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Gender Equality in the European Student Unions. The Bologna Process as Driving force?

Introduction

The Bologna Process has brought great changes to educational systems in Europe during recent years. Changing curricula, new degree structures and teaching methods are frequently discussed with regards to their impact on education, employability and society. These changes will also have an impact on gender equality and equity among students. The importance of gender equality was mentioned in the Berlin communiqué 2003: "The need to increase competitiveness must be balanced with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area, aiming at strengthening social cohesion and reducing social and gender inequalities both at [a] national and European level."[1]
The following communiqués, decided in Bergen 2005 and London 2007, do not mention gender equality again. A stronger focus is, however, given to the issue of the social dimension within higher education. The European Students' Union (ESU) sees gender-based discrimination as a part of this social dimension.[2] Since the social dimension is now a priority in the Bologna Process, new ways of including gender equality in higher education reforms can be found.
Over the years, questions concerning gender equality increased within the discussions on higher education. Recent statistics show that the female participation within all three cycles was highly influenced by new barriers and deeply connected with the access issue in general. The new two-tier structure of Bachelor and Master programmes might influence the female participation on the master level, especially in those countries where a one-tier structure was previously in place . The main goals of the Bologna Process – more transparency, an overall system of quality assurance and the importance of the social dimension - can also have a great impact on gender equality. The topic is, nevertheless, a very new aspect of higher education reforms in most of the European countries. The fact that the subject is a new one for many of the countries involved, and that there is a considerable lack of data and specific research as well as experiences makes it even harder to tackle the question of improving the current situation.
The European Students' Union (ESU) saw a need to strengthen gender equality both within its own organisation and members – the national unions of students – as

[1] Berlin Communiqué of the Ministerial summit 2003.

[2] European Students' Union (before: ESIB – The National Unions of Students in Europe): Berlin Declaration, online: http://www.esib.org/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&Itemid=99999999&gid=493

well as to improve ESU's expertise on questions concerning gender equality within the higher education sector. Therefore a special committee dealing with gender equality issues was established; the first members of the committee being elected in May 2006. As one of its first actions the committee surveyed the gender equality work of the national student unions in European countries. The study resulted in a collection of positive practises that are being implemented by student unions conducting gender equality projects. Many of the projects are linked with aspects of the Bologna Process. The gender equality work of the student unions is nevertheless rarely directly connected to their work on higher education and the Bologna Process. The following paper examines the possibilities of gender equality among the Bologna lines of action within a short survey. After that, four constructive examples of student unions working with gender equality projects are presented. A special focus is given to the question of whether the Bologna Process had influenced this work.

Gender Equality in the Bologna Action Lines

The activities of the Bologna Process have a number of starting points for a gender equality oriented policy. The changes towards the area of European higher education will impact academia and will therefore also impact not only men and women already involved in academia, but also those entering into it in the future. A short introduction into all ten Bologna action lines can provide us with a glimpse of how these effects might look like.

1. Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees.

The gender specific aspect in this action line is not at all obvious, but it should be considered together with action line number two. Basically, the increasing of transparency can benefit all students, no matter what gender.

2. Adoption of a system essentially based on two cycles.

Up until now, in many of the 'Bologna countries' there has been a one-cycle system, which was at least as long as the approximate amount of time required for a master's level degree. In some of those countries, the implementation of Bachelor/Master programmes coincided with restricted access to the master's level. ESU's first "Bologna with student eyes"[3] showed, that there is a gender bias regarding female participation at the Master's level. The same mechanisms which are involved in gaining admittance to higher education are also found in accessing the master's level. It it thus possible that the glass ceiling effect currently keeping a lot of women out of Ph.D. studies and higher levels in academia will also keep them away from the master's level in the future. This basically means a decrease in education and opportunities based on gender.

[3] ESIB (Ed.): Bologna with student eyes (2005), online: www.esu-online.org

3. Establishment of a system of credits.

The goal of establishing a system of credits is to increase the transparency of study programmes. If this system is really based on the student's workload and if it is implemented properly, it could provide students more flexibility. This increased flexibility and transparency would make it easier for those students, who need to combine studies with childcare or family care, to participate in higher education. Seeing females still tend to be the ones who need to do so, this could reflect positively for them.

