

EUROPEAN STUDENT CONVENTION

*- Getting Young
Europe out of
the Crisis*







YOUTH IN ACTION

Youth in Action is the EU programme for youth activities. The Youth in Action programme supports youth initiatives and projects. It supports mobility of young people and projects with a high degree of non-formal learning. Youth in Action funded most of the European Students Convention.

http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/youth/programme/about_youth_en.php

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In March 2012, the National Students Union in Denmark organized a conference in cooperation with the European Student Union. The conference was entitled ‘Getting young Europe out of the crisis - Eyes on higher education and employability of graduates’.

Over 120 student representatives from all across the European continent gathered for three days in Copenhagen to discuss the consequences of the rising youth unemployment, and the role of higher education to get Europe out of the crisis.

As yet, no country can claim to have found the solution to the current unemployment crisis, but by sharing our experiences and learning from each other across Europe, students might be able to come up with new ideas and solutions. Discussions were enriched by presentations from experts and stakeholders, input that helped analyze the complexity of the problem and contributed with new perspectives.

The conference was centered around a number of workshops facilitated by students with first-hand experience from the education system and student



political work in their homelands. These workshops provided an opportunity to share national experiences, as well as the development of ideas for common European solutions. The discussions resulted in ten concrete recommendations for the policy makers of Europe.



»The crisis has made an impact on the market, and rising youth unemployment rates mean that European youth is being used as cheap or free labour«

Emile Turunen (MEP) argued against tuition fees in the opening debate

The ten recommendations are the European students' demands to their political leaders, and they will be handed to the EU Presidency. European students are united in sending a clear appeal: Investment in education is the long-term solution to the crisis, and it is vital that the politicians do not let themselves

be swept away by crisis panic and implement short-sighted cutbacks. The crisis has made an impact on the market, and rising youth unemployment rates means that European youth is being used as cheap or free labour. The politicians must ensure that youth rights are not undermined. ●

COPENHAGEN

»Getting Young Europe Out of the Crisis: Eyes on higher education and employability of graduates«

The on-going economic crisis continues to affect higher education in many ways. Many governments are increasing existing or introducing new austerity measures aimed at cutting deficits in public budgets, reducing grants in higher education. Public funding available to higher education has been decreasing in a number of European countries. As a result, forced into competition for resources, higher education institutions' focus is shifting from teaching to fundraising. This short-term approach to avoid budget deficit does not take into account the real causes of deficit and increasing government debt, but aims to remedy it through reducing investment in areas such as education that underpin long-term growth. This is already affect-

ing access to quality education and the quality of the education itself. Higher education serves multiple purposes, this cannot be forgotten, especially as priorities shift to supporting the growth of the economy and creation of jobs. Social mobility, active citizenship, and development of crucial competencies are all vital functions of higher education, equal to the creation and maintenance of a broad, advanced knowledge base and the stimulation of research and innovation. This is a precondition for sustainable economic growth in the long-term.

This is the recommendation for sustainable economic growth in the long term, and this is also the priority to get out of the crisis. We can't afford to sacrifice any generation; it would increase economic and social difficulties

DECLARATION

within a few years. On the contrary, in order to shift away from depression, to reduce unemployment, and to increase social cohesion and increase welfare, we have to invest in education.

Access to and success in completing higher education remains a great challenge. This is especially true for students in the shadow of the financial crisis. Public and quality free higher education remains our vision; even while austerity has become common throughout the European Higher Education Area. ESU demands a radical re-allocation of national and EU funds to increase investments in Higher Education and reaffirms that the only way out of the crisis is development of a knowledgeable and employable citizenship in society. This is the foundation for long-term sustainability. We further ask to step up work in inclusion to

»Access to and success in completing higher education remains a great challenge«

higher education as education levels play an important role in providing opportunities and success, but the social and educational background of one's family largely remain the determinant factor for success.

The 23rd European Student Convention brought together students and experts from the fields of education, economy and politics. The Convention discussed and debated the interdependent factors and effects of the crisis on employability and employment. The convention further explored the aspects of democratic policy-making and agreed on a set of recommendations. The following recommendations were agreed upon by students and student representatives, written in consideration for the short-term state of the economy as well as the long-term targets of the EU and the EHEA. ▶

Education as a public responsibility. Because of the crisis, the temptation is to use tuition fees as a way of increasing budgets for universities. Because tuition fees are neither a sustainable way to guarantee the budget of higher education nor efficient tools to avoid social determination in the access of study, ESU recommends that all stakeholders recognize that education is a public good and public responsibility. The financing of higher education has to remain the responsibility of public expenditure and not be based individual investment. Thus it's the responsibility of states and public sector to promote financial support to students in order to cover costs. Moreover, one of the strongest responsibilities of a state is to guarantee the realisation of human and civil rights, which can be only achieved under public financing. Students need to cover their costs for living, necessary transportation, and in some disagreeable cases, the payment of tuition fees. Funding should be available in an amount that makes studies, or changing the fields of study, and learning mobility possible, regardless of a student's socioeconomic background. Education is a public responsibility and a public good, and therefore requires public investment. Institutions of higher education and governments must be transparent regarding the use of public funds for education and mobility, and should engage in discussions about how

to make the best use of public funds to realise the potential quality of education, access and success of students.

