

Contribution of the European Students' Union (ESU) to the public consultation on a renewed Modernisation Agenda for Higher Education in the European Union

The European Students' Union (ESU) is the umbrella organisation of 45 National Unions of Students (NUS) from 38 countries, representing through its members over 15 million students. ESU also bring together 15 European-wide student organisations as associate members. ESU's mission is to represent, defend and strengthen students' educational, democratic and political and social rights. ESU will work for sustainable, accessible and high quality higher education in Europe. ESU believes that education is a public good and a public responsibility and it serves multiple purposes.

As highlighted by the UN Sustainable Development Goals, quality education is the foundation to improving people's lives and sustainable development. The goal 4.3 aims *by 2030 to ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university*. In this same lines, the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) and the Modernisation Agenda presented in 2011 set clear ambitious but reachable targets in higher education attainment and students' mobility.

European cooperation and support can have a positive impact on education. When it comes to higher education, ESU believes that the EU should be a tool to enhance development and cooperation and not a goal in itself. Therefore, the EU should focus on supporting the countries and their commitments set out in the Bologna process, for example through financial and political incentives.

ESU firmly believes that the EU should reflect the interests of the countries and the academic community throughout its policies. These policies should not contradict other European agreements or structures; the EU should support the Bologna process for instance, and not create alternative structures when it disagrees with the countries of the Bologna process. Policies should also be in line with each other throughout the EU.

Education policies on both national and EU level should be made in cooperation with relevant stakeholders, where students are a central part, in order to ensure legitimacy. It should be clear and transparent to the public how decisions are made, who are involved in the decision-making and how to influence them.



1 - Main challenges faced by higher education systems in the EU in reaching their potential

Despite the efforts done so far by the EU and some of the member states, **access and completion** in higher education keeps being one of the main challenges in most of the member states. The share of the population aged 30-34 having completed tertiary or equivalent education reached 37.9% and the average "entry rate" into tertiary education among under-25s in the EU now at almost 60%. However, while females generally have higher tertiary education attainment rates than males, the gender gap varies a lot between countries. This is also far from the aimed targets in migrant populations and other vulnerable groups.

Another main area of concern is **teaching and learning in higher education**, as not a lot of progress has been made in implementing the Student-Centred Learning approach. The results of the Peer-Assessment for Student-Centred Learning study have shown that much of this has been done piecemeal, and lacks a holistic change from national to classroom level. Putting students in the centre of the learning process requires providing them with choice in curricula, assessment methods and study paths. It also means that students must be viewed as equal partners and co-producers of knowledge. Therefore, it is of utmost importance ensuring students have a real voice in decision-making structures, affecting their daily lives.

One long-standing challenge that still remains unsolved is how to ensure greater **links between research and education** in higher education institutions. It is vital to overcome an artificially created dichotomy and ensure that the research activities have an impact in the educational ones, going further in involving students in research for example.

Student mobility has been at the core of the EU initiatives and the Bologna Process. Despite several initiatives with the aim of removing obstacles to mobility programmes in order to enhance quality and widen access, mobility is still not accessible for all students. Some the aims and goals have been met only on paper rather and not in reality, leaving student mobility still a privilege for the few. The 20% target of mobile students by 2020 has also pressured countries to prioritise quantity often at the expense of quality. Moreover, automatic (level) recognition of diplomas within the EU is still far from being a reality despite all existing tools (EQF, ECTS, ESG, Diploma Supplement, etc). **Internationalisation** strategies are yet to become common in EHEA countries. There is a noticeable lack of involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the drafting, implementation and evaluation process, and there is not enough consistency in the efforts taken to adjust the higher education systems to live up to the challenges of a global reality.

Financing of higher education and student support systems have been disproportionately hit by the economic crisis, followed by austerity measures and budget cuts in recent years. The cuts to student support systems and the growing trend of converting grants into loans is creating incredible financial burdens on families and students and risk squeezing more students out of higher education. The underfunding of HEIs is leading to reductions in student services, growing tuition fees, and ultimately damaging education quality. Where education budgets have not been cut but remain static, growing demand and inflation calls for greater investment.