4. Promotion of mobility.

Mobility has a strong gender specific aspect: In many countries females make up the larger portion of those studying abroad.[4] This is also due to the gender specific choice of subjects which lead women into subjects that are usually more mobile, such as language, social sciences and cultural science. However, on the other hand access to mobility is often more restricted for female students. In some countries, women are not even allowed to study or are subject to strong discrimination. Moreover, women who are involved in subjects that focus on these countries and regions face disadvantages when mobility becomes a key issue for future jobs.

5. Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance

Quality assurance in general can play a crucial role in reaching gender equality in higher education. Gender equality can be set as a quality indicator for institutions and higher education in general. Internal and external reviews can then check the situation of men and women, the governing bodies can be advised to be gender balanced and the content of study programmes, at least in programme accreditation, can be checked regarding gender specific aspects of the curricula.

6. Promotion of the European dimension in higher education

Usually in this part, we are talking about learning languages and bringing European aspects into the curricula. For example: Based on gender stereotypes, language studies are a typical "female" thing. This does not necessarily mean though that women can get more power out of a stronger European focus in higher education.

7. Lifelong learning

Lifelong learning goes hand in hand with developing a qualification framework and a more flexible way of recognizing qualifications from different sectors in educational systems. It also covers the education of adults not considered to be typical students, for example those who may have already spent time in a profession before. An honest approach to lifelong learning can be especially beneficial to those

4 Survey of the Socio-Economic Background of ERASMUS Students DG EAC 01/05, Technical Annexes of the final report, p. 17.

who did not enter higher education following school and can make it possible to follow a non-traditional biography. This might be a chance to ease the combination of family and job, which is still a key issue regarding gender equality on the labour market. If flexibility is increased and a sabbatical year for childcare does not stand in the way of a furthering one's career, it might be easier to break gender based inequalities in that area.
If lifelong learning also increases flexibility regarding further education after entering a job, it may solve the gender specific bias while entering higher education. A large number of girls continue to not enter higher education after school, because they expect to have a life dedicated to the family and training on the job seems more appropriate.[5] If mobility between different systems is eased, this may facilitate a late decision in favour of higher education and therefore also in support greater opportunities for a proper job and career.

8. Higher education institutions and students

At least student unions are political organisations and are active in society. As long as society remains patriarchal, student unions will also be subject to patriarchal related problems. The more important an organization becomes, the more important gender equality becomes within its structure. It could be stated, that the development into a more powerful union coincides with more patriarchal developed structures. However, gender equality as part of the Bologna Process could also influence the student unions' work as it already has influenced it in the past few years.

9. Promoting the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area

Promoting attractiveness brings the Bologna Process into the sphere of competition and efficiency. It may actually contradict both the goals of increasing the social dimension of the European higher education system as well as that of establishing equal access. Equal access requires sufficient measures and supports for the weaker part of society, which is in terms of market based thinking not always efficient. However, this may not apply if attractiveness is defined in terms of equality and equal access, which from our point of view would be more appealing to students.

10. Doctoral studies and the synergy between the EHEA and ERA

At the level of doctoral studies, the female participation remains low nearly all over Europe. Since the 3rd cycle became part of the Bologna Process, it is also now up to us to deal with the related issues. One main of the main concerns with regards to the lack of female participants in the higher academic sphere is the problem of decreased motivation from the social environment. However, the actual academic "elite" also play an important role. If doctoral studies are becoming more structured