2 Funding of mobility. The crisis is stressing access to higher education.

Social insecurity and inequalities are rising within Europe. Student mobility should have to be understood as a part of higher education and not as a facultative opportunity given to limited categories of students. The proposed Erasmus for All loan scheme will not cause any improvement in the access of all, whatever social origins, to mobility. On the contrary, it will definitely lead to a strengthening of social selection in the access to mobility, by shifting from a grant based system into a loan based system, and asserting individual financing of mobility.

3 Social enhancement. Access to learning mobility plays a crucial role in social enhancement of an individual. To this end, higher education institutions need to provide each and every student an opportunity to study abroad, which contributes to truly internationalised institutions. It is vital that every programme has a mobility window that is accessible for all. Where there is no mobility window within a study program, this must be highlighted and rectified.

4 Education as the best way of reducing unemployment.

More than ever during a crisis, having a degree is the best way to avoid unemployment. This is especially important for post-graduates who have just started their professional life. This period is crucial and influences their social situation for the rest of their lives. Alongside the economic depression we faced since the beginning of the crisis, rising unemployment for young people in Europe is an increasing problem. Because economies are suffering, it is getting more and more difficult to find a job after studying.

ESU is very well aware that students need to experience the best education possible, but this can't be achieved by employing a short-term perspective on the relation between curricula and the needs of the labour market. The concept has been summarized as “employability.” ESU wants to make sure that a degree allows a graduate to find a job linked to their studies. Furthermore, a degree must provide a graduate with the ability to find a job and to further progress personally during their professional activities, this being called “lifelong learning.” For ESU, “flexibility” means enabling people move from one ►

THE 10 demands of the COPENHAGEN declaration:

1. *Education as a public responsibility.*
2. *Funding of mobility.*
3. *Social enhancement*
4. *Education as the best way of reducing unemployment*
5. *Employability and Higher Education*
6. *Internships and work experience.*
7. *Responsibility of society.*
8. *Government responsibility*
9. *Institutional responsibility.*
10. *Students' responsibility*

»As partners in our own education, students have a vital role in the shaping and implementation of policies«

sector to another. ESU asserts the fact that it's impossible to know on which productive sectors growth will be based for the next decades. We call upon employers to understand degrees as a tool for protection of graduates as future workers.

5 Employability and Higher Education. Practice of gaining skills and competences through informal and non-formal learning needs to be adapted to the formal learning programmes within the higher education institutions. Student-centred learning coupled with clearly defined learning outcomes need to be fully used and implemented. Students have a right to be heard and to take part in decision-making” during the design of curricula and learning outcomes.

6 Internships and work experience. Internships are now indispensable tools for professional development, but during an economic crisis, the temptation is for firms to use them in an opportunistic way. Internships should not replace real jobs and they have to be effective for the formation of the students. High quality internships based on work experience are a good way of developing skills; these should be integrated with studies and students should have adequate financial support just like they would when studying at an institution. In cases that internships take place outside of formal education, these should be guaranteed at least at minimum wage, where other forms of support are not available, and appropriate legal rights as an employee should also be guaranteed. Such opportunities should not under any circumstance be used as a means of free or cheap labour, as increasingly is the case.

7 Responsibility of society. The society as a whole is responsible for provision and support of life-long learning of employees and respecting its members and their rights. Society shall maintain open dialogue with higher education institutions. All private partners who are working with higher education have to do this in a responsible manner, which does not

give priority to business interest when cooperating on developing curriculum. Private industry must not externalize the cost of employee training on the higher education system.

8. Government responsibility. Governments are responsible for guaranteeing non-discriminative access to the labour market. They shall provide support and grants for higher education programmes and institutions to develop the dimension of employability. Governments are also responsible for the development of the labour market and assuring coherency and supporting necessary job creation. Governments shall initiate and mediate the dialogue between academia, government entities, business and industry to create consistent cooperation. To achieve these goals, degrees and diplomas have to be recognised under the rule of law in order to regulate the labour market, and to allow diploma to be real tool of professional development and protection students as future workers. Governments shall be responsible for finance of higher education as a public good and a human right.

