



## **ESU's reaction to the European Commission's EU 2020 strategy proposal**

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As the Lisbon Strategy draws to an end, the European Union is now at a cross-road. Faced with the effects of the worst economic and financial crisis to ever hit Europe in decades, member states have three diverse options, namely doing nothing, setting idealistic and tangible goals as well as rolling up the sleeves and turning theory into action. The last 2 options are the starting premise with which the European Students' Union (ESU) hopes that Europe's leaders commence the work towards achieving the EU 2020 vision.

In this document ESU will seek to outline what it sees as being the strategic thrusts in addressing the socio-economic and educational challenges that member states are facing within a national and international context. In representing, 11 million students, the views hereunder shall seek to address the concerns of the stakeholders of the receiving end of higher education.

### **Recognising constraints and facing new challenges**

In the current scenario where many member states, notably the Eastern countries, have significantly diminished the budgets of higher education, ESU positively notices the emphasis on the need to invest in education and research to ensure to reach the 2020 vision. ESU acknowledges that the scale of current economic turbulence, social changes, increased globalisation and the demographic changes require a strategy that adopts a new approach to development policy that responds to such changes.

Whilst in agreement with the Commission that investment in Higher Education yields economic return notably due to a higher employability, ESU is surprised that the benefit of ensuring equal opportunities for all to reflect the diversity in society is not acknowledged, even though the role of education in general and higher education in particular in promoting active citizenship and achieving the vision of diverse but unified and tolerant Europe has been underlined in many EU communiqués. In the draft EU2020 strategy, the concept of equality is being mainly tackled to enhance employment and economic growth. The benefit of ensuring equal opportunities for all to reflect the diversity in society is not acknowledged.

### **Key priorities for EU 2020**

The European Students' Union welcomes the due attention given to education in the Commission's Working Document ahead of the drafting of the Future "EU2020" strategy. ESU further positively notes that the

identified key drivers of EU 2020 are built on the notion of sustainability which is crucial in the context of long-term development that will increase the EU's internal progress and overall level of competitiveness.

ESU expresses its concern that the document will fail to capture the essence of the strategy unless specific targets are drafted. Whilst recognising the added pressure on Member States' governments in ensuring a brisk exit from the crisis, ESU is worried that this proposed strategy will pave the way for 10 years of political lip service that fails to address the current needs of the Union in consolidating itself socially, economically and environmentally for the benefit of all of its citizens.

### **Creating value by basing growth on knowledge**

#### Participation in Higher Education

One of the major challenges that to date still plagues the EU and which requires the immediate attention of political leaders is the current high level of school leavers that fail to proceed to post-secondary education. ESU agrees that there has been a major increase in general participation in higher education on the first cycle, but there is still limited access to many social groups. And even though there is relative gender balance on the first cycle, there remains still a high disparity with regards to the second and third cycles, not mentioning issues with increased study costs that inhibit access and completion rates in general and especially among the vulnerable groups. The factors leading to all of this vary from one member state to another. ESU calls on the Commission to add further pressure so that action at a national level is taken to maximise participation at all levels of education in order to fight discrimination in regards to access to knowledge. This must be combined with a strategy laying down a viable option for integrating Life Long learning concepts into universities and making these learning opportunities universally accessible to the public. Aware of the wide range of needs and resources available in different member states, ESU holds that such programmes out to be developed at a national level with the use of EU funding available.

#### Generic skills

Generic skills are essential for individuals to operate successfully within society and the economy. ESU holds that these skills should be embedded into the education system, identified through the defined Learning Outcomes of higher education programmes and most notably during the years of compulsory education. Amongst the skills that ESU holds that should be addressed as the basic skills such as literacy, numeracy and the use of technology; people-related skills that ensure that students have the communication, interpersonal, team-working and customer-service skills required in the modern context as well as conceptual skills such as organisation skills, problem-solving, innovative and creative skills that are key for personal development as well as to guarantee economic development of the Union.

The European Union is also based on democracy and human rights and as such education systems should foster the acquisition of social and civic competences. The core knowledge needed on the side of any active citizen includes understanding of concepts such as democracy, human rights, justice, equality, citizenship and

how these are applied in various contexts at the local, regional, national and international level. Furthermore, civic competences should also include the understanding of rules, norms and values permeating political systems in the local, national and international environment and how they relate to historical and contemporary events and developments both nationally and internationally.

Using the economic argument which ESU acknowledges as being the most attractive for member states struggling in the current context, ESU reiterates that global competition is now requiring skilled workers having cultural and language skills, knowledge of other national regulatory requirements and international recognition of standards and qualifications.

### Benchmarking

ESU notes that in its working document, reference has been made to the need for benchmarking of European Universities against the best universities in the world. ESU holds that any benchmarking should focus on a system level on educational attainment, research output, mobility indicators as well as accessibility. This will guarantee that European Universities are truly at the centre of a knowledge society that simultaneously gives due regard to social cohesion. Furthermore, we would like to emphasise the need to strengthen links between Universities by building joint degree programmes and developing common research projects not only within Europe, but also globally. There should be widespread EU funds devoted to this as well as giving financial support for students and researchers participating in these programmes.

### Funding of Higher Education

Voicing the concern of its member unions, ESU draws the attention of member states towards the need of further public investment in tertiary education that mirrors the investment in primary, secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education. The reforms proposed in the EU2020 strategy ought to be linked with radical reforms to financing of higher education to ensure that Higher Education systems are not dependent on fluctuating public funding but have a constant flow of financial resources that lead to an enhanced learning experience of the student.