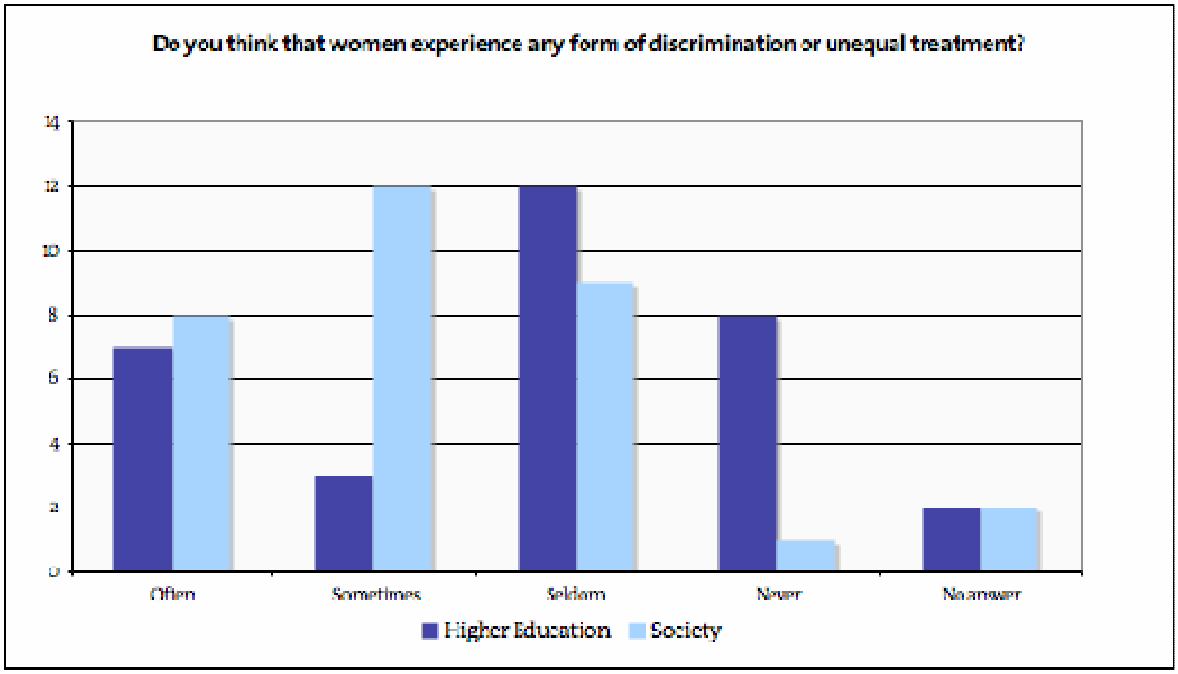
[5] Regarding this question, mostly national surveys exist. For example: BMFSFJ (Ed.): Gender Datenreport, online: www.bmfsfj.de

as a 3rd cycle, the importance of personal relations between professors and PhD students can be reduced. Since these connections were mostly male (because mostly men were involved) this could have an impact on female participation. On the other hand, the not curricular-based PhD studies may have served different need e.g., with regards to flexibility and personal needs, in which case a more structured approach may also keep students out of the system.

Gender Equality in the Student Unions in Europe

The first survey of gender equality work within the student unions in Europe was conducted in order to obtain a broad overview of the awareness of the organisations regarding gender equality. The survey was conducted between November 2006 and January 2007 and was combined with a general survey about the student unions' opinion on equality issues. The survey was answered by 32 student organisations from 27 European countries and covers 18 EU countries and 9 non-EU countries. The main questions of the survey were about the gender equality situation in the country, gender equality projects within the student union and mechanisms in the organisations.

Although the similarity of problems regarding gender equity and equality for men and women in all European countries is great, the diversity of the unions' awareness is also great. Many unions think that there is at least some inequality and unequal treatment of women in the society. Much fewer think this applies to the higher education sector, however: 31% of the student unions think that women face unequal treatment or discrimination in society never or seldom, while 63% answered that women face this sometimes (38%) or often (25%). The perception of discrimination or unequal treatment in the higher education sector is quite different: 31% of the unions expect women to face discrimination often or sometimes, while 63% expect this seldom (38%) or never (25%). This shows that a lot of student unions perceive the higher education sector less discriminating for women than the rest of the society. The number of student unions who think that women never face any kind of unequal treatment in higher education has increased from 1 to 5. Only three unions think that women sometimes face unequal treatment in higher education compared to the 12 unions who answered that women sometimes face unequal treatment in the society.



