

POLICY DECISION ON INTERNATIONAL MATTERS

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Introduction

The international dimension affects our education system and our living conditions as students at many levels. From our possibilities to access an education in Denmark, to our possibilities to access one abroad. From how our educations are structured, to how these are classified. From what the roles of our institutions are, to what the responsibilities of our Ministry are.

This policy paper aims to reflect DSF's opinions on different highly relevant international student-political matters.

Recognition

It is important that qualifications achieved in other countries can be further used in Denmark to access an education or to work in a specific field in the job market. Therefore, every student or graduate with a foreign learning experience should have the right to have this assessed and recognized in Denmark.

This equally applies to formal (upper-secondary education, higher education, etc.), informal (volunteering experiences, NGO work, etc.) and non-formal (trainings, summer schools, etc.) education forms. This should be done in a free, accessible and effective way.

In order to make education more accessible for people holding foreign qualifications, Denmark should strive to implement automatic recognition whenever possible, and this should not exclusively be done with countries within the European Higher Education Area. This means that Denmark should work towards cooperating with as many countries as possible to expand the amount of countries which qualifications can be automatically recognized in Denmark.

In the case of displaced populations, it is common that barriers are encountered when it comes to proving previously gained qualifications. This is given by the fact that displaced students or graduates might lose their documentation in their displacement, might never have had the chance to bring it along or might be impossible for them to retrieve it. Because of this, in case of not being able to document prior-learning experiences, refugees and asylum seekers, with formal, informal or non-formal qualifications, should have the right to receive a free, accessible, effective and comprehensive

assessment of their qualifications. This assessment should result in a document that can be used to access any higher education institution or to pursue a specific profession in Denmark.

Therefore, DSF believes that:

- Holders of foreign formal, informal or non-formal learning qualifications should have the right to have these recognized in Denmark in a free, accessible and effective way.
- Denmark should strive towards implementing automatic recognition of qualifications coming from as many countries as possible.
- Refugees and asylum seekers should be entitled to receive a free, accessible, effective and comprehensive assessment of their qualifications, in case of not being able to provide documentation of them. This assessment should result in a document that can be used to access any higher education institution or to pursue a specific profession in Denmark.

The European Higher Education Area and the Bologna Process

Our education system should prioritize international cooperation, because it is important for the quality of education. In order to do so, it is important to work towards ensuring that our educational system is internationally comparable with other systems. This ensures that the skills and knowledge of students or graduates from Denmark, can be recognized by employers and higher education institutions in other countries. In the same way, it ensures that students or graduates from other countries can continue or start an education, or access the job market in Denmark. Comparability of education systems is a prerequisite for internationalization and mobility.

Making our education systems comparable does not mean to support standardization, but to jointly agree on a set of common frames that ensure that our systems are internationally recognized. In the same way that we wish to ensure that our institutional academic diversity is nationally recognized; the same principle should apply to the international level. Initiatives that promote comparability of education systems should leave wide space to institutional diversity and be built around the principles of local governance and academic freedom. These initiatives should never undermine pre-existing wider comparability agreements. Furthermore, students should be included at all levels in the design, governance and monitoring of such initiatives.

The European Higher Education Area, and its Bologna Process, are good examples of initiatives that foster comparability among our education systems in Europe. It is therefore important that Denmark implements and follows-up on the agreed commitments within the Bologna Process, as well as supports other countries in the implementation of them, keeping in mind that part of the Bologna Process, though being a volunteer process may foster some of the unhealthy comparison and competition culture among universities. Denmark should take the Bologna Process seriously, but make sure that the implementation of the commitments always keeps local principals in mind, as well as not being affected by political agendas.

While efforts have been put into implementing many of the other elements of the Bologna Process, this has not been the case for the Social Dimension-related commitments, which have been systematically neglected. DSF believes that Denmark still has a lot of work to do in this area and would benefit from implementing the different, agreed Social Dimension initiatives, such as National Access Plans.

Therefore, DSF:

- Supports cooperation initiatives, which aim to increase the comparability of our education system with other education systems around the world.
- Believes that such initiatives should protect institutional diversity, local governance and academic freedom.
- Believes that such initiatives should never undermine pre-existing wider comparability agreements.
- Believes that students should be included at all levels in the design, governance and monitoring of such initiatives.
- Believes that Denmark should implement and monitor all the agreed commitments within the Bologna Process, as well as support other countries in those tasks.
- Believes that Denmark should prioritize the implementation of the Social Dimension commitments, including National Access Plans.

The European Union

The European Union (EU) has for a long time shown interest in having a say in the education sector. While keeping in mind that education should remain a national competency, it is important that the EU keeps fostering and investing in cooperation and mobility among its member states. Cooperation among different national education systems is fundamental for quality and, therefore, it is important that the EU takes a central responsibility in ensuring that platforms for such cooperation exist.

Programs such as Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 are examples of how the EU can economically invest in programs that can increase quality in our education and research, as well as foster cooperation among different countries. It is important, though, that such economic investments and programs are accessible to all students, regardless of their background, and that they are founded on the principles of academic freedom and do not follow any political or economic interests.

