

POLICY DECISION ON INTERNATIONAL MATTERS

Adopted by the board on January 23 2021

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.

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.

Comparability is to jointly agree on a common set of frameworks that ensures the recognition and translation of our education system abroad and vice versa. 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 too often neglected. DSF believes that Denmark still has a lot of work to do in this area and would benefit from implementing the "EHEA principles and guidelines on the Social Dimension".

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 “EHEA principles and guidelines on the Social Dimension”.

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.

Programmes such as Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe are examples of initiatives that can increase quality in our education and research, as well as foster cooperation among different countries. It is important, though, that such initiatives 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.

The new Erasmus+ programme brings many improvements. From a much-needed focus on green mobility to focusing more on inclusive exchange. And even though this would not have been possible without the much-needed increase of the Erasmus+ budget, there is still quite a long way to go for Erasmus+ to develop into a truly inclusive and environmentally sustainable initiative. There should be a continued focus on including marginalised groups of students, like students with disabilities among others, that too often meet barriers on their path to an Erasmus-exchange. The Erasmus stipend should cover the actual cost of mobility, with the current stipend often being exceeded by the costs of transport, housing, and daily necessities during exchange, forcing most students to pay the difference themselves.

Although Erasmus is often the simplest choice of mobility during studies, much can be done to decrease the complexity and level of bureaucracy in both the application process and in the way stipends are calculated, students would therefore benefit highly from a move in that direction.

The recent, rapid development of the European University Alliances has shown a clear priority from the European Commission on close collaboration between higher education institutions across Europe. With 6 Danish Universities already an official part of these alliances, there are a

lot of opportunities, but that there are still some dangers to watch out for. The alliances can foster teaching and research across multiple institutions that can enhance the educational output for students, with shared lecturers and teaching materials, and the opportunity to experience mobility that is a core part of the education- albeit without creating a parallel structure, regarding mobility, from the already existing Erasmus+ programme. Yet it is already evident that the amount of student representation in decision making is either extremely varied from one alliance to another, or that when student participation is high it is not made clear how their discussions and decisions are acted out upon. Student participation in shaping the alliances should be essential, with clear pathways into the decision-making process.

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. DSF believes that exceptions like this 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.
- The Erasmus- programme should continue its path towards more inclusion and more sustainable mobility. The stipends should reflect the real costs of exchange, and the programme should be simplified and de-bureaucratized.
- Such initiatives should not be built in conflict with pre-existing wider initiatives, such as the European Higher Education Area or the Bologna Process.
- The European University Alliances must prioritise student participation in decision making to foster a thriving collaboration across Europe.
- 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 on their education and their social conditions.

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 education abroad, also benefit from new inputs, ideas, and visions, which increase 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 the possibility of studying abroad, both as part of short-term or full-degree programs. This must be done by tackling the root causes that create the barriers that many students encounter in this area.

There has been a tendency to promote so-called “virtual mobility” or “internationalisation at home” as a tool for making mobility more accessible to specific groups of students. These programs offer virtual learning tools for students who cannot partake in physical mobility programs for various reasons. It is important to keep in mind that virtual mobility should not be a replacement for physical mobility. While it can in some instances aid specific students in experiencing some elements of studying abroad, it should not be conflated with physical exchange. 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 education requires 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 constraints and should be offered at all levels of higher education. They should also be distributed based on the taken number 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.

With the Brexit deal stating that the UK are no longer taking part in Erasmus+, Denmark and higher education institutions must prioritise bilateral agreements, to ensure exchange between Danish and UK students is also possible in the future not only for the ones that can afford or gather funds externally in order to pay on their own accord, until an international exchange programme is re-established.

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 based on the number 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.
- Bilateral exchange agreements between Denmark and the UK should be established, until an international exchange programme is re-established.

Rankings

University rankings are international lists where universities are put in competition with each other and classified based on a narrow set of criteria such as number of acclaimed publications and prize-winning researchers, rather than for example teaching and educational quality.

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 intend to 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.

Still, we need to be aware of the risk of streamlining institutions and programmes when creating transparency. Transparency is a tool of reducing complexity which often includes focusing on

specific predefined parameters. This implicates a risk of the single institutions improving on predefined parameters which conflicts diversity among institutions and programmes.

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, but we need to be aware of the risk of streamlining by creating transparency through specific predefined parameters.

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 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. Currently this is done through ESU in the start-up of the Global Students' Forum (GSF).

Since we took part in creating Students Organizing for Sustainability - International (SOS) we have been taking a lead in extending and growing the organisation. In collaboration with students, an increasing membership is working across the globe for sustainability in a broad sense. The potential to aid student networks in pushing the sustainability agenda globally is immense, and DSF believes that through collaboration we can more efficiently reach our common goals.

Furthermore, it is important that we partner up with other democratic representative student organisations. Based on our context and political situation in Denmark, we have access to resources which are lacking elsewhere. DSF believes we should offer support where we can with organisational and material resources as well as exchange ideas, experiences, and methods with students abroad for our own and their benefit. 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.
- Believes it is essential to 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 and support the creation of new international student representative networks.
- Believes that further development of SOS-International is important.
- Believes it is important to continue to partner up with other democratic representative student organizations around the world to both pro-actively support their organisations and to learn from them.
- Believes in recognizing 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.