Picture 1: Student unions opinion on unequal treatment of women

Actions of the Student Unions

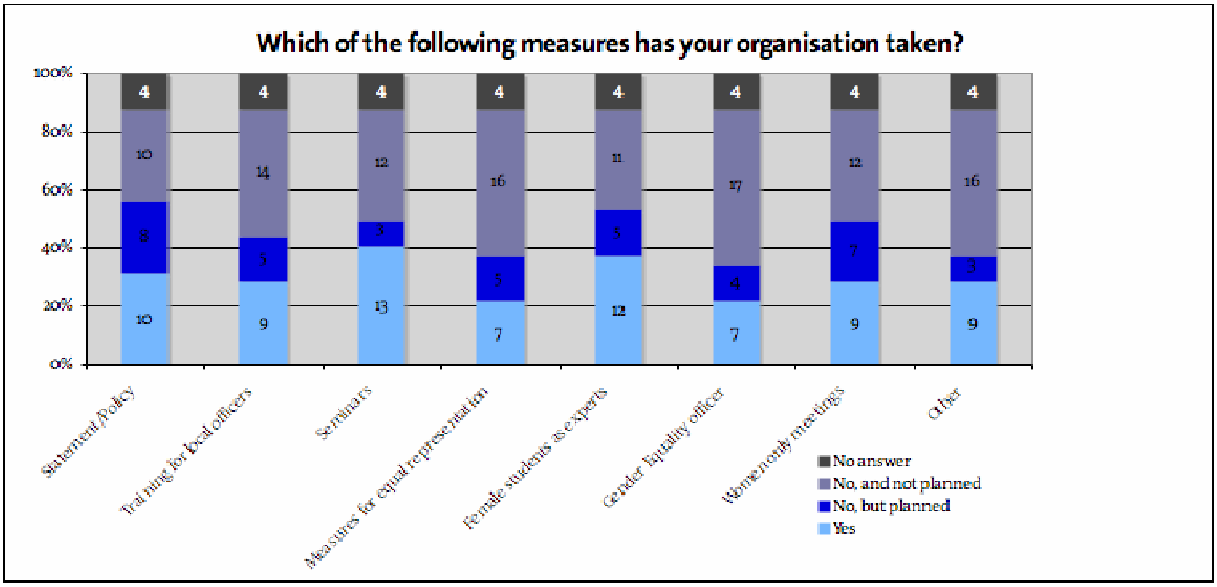
The survey assessed the actions of the student unions with regard to gender equality. The majority of unions have taken measures against some kind of unequal treatment in their country (75%). Specific measures against gender based discrimination were taken by 15 (47%) of the unions, 25% have not taken any measures and 25% did not know
whether they had taken any measures yet. In some countries with more than one national student organisation it depends on the union whether there have been measures taken or not (e.g., Iceland, Croatia). These results show that the vast majority of student unions in Europe agree on the existence of inequality on a general level. Active work in gender equality is considerably less present among the organisations, but still almost half of the organisations have worked on gender equality. The number of unions which do not know whether there have been actions in the past, can be interpreted in different ways. There might be no discussion about gender equality action during the recent time, but there might still have been actions taken in the past. Another reason might be the structural differentiation between women's working structures and the rest of the student unions.
The actions unions have taken so far against gender-based discrimination vary a great deal. The questionnaire offered a number of measures. They could indicate whether they have taken any measures, whether they are planning to do so in the future or whether they have not and are also not planning to in the future. The results were as follows: 25% of the unions are not planning to take any measures in the future. More than half of the unions (56.25%) said, that they have done at least one of the following measures in the past. The differences towards the general

questions might result from the more specific answers, which are possible in this question. Furthermore, there might be some measures, which were not seen as specific gender equality measures before.

The measures, which could be chosen from are

- Women have the possibility to meet without men being present
- Having a gender equality officer in the organisation
- Including female students as experts in making a statement, organizing events etc.
- Ensuring equal representation by gender in the organization (e.g., quotas)
- Organizing seminars, workshop on given issue
- Organizing trainings for local higher education officers on the issue
- Making a statement on given issue

The answers for not taking measures show that very different reasons are equally represented. One third of the unions do not see gender based discrimination as a priority in the organisation (31%), while one third says that there is no discrimination (27%). Additionally, both a lack of financial resources (19%) as well as a lack of knowledge (23%) prevents further action in the field of gender equality. There was actually no single union, which stated that the members do not support measures against gender-based discrimination.