Although being a positive example, the Erasmus+ program can still be improved. The program is widely inaccessible for students coming from backgrounds with lower economical capacities, as well as for students with disabilities, among others. The given study grant remains insufficient to cover the real expenses that mobility has, and the Masters Loan Scheme fails to offer a solution to the existing economic barriers. Finally, given the complexity and high bureaucracy levels of the application process, the economic support given to youth-driven projects is still widely inaccessible to the average youth population and small organizations.

Therefore, it is necessary that the funding given to the Erasmus+ program is substantially increased and that it is used to put special focus on accessibility to the different existing key actions. Furthermore, Erasmus+ requires a higher level of simplification and debureaucratization, study grants need to be increased, and the Masters Loan Scheme need to be supplemented by study grants instead.

It is fundamental that the cooperation initiatives set by the EU are not built overlapping or in competition with other pre-existing wider initiatives. As a clear example, it is important that EU driven initiatives do not undermine the European Higher Education Area nor the Bologna Process. The EU should instead work to support such wider initiatives.

Furthermore, it is important that the EU works towards ensuring that students, within their member states, receive equal rights and possibilities. The EU should ensure that students coming from EU countries do not have to pay extra fees nor receive less benefits in other EU countries. Currently, students from the EU are legally entitled to equal conditions and benefits when studying in other EU countries. However, this agreement excludes access to student grants and loans. This is problematic, since maintenance aid mechanisms are fundamental for the academic success of individuals, and to ensure that all students have access to mobility, regardless of their social background. Such exception should be removed.

Students should be included in the decision-making processes of EU-driven discussions and initiatives that have an impact in education and their social conditions.

Therefore DSF believes that:

- The EU should keep investing in initiatives that foster cooperation and mobility among its member states.
- Such initiatives should be accessible to all students, regardless of their social background, and be founded on the principles of academic freedom, without following any political or economic interests.
- Funding given to the Erasmus+ program should be substantially increased and more focus should be placed on accessibility to the different program actions. Study grants should be increased to cover the real costs of mobility, further simplification and debureaucratization should be implemented, and the amount of funds reserved to the Master Loan Scheme should be allocated into study grants instead.
- Such initiatives should not be built in conflict with pre-existing wider initiatives, such as the European Higher Education Area or the Bologna Process.
- Students from the EU should enjoy equal rights and benefits in other EU countries, including maintenance aid mechanisms, such as grants or loans.
- Students should be included in the decision-making processes of EU-driven discussions and initiatives that have an impact in education and their social conditions.

Sustainable Development Goals

In 2015, the United Nations agreed on 17 global interdependent goals, which are to be achieved by 2030. The objective of these are to: end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all. These goals are known under the name of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Among them, goal number 4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all and promote lifelong learning. Furthermore, it aims to ensure that, by 2030, all women and men have access to affordable and quality tertiary education, including university. DSF sees this goal as a step in the right direction to ensure global equal access to quality education, as well as commits to pro-actively work towards the achievement of it.

The 17 goals are dependent on each other to succeed. In the same way that the implementation of goal number 4 is fundamental for the implementation of the other SDGs, it is not possible to witness the successful implementation of goal number 4, without the successful implementation of the others. Therefore, DSF recognizes the relevance of all the 17 different SDGs and the importance to implement them at a holistic level, in order to achieve a successful implementation of goal number 4.

Our institutions have a responsibility towards our society. Therefore, they should ensure that humanity has the necessary intellectual means to successfully implement the different existing global challenges, among them the 17 SDGs. Our education system should therefore be equipped with the necessary resources and structures that can ensure this; as well as take up its responsibility of working towards the implementation of the 17 SDGs, and, in this way, towards a better future for our planet.

Therefore, DSF:

- Commits to pro-actively work towards a successful implementation of SDG number 4.
- Recognizes that the implementation of the other SDGs is fundamental to ensure the implementation of SDG number 4.
- Believes that education institutions should work towards the implementation of the 17 SDGs and be equipped with the necessary resources and structures that can ensure this.

Outgoing mobility

Outgoing mobility is beneficial for Danish society and for the quality of our educations. It ensures that we, as students, can seek knowledge in other countries and contribute to our society with different and innovative perspectives. The institutions that receive students that have taken part in educations abroad, benefit as well from new inputs and visions, which translate into increased quality.

Unfortunately, studying abroad remains a privilege that not all students can enjoy. It is therefore important to ensure that all students in Denmark have access to the possibility of studying abroad, both as part of short-term or full-degree programs. This has to be done by tackling the root causes that create the barriers that many students encounter in this area.

It has been a tendency to promote so-called “virtual mobility” as a tool for making mobility more accessible to students from underprivileged backgrounds. These programs offer virtual learning tools

for students who cannot partake in mobility programs for various reasons. It is important to keep in mind that virtual mobility should not be a replacement for physical mobility. Developing alternative, lower quality programs, directed towards those who do not have the means to partake in physical mobility programs, produces only b-class programs for students coming from underprivileged backgrounds; contributing in this way to socially-based student inequality.