9. Institutional responsibility. Institutions of higher education and society shall cooperate to accomplish common goals. Access to and success in higher education shall be available to all who wish to study. Institutions shall be vigilant in defending their purpose from

the influence of private interests and shall remain servants of the public good.

10. Students' responsibility. The European Students' Union, National Unions of Students, and institutional unions shall be responsible for developing and communicating coherent strategies regarding development of graduate employability, and shall use them in lobbying activities at the institutional and national levels.

Students are competent and constructive partners in decisions regarding their future. Students have to have a right to participate in the governance of their higher education institutions, have access to express their views through political parties or non-governmental organisations and enjoy freedom of speech and freely access media tools.

As partners in our own education, students have a vital role in the shaping and implementation of policies. We have researched and observed, discussed and debated. These recommendations come from the input and discussions of more than one hundred delegates and experts from a variety of countries within the European Higher Education Area. The hours and weeks of work put into the process reflect the importance of these recommendations to the participating organizations, their members, and their constituencies. As such, the undersigned are dedicated to their realisation with all expediency ●



VOXPOP: *Helen*

Helen O'Shea

Ireland

Works with the UK National Students Union in Scotland

What is the youth unemployment situation in the UK?

In the UK, one in five are unemployed, so the situation is pretty bad.

We know that many of those who actually are employed are under-employed.

What do you do as a student organisation?

As a student organisation, we are trying to make sure that the curricula are suitable for employment. Obviously there are dangers there, because you do not want just to be appealing to the whims of the labour market, you want to value academia for academia's sake. We need to put more pressure on business and industry so they create more reliable jobs, and not just six months unpaid internship with no intention of providing a job afterwards - young people are being exploited. We need to put pressure, especially on large companies that are getting away with it repeatedly.





Morten Østergaard, the Danish minister of higher education underlined the importance of european cooperation when working to solve the crisis

WORDS from the SPEAKERS

“I wish you all a successful conference with my whole-hearted backing and belief that you can contribute with solutions to the challenges of graduate unemployment. I believe the ESU has an opportunity to play a key role as a messenger for the opportunities of European employment for European graduates.”

Morten Østergaard, Minister for Science, Innovation and Higher Education



“Even the best job applications are useless, if there are no jobs to apply for. Even if every single student had straight A’s and the finest letters of recommendation, new jobs would not materialize out of thin air. Therefore it is crucial that we as students address the problem of job shortage at a structural level.”

Torben Holm, President of the National Union of Students in Denmark

“The only people that should be afraid of a great education system are authoritarian rulers and their friends. That is why I think it is important that we not only focus on the economic aspect of the crisis, but also on the one that relate to our value as citizens in a social context, and ultimately as students.”

Allan Päll, Chairperson of the European Students’ Union



speakers input:

MAGNUS BALSLEV JENSEN

Consultant at the independent
think tank DEA

GRADUATE EMPLOYEES AS AN ASSET FOR THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

– *How to get there?*

*May your hands always be busy
May your feet always be swift
May you have a strong foundation
When the winds of changes shift*
Bob Dylan – *Forever Young*

These lines written by Bob Dylan in 1973 were meant as a blessing from a parent to a child in a world often rocked by change and unforeseen events. However, it is also a fitting message to the youth of Europe anno 2012, a youth being blown off course by tough economic times. An economic crisis often hits hardest amongst young people and the current crisis is no different. Youth unemployment has risen dramatically across Europe and little is stopping it from getting even higher. Not an encouraging message, however, it is

important that we stay honest about the magnitude of the challenges we face.

In times of high unemployment, it is essential for young people to not let their skills and knowledge deteriorate whilst looking for work, because the education system is constantly churning out graduates with newer, fresher and more updated knowledge than the ones with a diploma starting to collect dust. If the unemployed young people (and anyone who is unemployed for that matter) want to stay attractive in the eyes of the employers, they need to do their best to maintain their skills, and sharpen their qualifications. That is why we need to make sure, that we utilize our education system as a part of the solution to bringing the unemployed graduates back to



The ice-breaking resulted in several creative presentations. Here a group is finalizing their input«

the labor market. Because while a good part of the unemployed graduates can be attributed to the macroeconomic challenges the European economies face, we also need to ask whether the education we provide gives the graduates the skills needed by their future employers.