Picture 2: Measures of the Student Unions

The reasons for or against working on gender equality are in one third of the cases the lack of prioritisation of the field in the unions work, but also nearly one third of the answering unions say "there is no discrimination". The "lack of knowledge" or the "lack of financial resources and/or staff" was a reason for another 42% of the

unions. Even though the "lack of financial resources and/or staff" can also be a question of prioritization, these unions are generally willing to work on gender equality.

Gender Equality within the Positions of the Student Unions

A deeper look into the organizations gives us more information about the situation there. Some student unions do have clear mechanisms on empowering women, formally regulated within their statutes or based on informal agreements. However, the vast majority of the unions do not have any measure for gender equality. Some mentioned, that there is no reason for such a measure; others do not prioritize the issue. The existing measures range from quotas for elected bodies to informal female networks or special women's officers, which are only elected by women. The question on gender mechanisms was not answered by a large number of organizations. Since there is no given reason for that, we can only guess. The organizations might not know the measures or the unions might not have any formal regulations. The real participation of men and women in the organizations illustrates that there is a relatively high number of women in the organization, much more than is usual in politics. Nevertheless, looking below the surface provides us with more information. The number of men and women are the same, but the positions and the fields of their work vary a great deal. The answers of the organizations were classified into 7 groups:

- A – Equal rate on all levels (45-55% each)
- Bf – Fewer women on all levels (45-35%)
- Bm – Fewer men on all levels (45-35%)
- Cf – Equal rate, but higher position unbalanced towards less women
- Cm – Equal rate, but higher position unbalanced towards less men
- Df – Rarely women on all levels (35% and below)
- Dm – Rarely men on all level (35% and below).

The levels covered the board (legislative body), the executive body and staff. The question was not answered by 35% of the unions that filled out the questionnaire. This leads to greater differences depending on whether we look at all unions or only at those who answered the question.

The main findings were:

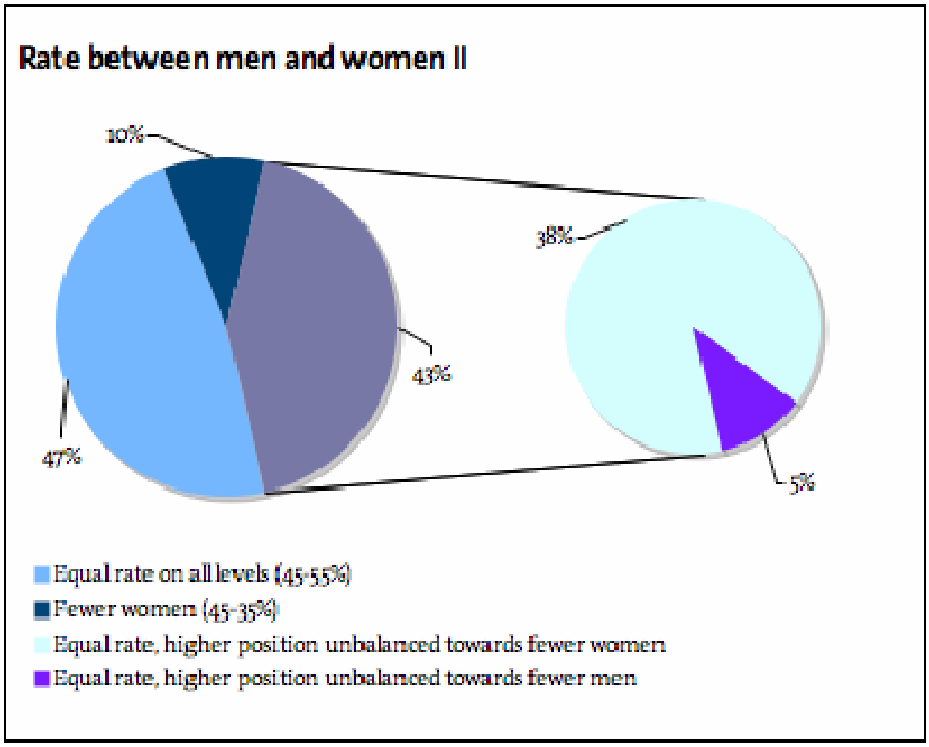
- 31% of the unions proved to have an equal rate of men and women on the described levels.
- More than one third of the unions (34%) proved to be gender biased on higher levels. Women and men are equally represented on the lower level (board or executive structure), but the executive structure or the chairperson/president is male dominated. One single organisation was biased towards fewer men on high level positions. The vast majority of those

34% unions proved an equal rate of men and women in the lower levels of the organisations, but mainly in the presidium/executive committee the ratio changed towards more men.

