

## **Resolution on consolidation of higher education institutions Baltic Organizational Meeting 2017**

### **ABOUT THE BALTIC ORGANIZATIONAL MEETING**

The Baltic Organizational Meeting (BOM) is a regional agreement between national student unions in Baltic states- the Student Union of Latvia (LSA), Lithuanian National Union of Students (LSS) and Federation of Estonian Student Unions (EÜL).

BOM first convened in Vilnius in 1999. BOM is held once a year to discuss and work on common challenges students face in Baltic states.

### **ABOUT BALTIC ORGANIZATIONAL MEETING 2017**

In 2017, BOM was held in Riga, 14.-17. September. The topic chosen for this meeting was something that is important for all the participating national students unions, which is consolidation of higher education institutions.

Consolidation as a major change process in higher education (HE) is very complex and ambiguous. As it is seen from previous precedents, it is mostly initiated from the side of government or administration structures in higher education institutions (HEI) rather than student representation bodies. Students and their representatives hold the role of a reacting stakeholder, expressing their opinions either in favour or against such changes and shifts, no matter what is the background for such decisions- either political, financial or other.

### **ABOUT THIS RESOLUTION**

On contrary to what could be expected from this document, it does not express a strong opinion whether students in Baltic states are in favour or against consolidation or any merging processes as such. This position expresses the student perspective about the details and process management principles that should be taken into consideration when merging, consolidating separate HEIs or separate entities such as research institutions. Consolidation is a difficult process that affects different aspects of the HEIs involved, thus effective and clear communication is the key. Student representatives are an important part of communicating changes to the students, which makes them a crucial part of the process. In this document we focus directly on the main aspects that need to be taken into consideration in the merging process of HEIs. They are divided into 6 subsections: (1) academia and science issues, (2) social issues, (3) study administration issues, (4) cultural issues, (5) financial and legal issues and (6) infrastructure.

### **ACADEMIA AND SCIENCE ISSUES**

*Consensus in writing should be agreed on all possible changes during the consolidation process*

As they are a lot of involved parties in a consolidation process, it is important for all of them to describe their opinion of the process, but more so about what the end results of the consolidation will bring. It gives the public an understanding of the process, and also takes away the doubts of the academic staff, the administrative staff, partner universities, existing exchange programmes both for staff and students, joint programmes and most importantly students. Taking away doubts will encourage better cooperation at the beginning.

#### Openness and transparency for electing the staff members

From a student's perspective it is very important to recruit professional staff. To make sure that it is reached, there is a need for a specific plan and descriptions of procedures on what particular actions and in what order need to be taken. Equality and academic and scientific expertise shall be the key principles for recruiting of research and academic staff members in HEIs.

#### Learning outcomes from different study programmes must be compared and equalized

When consolidating study programs under similar study program groups from different HEIs, the uniqueness and specialization of the programs should be taken into consideration. Learning outcomes gained in studies should be as close as possible to the ones intended to be reached when beginning the studies. The best aspects of each study program should be kept and combined. Student representatives not only have to be part of the decision making bodies that approve the new study programs, but also they have to be a part of the initial work groups that compose them. Whilst combining two subjects or study programs, the transition period should be as flexible as possible for the students of all HEIs included.

#### Safety nets for research funding should be created

Students must have a right to finish projects and other research activities they have started before the organizational change in HEI's structures. Ensuring the recognition of the invested human, money and time resources is needed, making it a priority during consolidation of HEIs.

### **SOCIAL ISSUES**

#### Inclusive environment

During the consolidation, it is required to consider all the aspects of student adaptation to new environment. Professional psychological help has to be available for students free of charge, as well as career counselling and other forms of mentoring and support from HEI's staff members.

The environment in a consolidated HEI has to be welcoming and with no discrimination towards students with regard to their race, nationalities, disabilities or any other aspects. All students have to be treated equally, yet considering learning needs of every student.

### Finances

Student loans should be available for all those in need of additional financial support. Furthermore, the student loan conditions shall not be changed for those students who already have ongoing financial commitments.