The educational attainment of young graduates is the foundation they can

ABOUT DEA:

DEA (Danish Business Research Academy) is a think tank dedicated to the issue of the relation between companies' competitiveness - and investments in education, research and innovation

Learn more at dea.nu/english

depend on during hard times, but only if their education provides them with the skills needed by the labor market. Hence, we need to make sure that there is a strong connection between our education system and our labor market.

This issue has recently been raised in a report by the European Commission showing that approximately 40 pct. of academics are not engaged in Business Cooperation at all, and 20 pct. only to a low extent. Nevertheless, 92 pct. of the higher education institutions themselves say that they engage in some degree of University Business Cooperation at the institutional level. Nevertheless, the connection needs to be profoundly rooted in all levels of the institution from faculty to students. ●

VOXPOP: *Petra and Oliver*



**Petra Radeci
and Oliver
Suman**
Croatia

*Field of study: **Agro-business
and Medicine***

What is the youth unemployment situation in the Croatia?

Petra: At the moment we have a big problem with unemployment, especially with students that are graduating and can not find a job. Young people think that they do not have a chance in

Croatia. They are constantly looking for jobs in other countries, and might end up staying there. This may not be such a big problem now, but in ten or twenty years, it will be.

You don't expect much of your politicians?

Oliver: No. People do not get involved, they just vote once every four years and that is it. Last year there was a demonstration, and only a thousand people turned up. No one wants to take to the streets and things like that. Maybe it will improve when we enter the EU, I don't know...

VOXPOP: *Fernando*



**Fernando Miguel
Galán**
Palomares, Spain
*Field of study: **Medicine***

What is the youth unemployment situation in Spain?

Youth unemployment is a huge problem because of the current crisis. Young people are quite desperate. We cannot find jobs, and at the same time the funding for universities is being cut as is the grants to the students.

What do you do as a student organization?

We are trying to stop the cuts in higher education, and to stop the cuts on grants. We are also asking not to increase the tuition fees, which are being increased at the moment.

In your opinion, what should the politicians do?

They are cutting funds everywhere, I do not think it is the proper way. People have no money to spend since they cannot find a job, so the politicians are stopping the economy.

»Young people think
that they do not
have a chance
in Croatia.«

Petra Radecic, Croatia

What is the
perceived value
of my degree?
my institution?
my skills?

how much € should
I really expect
to make after
graduation?

After each session the results of the
the workshops was exhibited on
flip-charts

UNEMPLOYMENT

is not the individual's problem

I found **Tinja Zerzer** in the lunch break on the second day of the conference. She agreed to tell me about her impression of the conference so far, but first I asked her how she got so involved in student politics, that she is willing to spend her entire weekend discussing unemployment in Copenhagen.

»I got involved in student politics because I wanted to actively participate in shaping the university. What the university taught, and what kind of place it is. I study economics in Vienna and am a little behind schedule – that's what student politics does,« Tinja laughs. Being behind schedule with her studies is not the only result of her political involvement though.

»I learnt many things that helps me in my studies, because it gives me a different approach. I know that economics is not disconnected from the rest of the world. It affects the entire world. It is tangible. It is not just theory.«

Next, I asked her what her favourite moment of the conference was so far. Tinja

hesitated a little before answering.

»That is a tough question, actually.

I loved the panel yesterday it was amazing. I do not remember the last time that I heard a panel with so much informational value to it. It presented so many different positions and different perspectives on the topic. People actually expressed their own views, and not just agreeing with each other.

However, the presentation today by Deborah Roseveare from the OCED was interesting as well. When she talked about three things that are shaping our future significantly, I did however miss the economic and financial crisis we are facing at the moment, because I believe it is not only going to shape the future, it is already shaping the present. This was also apparent in the questions that were asked: There was not a single question that was not somehow related to financial and economic aspects. But Roseveare's presentation was very open – that was interesting.«

However, not all parts of the programme made a positive impression.

»I was a bit shocked by the ministers



opening speech. He made it sound as if it is the young peoples own fault that they find it hard to get a job. That the problem is somehow caused by a lack of the right skills. The minister needs to explain to me which skills will create more jobs. There are not tons of jobs out there just waiting to be filled with the right skills. Enhancing skills only solves this problem on an individual level, how is it going to solve the general unemployment problem that we are facing?«

If you could influence the politicians, what would you ask them to do?

»Put in very simple terms, I would

»Just cutting and cutting and cutting and cutting will not change anything for the better«

ask them to think a little less short-sighted. Just cutting and cutting and cutting will not change anything for the better. I also hope they learn to recognise the value of education for the future. It doesn't help only to have an economic approach, because there is no economic model in this world that can really describe reality.«

What do you hope will be the result of this conference?