The public tuition-waivers (udlandsstipendier) given to students that partake in higher education abroad are a good way to ensure that studying abroad is accessible to all Danish students. However, these waivers have yet much to improve. These are often only partial, they are exclusively given up to a length of 2 years and are not given to students who take a full bachelor abroad. They only cover the cost of tuition-fees up to 60 ECTS per year, or equivalent, not covering the extra costs that educations require to take a higher amount of credits. Finally, when studying abroad as part of an education being pursued in Denmark, only students entitled to receive SU can receive these waivers.

In order to promote equal access to higher education abroad, public tuition-waivers should be given without economic or time limits and should be offered at all levels of higher education. They should also be distributed based on the taken amount of credits per year, with the aim of ensuring that students required to take a higher number of credits can have the financial means to do so. These waivers should also be given independently from the SU system.

The portability of SU is also a good tool to ensure that studying abroad is accessible to a wider number of students in Denmark. However, this portability is only valid up to 4 years when studying in non-Nordic countries and, in many cases, this does not cover the first year of higher education. This is problematic since it can create a serious economic challenge for many students to start or finish an education abroad. Furthermore, the SU is not portable to the widest majority of international students, building extra barriers for international students to go on exchange. It is important that student grants are portable for the total length of an education abroad and that these are accessible to all students in Denmark.

Therefore, DSF believes that:

- Virtual mobility programs should not substitute physical mobility programs.
- Public tuition-waivers (udlandsstipendier) for Danish students abroad should be given at all levels of higher education, without economic or time limits. These should also be distributed in base of the amount of credits taken per year and should be given independently from the SU system.
- The SU grant should be portable for the total length of an education abroad and this should be accessible to all students from Denmark.

Rankings

University rankings are international lists where universities are put in competition with each other and classified based on a narrow set of criteria.

Rankings are often problematic since they pressure institutions into pursuing an external reputation-race, pushing them to overlook the wider purpose of education, and the quality and accessibility of it. Rankings can affect trans-institutional cooperation negatively by putting institutions in direct competition with each other. By fostering elitism and division of the student body, these classifications can have a negative effect on graduates' employment possibilities, as well as affecting student choice and making different institutions less accessible. They can also create imbalances in funding, since these tend to foster funding concentration in institutions with higher reputation, contributing in this way to further economic inequality among institutions. Our education system should be based on academic diversity and cooperation. Rankings, which classify universities on their ability to fit into a specific narrow profile, contributes negatively to our institutions' possibilities to develop in different directions.

Rankings should not be confused with transparency tools, which are instruments that compare and provide information on the characteristics of different institutions and their performance in different areas. Differing from rankings, transparency tools do not classify institutions under a narrow set of criteria, but recognize the existence of different profiles and missions, as well as incorporating a multidimensional approach, when looking into institutions' performance. It is positive that students have access to such tools to make a well-informed study choice, based on their individual needs and interests.

Therefore, DSF believes that:

- The current criteria and parameters for university rankings represent a threat to quality, access, trans-institutional cooperation and diversity in the education system.
- Transparency tools are positive instruments for ensuring that students have the necessary information to make a study choice based on their individual needs and interests.

Global Student Movement

As students, it is not only our responsibility to fight for our rights in Denmark, but also to support our peers in other areas of the world fighting for equal access to quality education. We believe that students share common interests and that they should organize themselves to have a joint voice, these principles apply globally.

It is important that, as DSF, we involve ourselves in the international educational political discussion, and that we organize ourselves together with other student organizations that share our same fundamental values. It is therefore important that we continue to actively work within the European Students' Union (ESU) and the Nordic Presidential Meeting (NOM) to develop a strong regional student voice. It is also important not to limit ourselves to our current networks or umbrella organizations, nor to the limits of our continent. It is fundamental that DSF keeps working towards developing collaborations with other student unions from all over the world, with the final objective of building a strong global student voice.

Furthermore, it is important that we pro-actively support the development of other democratic representative student organizations, in order to ensure that they have the best capacities to represent the interests of their students. This can be done, for example, through partnership projects between DSF and other National Unions of Students.

It is also important that DSF respects the legitimacy of other independent, democratic and representative national student unions, and recognizes that their voice is the general voice of the students in their country.

As representatives of the interests of students, DSF will condemn attacks against academic freedom and the fundamental rights of students around the world. As well as, when possible, protect the interests of those who are victims of such attacks. This can be done through, for example, supporting initiatives like Scholars at Risk or Students at Risk.

Therefore, DSF:

- Believes that students around the world share common interests and should organize themselves to have a united voice. Therefore, DSF will work towards the development of a strong, organized, democratic and representative global student voice.
- Will involve itself in the international educational debate and pro-actively work within our current international networks, such as ESU and NOM, in order to strive towards a strong regional student voice. Furthermore, DSF will work towards the creation of new international student representative networks.
- Will pro-actively support the development of other democratic representative student organizations around the world.
- Will recognize the legitimacy of other independent, democratic and representative national student unions, as well as recognizing that they represent the voice of students in their country.
- Will condemn any attack against academic freedom and the fundamental rights of students around the world. As well as, whenever possible, protect the interests of those who are victims of such attacks.