- No organisation has less than 35% of men or women on all levels. Such a gender bias was not indicated for all levels.

Looking at the results of only those unions who answered the question the results we get pose a different picture:

- Nearly half of those unions proved to have an equal rate of men and women on all levels of their organisation.
- 43% indicated a biased men/women rate only in higher position. But from these, mostly all unions were having more men than women in higher positions.
- Still one out of ten organisations has more men than women on all levels of the organisation.



Picture 3: Rate between Men and Women in the Organisations

The participation of men and women, therefore, does not reflect the participation of men and women in higher education in general. In most of the countries covered by the questionnaire, women and men participate equally in higher education on the level of the students.[6] In some countries the number of female students actually

[6] Source: Eurostat. Number of students (ISCED 5-6) in 2004.

exceeds the number of male ones up to 60%. But obviously the glass ceiling effect also impacts the students union and women in positions there. Even though a significant amount of student unions perceive the higher education sector as less discriminating towards women than the rest of the society, the organisations show a picture of political participation of women, which is equal to the rest of the society.

Good Practise: Combating Gender Inequality in Higher Education

The survey gives mostly quantitative information about the attitude and the action of student unions. Concrete projects have been an integral part of the work of several student organisations in countries all over Europe. In the following section I will take a deeper look at these actions, pursuing three aspects:

- description of the project
- motivation of the organisation for the project
- main aims and outcomes

This part is based on interviews that were held with the student unions between May and August 2007.

Austria: Women's Spring University

The women's spring university held by the Austrian student union *Österreichische HochschülerInnenschaft* took place in March/April 2007. Despite there having been several women's universities during the 1980s it was the first project of this kind in recent times. The main purpose of the university was to bring those women into academia who are usually excluded from them. At the same time, the university opened a place for discussing the university and academia from a feminist perspective. Curricula and science could be discussed apart from (mostly) male dominated university governance. The university also included knowledge building parts: There, women were able to build their competences in those areas that are usually male dominated (e.g. law, leadership).
During the last six years, the Austrian student union has been constantly working on gender equality. The executive body of the union includes an office for feminist politics which is responsible for the work being done in the area of gender equality.[7]
The project was a collaboration of the Austrian national student union, the local student unions in several Austrian universities and faculty student unions from faculties of local institutions of higher education. In addition, a local women's organisation and the municipality were involved.
The 350 participants of the university took part in 50 workshops and two plenary sessions. The topics covered higher education, social life and the social situation of women in the society as well as theory on gender.[8] The structural connection to the

[7] www.oeh.ac.at

[8] www.frauenuni.net

student union and the rest of the organisation occurred through the participation of elected officials in the university and through the organisational support of volunteers.
Even though the explicit connection to higher education policies and the Bologna Process was not obvious, the topics of the university covered several aspects of the social dimension. Further topics of the Bologna Process were also included through workshops on science and the role of academia in the society. Gender specific aspects of employability and working conditions are also close to the discussion about the European Higher Education Area.

United Kingdom: Pro-choice and Proud of it!

The *National Union of Students* (NUS) in the United Kingdom has been running the campaign "Pro-choice and proud of it!" since 2005. It is a three year, long term campaign based on the idea that women need the capacity to decide about their own body for well being. While well being is a precondition for participation in decision making and leadership, it is a basic need for success within education and working life. The project aims to support women in higher education to fight for their rights on well being.
For more than twenty years, the *National Union of Students* has run what is referred to as the 'women's campaign'. The unit, which employs a women's officer full-time, works to combat sexism in all its forms and to ensure that women's voices are heard and valued. The pro-choice campaign mentioned above was organized by the officer. It is aimed at female students in the British higher education system and should result in a safe space within the institution where female students are not harassed due to their opinion on fertility. At the same time the campaign targets national legislation on abortion and hopes to establish pro-choice as a norm within the student union.
Student well being is a crucial part of the social dimension. Based on the belief that students can only succeed in higher education if they find themselves in good conditions, it is clear that this also includes making decisions about one's own body and the way of life a person wants to choose for one's own future.

