students as well as providing guidance and counselling – all of which “includes the importance of student support services and the key role of its professionals” (UNESCO Forum on Higher Education in the Europe Region, Bucharest Message 2009, Ch. III par. 3).

Consequently, UNESCO has called on its member states to work with all stakeholders in order “to provide adequate student services” (UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education, Paris 2009, Final Communiqué, Par. 51 point I)

Within the context of social, cultural and economic globalization and increased competitiveness of higher education areas and institutions, professional and efficient social support for university study becomes increasingly important. Student affairs and services organizations remain crucial for the social, economic, financial, health and cultural support of all students in any given situation, and will play an increasingly important role if the goals of the Bologna process are to be met. They run affordable student apartments and restaurants, they consult on and administer loans and grants, they work for social integration, equitable access to and cultural diversity in higher education institutions. They provide the right framework for international mobility of students and staff, for better access to higher education and improved success rates, and they are key players in counselling and advice for students with financial or specific needs. Adequate student services/affairs are thus a strategic dimension for higher education systems around the globe.

Today, the success of higher education rests upon the three pillars of well-performing tertiary education systems: research, teaching and student services. Excellence in education requires not only top performance in research and teaching but an excellent and competitive social infrastructure and strong support mechanisms for students.

Critical thinking, social responsibility, and participation in society are the fundamentals of modern democracies. Brain power is the fuel of our knowledge-based societies. Research and analytical skills, creative and innovative thinking and the application of knowledge to complex situations are key competencies in all European societies. The right to a university study provides people with the

access to these skills, but also with the access to the intellectual, cultural and economic wealth of our societies.

At the same time, the internationalization of higher education reflects the growing mobility of students and staff, and transforms this right to a universal question of sharing the long and rich tradition of higher education in Europe.

Regarding access to and equity in higher education, the importance of counseling, financial aid and timely information to different student groups is widely recognized and must be clearly understood and promoted by adequate action. This is particularly true for socially marginalized or minority groups, and decisive action is required to achieve progress in their participation in higher education:

- increase access to higher education by opening up non-traditional entry routes
- promote diversity by increasing access to minority groups
- expand life-long learning and part-time studies in order to reach out to elderly or working students as well as students with children or disabilities
- increase financial support to students from low-income and migrant backgrounds
- establish financial aid schemes on the European level
- establish easily accessible financial support for international mobility

Regarding study success and graduation, student services/affairs continue to be important in all study phases, generally increase retention, study success and graduation rates and play an important role in the transition to the labor market. The right to university study should be guaranteed in the long run by:

- providing adequate counseling in critical study phases
- providing a positive learning environment including affordable housing and food, cultural activities and social support
- develop social and cultural activities on campus in order to increase the social learning capabilities of students

We therefore call upon governments and higher education institutions to recognize the important role that student service/student affairs organizations play in higher education, and urge them to provide adequate means and support for learning environments in which students' social, economic and cultural needs are fully addressed.

Generally, we recommend that a student affairs perspective is thoroughly integrated in European discussions on higher education, and particularly in the development of the Bologna area. This can be done by the following measures:

- associate ECStA to the Bologna consultative bodies, similarly to ESU, EQAR, etc.
- include student affairs organizations in national policy making
- increase the cooperation of higher education institutions and student affairs organizations
- provide opportunities and funding to international cooperation of student affairs

The YOUNIVERSITY European Forum on Student Affairs, organized in the Italian city of Padova, outlined the strong relationship between the city and the university, which is an important characteristic of European civilization. In Padova like in many other places, it is also the specificity of one of the first European university cities with a long history and tradition, but oriented towards the future. In the international competition for higher education, European university cities are a very strong factor of attractiveness. They are offering to European and international students a cultural environment and integration to the life of the city, an urban society of citizens, and they offer integration for foreign students in the everyday life of the country.

The European university cities are well aware and very much interested in the presence of students also for their attractiveness, economical advantages and impact on the city's overall development.

*Signatories: EUROPEAN COUNCIL FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS and its member organisations, present at the ECStA General Assembly, Padova, October 2, 2010*

*For more information and contact: [www.ecsta.org](http://www.ecsta.org)*