Appropriate amounts and varieties of scholarships have to be offered for all students. Equal opportunities to apply for scholarships shall be in place, adapting the same criteria for students from different HEIs.

### Integration and blending

A strategy for cooperation and integration has to be made both for staff members and students. Study groups, courses and other learning platforms have to be mixed in order to achieve the benefits of consolidation. Mechanisms for fighting social and cultural barriers between people from different HEIs have to be in place, ensuring adequate environment for cooperation.

### Transition periods

Due to the fact that HEIs have at least slightly different methods of teaching students, transition period has to be introduced. During this period, evaluation methods of students have to be equal and fair to all students and no social guarantees can be lost due to the academic results, e.g. scholarships. The length of transition period has to be decided by the Senate or other highest decision making body in the HEI.

## **STUDY ADMINISTRATION**

### Rules and structure of rotation

Student rotation criteria should be agreed upon from all involved sides and appliance of it should be decided and accepted by Senates of all HEI involved before the beginning of the consolidation.

When entering the new HEI, the funding of the study place has to stay the same until the new period of rotation. The criteria of rotation HEIs have agreed upon consolidation should be applied after the first period of studies.

### Timetables and academic calendar

Students are the main interest group who are affected by timetables and the academic calendar. In formatting the timetable and the academic calendar the student representatives should be involved into the process and their input taken into account. In collaboration with student representatives, special attention should be paid to forming the time tables of Masters and PhD students.

## **FINANCIAL AND LEGAL ISSUES**

### Budgets

Consolidation from a legal and financial point of view should be strategic, future-oriented with taking into consideration legal certainty and transparency. University study fees should have a clear and fixed amount which would offer students a stability during their studies. Students should have the right to keep their study fee according to the terms mentioned in the initial study agreement. If downsizing has to take place, academic staff members should be the least affected by the changes, ensuring purposeful and just process. Salary changes should take into consideration the benefits of the workforce and workload increase should only affect the administrative side of the consolidated parties.

### Documentation

All documentation regarding the consolidation has to be in writing and available to all included parties, clearly defining all of the involved stakeholders, their roles and status within the consolidation process. Parties of the consolidation will need a clear explanation of the used terminology. The university's strategy and other planning documents should be amended accordingly when the consolidated parties are affected with the annual plan.

## **INFRASTRUCTURE**

### Learning and living environment

Study and research facilities should be sufficient for all the needs of staff and students, providing proper environment for development. While planning occupation and use of HEIs infrastructure, student needs should be prioritized, ensuring uninterrupted study and research process. Preferably, management teams of HEIs should look towards creation of united HEI campuses, instead of scattered buildings across cities. Appropriate and affordable student housing should be available, and HEI has to be responsible for meeting the demand for student housing.

### Accessibility

Laboratories, auditoriums and other facilities have to be accessible to all HEI community members. Available resources should be shared fairly between internal structural units of HEIs. Research equipment should be available for all staff members and students equally. Accessibility to HEI infrastructure shall be considered from a perspective of students with physical disabilities and in case of abandonment of buildings, most accessible buildings available should be kept.

## **CULTURAL ISSUES**

The consolidation process must be thought thoroughly taking into consideration the cultural interests of the students of both HEI. In the assimilation process, a united academical community in terms of culture and traditions should be formed.

Taking into consideration the flexibility of cultural practices, HEIs are encouraged to keep their traditions and cultural practices, etc. However, effort must be put in making new cultural practices and eventually uniting the two academical communities into one.

It is up to the representative bodies and responsible departments of both HEIs whether to keep, combine or eliminate any events or cultural symbols (logo, anthem, brands, etc.).

## **RESULTS**

Implementation of the ideas and recommendations expressed in this resolution will ensure a harmonic and stable consolidation process from the student's perspective.

Through communicating the values of all the HEIs involved HEIs, together they can determine which are the common goals of the new academic community. Therefore, the HEIs are advised to work on their united values, goals and cultural practices as a unity.

We believe it's important that processes that will take place must include all involved stakeholders, to ensure that best possible outcome is reached. Process of change must be over thought to avoid any possible threats, taking into account every aspect of HE, making sure that result will be an improvement from the original situation.