Finland: The Difference between Legislation and Reality

In Finland gender equality plans are legally required. The national union of polytechnic student unions in Finland, *Suomen Ammattikorkeakouluopiskelijayh-distysten Liitto (SAMOK)* launched a project in early 2007 which mapped the existence of gender equality plans. The project which was completed in June 207 also documented the plans' correlation with legislated requirements and the inclusion of students in the gender equality plans within the Finnish polytechnics.
It was the first project held on gender equality by the Finnish student union and was initiated by a gender equality project in Finnish polytechnics covering three

institutions.[9] It targeted the polytechnics which by law have to present a gender equality plan for their institution. It is expected that if plans are implemented successfully the situation for students who are facing harassment and discrimination in higher education institutions should be improved. In addition, students who are leaving the higher education sector should be educated in gender equality for their professional life.
The project was not motivated by the Bologna Process nor does the Finnish union use the Bologna Process as a tool for working on gender equality, nonetheless they increased their work on equity in all areas within the same year. Moreover, the project which was aimed at implementing legal requirements in the institutions, therefore, demonstrates a clear connection to quality assurance and implementation of current reforms.

Serbia: Get involved! Gender Equality in Student Organisations and Institutions

From 2003-2004, the Serbian Student Union (*Studentska Unija Srbije*, SUS) conducted a project on gender equity work and the active support of women. The project led to a gender equity team, which remained active during 2005 as well.
Based on research conducted by various non-government organizations the union saw that women in Serbia are not at all in equal positions with men in politics and decision making. The research of the student union members stated that the problem in society is reflected in the student groups and that there is no gender balance in the academic community. The problem is mostly evident in the lack of participation in decision making processes and in the lack of initiatives coming from female students.
The aim of the project was to encourage and strengthen female students. Female students were to be motivated to more actively participate in student organizations and within institutions of higher education. Methods employed within the project included trainings and workshops. Furthermore there was a focus on raising awareness of the lack of female participation and promotion of women's political participation. The expected outcome of the project was to create a team of female student leaders with necessary skills who would continue the work on the issue of gender balanced participation. It was anticipated that the gender equality team formed though the project would concentrate its work on policy making.
The first part of the project consisted of one workshop, two trainings and a round table. The five day workshop on basics of gender equality as well as the two training sessions educated and strengthened a group of twenty female student activists. Core participants for the educational part of the project, organized in January, February and March 2004 were a group of 20 female student activists from Nis, Novi Sad, Kragujevac and Belgrade University. The second part of the project was a campaign for promoting gender equality and active female participation. As part of

9 www.6mix.nu

the campaign preparations a mini survey of students opinions and attitudes was conducted.
It was the first project of the Serbian Student Union. Their main motivation was the serious lack of gender equality in the Serbian society and academia. At the beginning of the project, the Bologna Process was not very present at Serbian universities. As with Finland, the process was not a motivation for running the project. Nevertheless, a connection to the process can be seen in that there was a need of a process, to include students as active participants and equal partners in the higher education sector. This also requires equal participation of men and women in negotiations and in university governance. The active promotion of female representatives is, due to the lack of gender equality within the society, a tool to ensure a level of student participation, which reflects the student body and a democratically formed student opinion.

Conclusion

These examples of good practises illustrate that student unions are active in the field of gender equality. Specific projects are run either within the student union or by a special unit of the student union. In all four cases the Bologna Process did not serve as direct motivation for holding the projects. Nonetheless, the initial awareness of gender inequalities was a main reason for starting to work on gender equality in the organisation. Despite the lack of direct connection of the projects and the Bologna Process, all projects link to measures and discussions which are held under the framework of the Bologna Process. The social dimension, student well being, changing curriculum and the role of higher education in the society as well as the implementation of legal measures, institutional autonomy and active partnership of students are core elements of the Bologna Process. They deliver a number of aspects and connections to gender equality work which are essential to use in discussions about the Bologna Process on European, national and local levels.