The previously mentioned challenges on funding, together with the high youth unemployment rates, where the basis for an increased focus on the relevance and efficiency of higher education. While higher education must help graduates prepare for the labour market, the multiple purposes of higher education must never be forgotten. Focusing on lifelong learning, critical thinking, transversal skills and the interest of students should be the

main focus in discussions on **employability**, not the short-term and narrow needs of the labour market today. Tools to facilitate employability, such as automatic recognition of prior learning, of general and transversal skills or of learning outcomes are still not in place.

2.- Priority areas where those in charge of higher education should focus their attention

The priority areas should tackled and be aligned with the challenges faced as described in the previous section.

Access and completion: *Making our systems more inclusive is an essential aim for the EHEA as our populations become more and more diversified, also due to immigration and demographic changes* (Yerevan Communiqué, 2015) and in line with the Education and Training 2020 strategy. There is a need to focus on flexible access paths and fair recognition of prior learning, as well as support mechanisms to facilitate successful completion.

Learning and teaching: At the Yerevan Ministerial Conference, countries agreed to encourage and support higher education institutions and staff in promoting pedagogical innovation in student-centred learning environments. We should create closer links between research and education in higher education. Further work is need for incorporating learning outcomes for general and transversal skills such as creativity, critical thinking, digital skills and intercultural understanding.

Mobility & internationalisation: Ministers committed to remove barriers and wide opportunities for international mobility, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is still a lot of work to have fair recognition between countries of qualification gained abroad and to facilitate automatic (level) recognition. Internationalisation strategies will also allow having an international experience at home for those who are not mobile.

Different purposes of higher education: One of the major concerns is the extensive focus on the economic role of higher education and the lack of support for the public responsibility for education and promotion of education as a public good. The Paris Declaration actually reinforced the importance of education for active citizenship and learning to live together, as well as the need to promote the values of democracy, human rights, freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination. If the goals of inclusive and sustainable growth are to be achieved the approach must be adjusted accordingly.

Funding: In the Bologna Process the ministers committed to securing the highest possible level of public funding for higher education as education as public responsibility has been highlighted several times. This should also be reflected in all future communications from the European Union concerning higher education. While encouraging member states to meet the minimum target of 2 % of GDP investments in higher education, we strongly emphasise the need to abolish tuition fees and reject any reference to the further introduction or increase of tuition fees.

3.- How the EU should support efforts to improve higher education

The European Union, in close cooperation with stakeholders, should support countries in developing their higher education policies on a national and institutional level, while education policy remains a national competence.

3.1.- European cooperation in higher education has been since 2011

It is no secret that Europe has faced enormous changes in the past few years and is continuing to do so in relation to youth unemployment, radicalisation and integration of migrants and other vulnerable groups. Several initiatives of the European Union in higher education seek to combat this development in Europe.

The Modernisation Agenda, while containing several policy recommendations that the students through ESU have supported and pushed for, can sometimes be problematic in the way it is implemented. This publication seeks to shed light on how some of the National Unions of Students across Europe view different aspects of the Modernisation Agenda and its implementation. The experiences across the region are nearly as diverse as the student body itself. Despite this, there are many common themes. Among those, concerns about youth unemployment, the commodification of higher education and access to further studies are highlighted.

It is clear that the ET2020 strategy and the Modernisation Agenda have made an impact, however there is still quite a lot of room for improvement in the EU as a whole but also in its' member states. In 2012, the share of the population aged 30-34 having completed tertiary or equivalent education reached 35.7%, a number that then rose to 37.9%. While females generally have higher tertiary education attainment rates than males, the gender gap varies a lot between countries.

There is a need for more ambitious and dedicate greater efforts in giving education opportunities to everyone. Europe can't afford inequalities. Equal opportunities for all are key for the future of Europe itself. Some concerns arise for example from some approaches taken by the Commission regarding the purpose of education and the financing systems. It's difficult to think that trying to rush students through the education system or increasing the financial burden on them will help anyhow to achieve the ET2020 strategic objectives and minimize inequalities.

Moreover, ESU sees that the EU also influences countries outside the EU, especially through its partnership and neighbourhood policies. Therefore, when touching upon higher education, these policies should reflect commitments made by countries within the Bologna Process.