»I hope that we manage to find a way to state clearly that unemployment is not an individual problem. We need to focus on how to change the system.« ●



VOXPOP: *Helen*



Helen O'Shea

Ireland

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Union in Scotland

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What do you do as a student organisation?

We are trying to make sure that the curricula are suitable for employment.

We need to put more pressure on business and industry so they create more reliable jobs, and not just six months unpaid internship with no intention of providing a job afterwards.

In your opinion, what should the politicians do?

I think the politicians should put more pressure on business and industry. Business and industry need to invest in society. There is an enormous crisis. Universities and colleges are paying the price, students are paying the price, and if business and industry want an effective and dynamic workforce, then they need to pay the price as well.



Employability

FROM A TEACHER'S TRADE UNION PERSPECTIVE

Why is the concept of employability an important debate in relation to the development

of a modern university sector? Since no one will argue in favour of educating graduates with useless skills and qualification, it should be very easy to reach a consensus on the importance of keeping curricula and subjects relevant to the needs of the labour market.

But the reality is that it is not as easy as one would think, because so far no one has been able to come up with a clear definition of labour market needs, nor what precise developments the vari-

ous university subjects should undergo to be aligned with such needs.

The easy solution for many policy makers is to argue in favour of a close involvement on the part of employers - and mainly those of

the private sector - in the various committees and policy forums at the institutions responsible for developing curricula. But the easy solution is not necessarily the right one. Before

we go down the route of involving private employers directly in the detailed development of university curricula, we must discuss what it is that makes university graduates employable today.

»the solution is not to go for 'one size to fit all'«.

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speakers input:

JENS VRAA JENSEN

*International adviser at DM, Denmark, and
Chair of the Higher Education and Research
Standing Committee of EI/ETUCE*



INGRID STAGE

President of DM



There is a tendency to allege that there is a contradiction between the hard factual skills of a subject and the more soft academic skills. People who peddle this argument also tend to argue for more emphasis on the former and less on the latter skills, as this would produce easily explainable and understandable skills and competences. But suppose that what the labour market actually demands is graduates with more soft academic skills, including the ability to find new solutions to complicated problem, to question conventional wisdom in organizing work and structures, and to develop new and more advanced ways of working place structures?

If this is what the labour market is in fact demanding today, and to an even greater extent will need in the future, then more soft skills would be prefer-

able. The education would also last longer, as the graduate would be better equipped to look for continued development of professional competences. To focus on a more narrow set of skills entails a risk of producing skills which will have a short shell life. A dynamic labour market demands abilities to continue self-governed professional development. Abilities engendered by an education focusing on developing a critical mindset and intellectual challenges besides the hard factual skills.

But the solution is not to go for »one size to fit all«. In order to strike the right balance between the hard and soft parts of curricula in any subject, we will need to consider a vast number of factors.

Thus, it is more important to discuss ►

»The universities must be guaranteed autonomy, and the academic community must have full academic freedom«

where is the competence to take decisions on the content and curriculum? Are employers with their understandable tendency to focus on the immediate need of their enterprise the most competent to decide this? Or would it not be more relevant to listen to the academics and the students? They are less likely to be focused on the short term perspective. Generally speaking, they will be more inclined to consider the long term perspectives and critical/intellectual potentials of a given subject.

Perhaps it is just stating the obvious that a trade union/professional association organising the teaching staff argues for decisions on curriculum and the long term employability of the graduates to be taken by staff and students rather than by external employers and/

or politicians who might tend to focus on the short term.

There is no contradiction between employability and long term focus on developing a critical mindset on the basis of continued intellectual challenges.

In order to develop a critical mindset in the students, the universities need to stick to their mission, i.e. to be critical in their search for a deeper truth and understanding of all areas of society and public and private enterprise, e.g. technology, nature, language, politics and religion. In short challenge conventional wisdom in all aspects of life.

To be able to fulfil this mission, the universities must be guaranteed autonomy, and the academic community must have full academic freedom. The most effective safeguard is a system of collegial governance which has been the best protector of the critical mission of universities. If a critical mindset is still valued as an important outcome of university studies, it must be protected and given the best possible framework for continued development. It must not be undermined by a set of short term and narrow interests, as these can never be a real protection of the employability of university graduates. We would argue that in many cases, the opposite is true. ●



Student representatives from all over Denmark pitched in, and helped DSF organise the convention. Therese from RUC photographed the convention

qualifications
my
ation"
I've learned
What is the perceived value of my degree? my institution? my skills?
how much € should I really expect to make?
When my
4
-/he
my
4
-
I have?
?

EUROPEAN STUDENTS' UNION



REPRESENTING STUDENTS SINCE 1982



Danske Studerendes Fællesråd