ESU holds that alternative sources of funding, including tax incentives for private donations towards supporting teaching and research activities, will also make sustainable a strong student support framework that encourages further students to participate in higher education programs. The Lisbon Strategy failed to achieve this, and ESU hopes that the EU2020 strategy will prove to be the necessary political impetus that drives Member States to act in this regard.

Coupling the above, ESU draws the attention to the fact that tuition fees cannot be seen an excuse to invest less in higher education, and given the fact that tuition fees have no real impact on the completion rates of education, ESU once again demands that governments do not introduce or raise tuition fees, but rather

reduce or abolish tuition fees in member states. ESU feels that this should also be EU policy and part of OMC-indicators.

In its 'Report on the Impact of the Financial Crisis on Students', ESU noted the haphazard counter-mechanisms that different member states have adopted. Henceforth, ESU believes that more transparent long-term financial planning of funding of the education must be set by Governments in this field. Amongst the measures ESU encourages governments to take is the apportioning of annual budgetary allocations that are determined based on increased participation rates and quality improvements necessary within education institutions. In this spirit, ESU welcomes the stress on the need for the new priorities being set to be reflected in budgetary policies alongside the adoption of new financing models that ensure that a common pool of public and private resources is set up.

### Mobility

Whilst welcoming the 20% mobility goal set as part of the Bologna process, ESU feels that even more ambitious goals can be set by the EU. Even though the working document presented does suggest that *“all young people in Europe the possibility to spend part of their educational pathway in other Member States”*, realistically speaking ESU is aware that unless such a statement will be backed up by concrete efforts by the EU member states and the set up of concrete mobility targets and indicators for measuring the progress towards them, it will not be translated into reality. ESU reiterates that mobility barriers do still exist with the primary ones remaining language, financial and accessibility issues; hence we see the need for continued and increased investment from the EU budget to learning mobility initiatives.

ESU holds that learning mobility is not only about promoting the European idea, but also an important tool in fighting xenophobia and intolerance. It is also a major catalyst in increasing the mobility of workforce which in turn is an important part of overcoming, or at least evening out the demographic challenges Europe is facing in the coming decades.

### **Empowering people in inclusive societies**

ESU welcomes the Commission's focus on the need to empower people and to focus further on societal equality. ESU reiterates however that to ensure this, substantial reforms on a national level are required with due attention needed in the case of students with disabilities, students from a disadvantaged socio-economic background and students, with migration background or ethnic minorities. Furthermore, ESU stresses that education should be a major part of making social mobility a reality by providing people with necessary skills to remain not only employable, but also active in society.

Data shows that the society has lower social transfers and additional tax revenues through more citizens entering labour market because of education. Also better educated individuals have better health, are more

democratically involved and spend more on goods and services, thus lowering the public costs of health care, social services and contributing to the progress of our societies and an active economy.<sup>1</sup> ESU thus holds that by ensuring that support systems are in place for vulnerable groups during the course of their educational experience, governments will not only be ensuring that the students flourish into holistic adults with a solid academic, linguistic and cultural background but also that in the coming years, the citizens of the EU require less state support. This is essential in the context of an ageing population.

## **Creating a competitive, connected and greener economy**

### Investing in research

ESU notes with satisfaction that “*an effective and well-resourced European Research Area*” is essential to the EU 2020 vision. ESU expresses its hope that member states show further commitment than that shown towards reaching the Lisbon Strategy goals in this respect. To date, the status of researchers, including doctoral students differ greatly. Tuition fees for doctoral students are heftier than those imposed on earlier cycles and at times work done by these students remains still unpaid.

ESU hopes that more member states adhere to the Salzburg principles, European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for their Recruitment.

ESU reiterates that funding of doctoral programmes should be done in a way to ensure that academic freedom is not put to risk. Public funding of doctoral programmes should also be allocated to research fields that do not directly bring economic profit.

### Environmental studies

ESU welcomes the proposal that more attention is given to the environment with stress on the need for the setting of a sustainable approach in policy making and development. To meet the challenges that future generations have the face ESU encourages that Governments introduce environment and climate studies in study programmes to foster a culture of responsibility towards a healthier earth. In addition, ESU further notes the need for educational institutions to invest immediately and strongly in research on global warming, environment safeguarding, sustainable energies and the evolution needed by our socio-economical systems.

## **Making it happen**

Whilst wholeheartedly agreeing with the stress made in the document that all stakeholders actively support the EU2020 vision, ESU nonetheless equally stresses that this vision requires strong political commitment translated into action by national parliaments. ESU dismally notes that the Lisbon Strategy dramatically failed

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<sup>1</sup> OECD (2009), *Education at a Glance*

to achieve the goals set. Faced with such a dire economic situation, member states can no longer procrastinate in translating goals into practise.

In a rapidly changing environment, the changing skills needs of the economy and society are difficult to predict with a high degree of certainty. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify trends which will assist us in making informed policy decisions. There are also core sets of skills that are to be maintained and constantly developed over generations, especially when it comes to personal development and active citizenship.

In addition, ESU holds that if the member states are truly committed to developing a strong competitive advantage over competing economies, the EU's ambition should not to simply meet projections based on an extrapolation of current observed trends. The EU2020 strategy requires that significant challenges are met by Government, stakeholders and individuals. ESU holds that whilst the challenges are great, the costs of not meeting these challenges are equally high.

ESU is committed to raise to the challenges ahead and fulfil its responsibility as a stakeholder in the joint effort for fulfilling the Lisbon objectives, in accordance with the prioritisation given by the ESU members – national unions of students – representing 11 million of European students.

For more information, please contact the ESU Executive Committee on [ec2009@esu-online.org](mailto:ec2009@esu-online.org)

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