3.2.- Relevance for future EU cooperation of the three already identified "priority areas to explore further" and types of action

Enhancing "relevance" in learning and teaching: European institutions should support the development of teaching and learning strategies at national and institutional level for supporting Student-Centred Learning approaches. Such strategies should address among others: the training needs of teaching staff (pedagogical, digital, communication, etc), evaluation of the teaching activities by quality assurance mechanisms, incentives based on quality of teaching, identification of good practices and its dissemination, curricula design, etc.

Helping HEIs become strong regional innovators: There is also a need to improve the and societal relevance of higher education courses by promoting learning outcomes related to citizenship and learning to live together, as well as of the values of democracy, human rights, freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination.

Ensuring education and research activities within higher education are mutually reinforcing: It is key to ensure the involvement of students in the activities of the institutions tackling all their missions (research activities, societal outreach, education, etc) and adequate support for them to do that. Students should have the opportunity to engage in the research activity of the institution as well as ensuring that the research that the institution carries out is reflected in their education.

3.3.- Other priority areas and types of action you would like to see as part of EU cooperation in higher education

Access is still an issue in general and bigger for vulnerable groups (for example in migrant population or regarding the gender gap in several fields). ESU calls on the European Union to financially support countries who wish to design national access plans to improve access and successful completion (reducing drop-outs). However, those plans should not lead students towards any type of study programmes based on the needs of economy but on personal competencies and interest. The supportive role of the EU in collecting comparable information on higher education in the EU can have a significant impact.

Mobility: EU should work to remove barriers and wide opportunities for international mobility, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is still a lot of work to have fair recognition between countries of qualification gained abroad and to facilitate automatic recognition. EU should support mobility through increasing grants rather than loans. Internationalisation strategies will also allow to have an international experience at home for those who are not mobile.

Higher Education response to new societal challenges: While EU population is aging, the migration flows and increasing numbers of asylum seekers are shaping the demographics in Europe. Higher Education should be well prepared and respond adequately to issues such as recognition of qualification held by refugees, asylum seekers and persons in a refugee-like situation as well as their integration and support mechanisms. Moreover, mobility opportunities should be offered to students and staff from conflict areas or where they are being persecuted or attacked for exercising their basic freedoms, while working to make it possible for them to return home once conditions allow.

Other comments

The work that the EU does regarding higher education must better involve stakeholders in the spirit of modern collegiality. This means that educational initiatives and decisions should be developed with relevant stakeholders. It should be students, teachers and institutional representatives and their organisations that are consulted in education issues. It is important that the EU's internal structures create sustainable and representative stakeholder engagement structures to govern its educational initiatives. ESU believes that large programmes that profoundly affect students, such as the Erasmus+ programme, should be co-governed by educational stakeholders. Not only for the sake of democracy, but to ensure the quality of the programmes. Educational stakeholders have a vested interest in creating the most responsible policies for those they represent.

There is a need to ensure a European approach in all European projects co-funded by the Commission, as well as to ensure a broad impact and usefulness in line with the Modernisation Agenda goals. Therefore some actions of Erasmus+ should be re-centralised.

The European Union should also support, encourage and welcome free, academic and rigorous research and policy debate. ESU encourages the European Commission to base its proposals and policy documents on wide objective research and consultation with relevant stakeholders. This ensures that various political and socio-economic concerns are heard.

At the EU institutions, education, including qualifications and skills, should be put under the same structure (DG/committee) together with research in order to ensure closer links between them all and ensuring a bigger impact towards a knowledge society.

Moreover, we would like to refer you to some of our previous work on this aspect:

- **ESU's Statement on the EU2020 mid-term review and ET2020 follow-up** (General Assembly BM67, December 2014)
<http://www.esu-online.org/news/article/6065/BM-67-Statement-on-the-EU2020-mid-term-review-and-ET2020-follow-up/>
- **Student Voices on the Modernisation Agenda** (SAGE project publication, March 2014)
<http://www.esu-online.org/news/article/6068/Student-Advancement-of-Graduates-Employability-Student-Voices-on-the-Modernisation-Agenda/>
- **Bologna With Student Eyes 2015** (May 2015)
<http://bwse2015.esu-online.org/Main+findings>
- **ESU's Statement on the Modernisation Agenda** (General Assembly BM61, November 2011)
<http://www.esu-online.org/news/article/6065/569/>