

Contribution of the European Students' Union (ESU) to the consultation on a Skills Agenda for Europe

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.

ESU recommendations: summary

1. In order to develop skills, education should not be directly linked with short term labour market demands; education policies are more complex than solely labour market outcomes. Therefore EU Skills agenda should acknowledge multiple purposes of education and embed transversal skills and skills for active citizenship.
2. Full implementation of student-centred learning should be meaningful part of the education and training modernisation, ensuring flexibility in education process and curriculum, at the same time addressing different needs of skills for different learners.
3. Employers and companies should always take advisory role in curriculum design, leaving influencing and decision making to education institutions, where students should be equal stakeholders.
4. EU should not develop new transparency mechanisms for recognition of qualifications, instead the existing Bologna transparency tools (NQF, EQF, Diploma supplement, ECTS) should be better explained to and used by HEIs, students and employers.
5. Member states should follow the same procedures and understanding for Recognition of Prior Learning, ensuring validation of previous learning and training.

6. ESU disagrees on giving priority for financial investments in education disciplines that are considered more relevant for boosting national economies. Skills Agenda should not encourage governments to withdrawn commitments made in Bucharest Communiqué to secure proper funding for higher education. Such divisions undermines other facets of education, limits access to education and generic skills.
7. In order to create more opportunities for mobility periods abroad within the ERASMUS+ programme, proper EU funding should be secured in next EU multiannual financial framework. Also measures to target participation of marginalised groups in mobility should be taken by the member states.
8. The European Higher Education Area qualifications framework needs to be useful for all signatory countries of the Bologna Process, as well as outside of the European Higher Education Area to maximise the opportunities of internationalisation for higher education systems in Europe, making them comparable with one another, thus, not limiting it to EU and Bologna Process members. EQF is not yet ready to be opened up for multinational companies and intersectional bodies. Students should be fully involved in further EQF referencing.
9. Stakeholders should be involved in developing further strategies and plans for skills on both national and international level.

1.- Relevance of the issues and priorities identified

With the Bologna Declaration, ministers and higher education institutions committed themselves to creating higher education systems that will widely reflect societal needs, encourage critical thinking and help coherent development of citizens' employability. Therefore, several Bologna action lines, but also European Union political initiatives, are strongly linked and developed to enhance the employability of citizens and graduates. **The difference between employability (ability to learn; ability to gain employment) and employment (an actual acquisition of a job) should always be kept in mind**, in discussions and decision making processes on European, national and institutional levels.

ESU emphasizes that employability is a broad concept which includes subject-specific, methodological, social and individual competences which enable graduates to successfully take up and pursue a profession/employment and empower their lifelong-learning. Employability is also about making graduates more likely to gain employment in their chosen field(s), being able to create/start new businesses, and being able to develop and succeed in their occupations.

Although, since the economic crisis the European education discourse has even more moved in direction of developing knowledge society that benefits the growth of economies, it is of high importance to acknowledge that higher education needs to be tailored according to the societal

needs and not to the needs of the economy solely. **Higher education has multiple purposes** where employability is only one of the facets, along preparing active citizens for life in democratic societies, fostering social mobility, personal development and securing sustainable development for the societies we live in. It should reflect in the way how higher education is financed and governed.

Students should be in the centre of the reform that aims at enhancing employability, actively involved in curriculum design and governance of higher education.

1.1.- Three main priorities of the EU Skills Agenda identified by the European Commission

Ensuring higher and more relevant skills for all

ESU believes that **the link between employability and social dimension should be strengthened** by opening access to and improving success within higher education, for all students and learners, especially implementing measures that address access and completion of those coming from marginalised demographics. Therefore, improving access to skills to people who are more likely to be trapped with lower qualifications.

Development of transversal skills, e.g. critical thinking, problem solving, the ability to learn independently and with understanding, should be addressed in higher education and in-cooperated in the learning process with different pedagogical methods.

New Skills Agenda should recognise and address the importance of acquiring active citizenship skills, skills for sustainable development and ability to live together in a multicultural society. That is also meaningful part of the anti-radicalisation agenda that is underlined in Paris Declaration, adopted by European Education ministers in March 2015.

Promoting better visibility and use of available skills, including of EU mobile workers and third-country nationals

Further use and recognition of Bologna transparency tools should be addressed. Tools like Diploma Supplement, ECTS and Qualifications frameworks are making recognition within the EHEA easier, however, the conditions have to be made more friendly for students and graduates coming from the outside of the European Higher Education Area.

There are numerous tools and political initiatives stemming from the Bologna process that have been to a great degree oriented towards improving the communication with the labour market. For example, the Diploma Supplement is aimed to a certain degree at better describing the exact learning achievements of students that undergo a certain program. Still, there is little evidence that the tool has been taken up by employers as a simpler method to gauge the learning experience of a student. Institutions and employers should make full use of the Diploma Supplement for fostering employability, whilst allowing themselves to benefit from the added transparency and flexibility of the higher education degree systems.

Students should be actively involved in further implementation, self-certification and referencing of National Qualifications Frameworks as well as in further developments of EQF.

Reaching a better understanding of skills needs and trends in the labour market

All disciplines of education should be properly financed, not differentiating solely between those that are benefiting local economies more or less. The cuts to education budgets made during the recent financial crisis, with humanities and other fields viewed as less economically rewarding have been disproportionately affected, prioritising sciences more benefiting to economic outcomes.

Education and training not only develops economies, but also fosters social mobility. There is a clear link between public responsibility of education and social dimension, ensuring equitable access to education, therefore also equitable access to skills, learning outcomes and labour market.

Students are able to develop employability in the ways that cater the best for their particular interests and needs, including wide choice of education and work pathways.

Greater transparency and knowledge between students about qualifications and intended learning outcomes should be ensured in order to reach understanding of skills acquired in education or training. Furthermore, there need to be support mechanisms put in place in order to facilitate smooth transition from education to labour market, including proper career guidance.

1.2.- Main issues of the EU Skills Agenda identified by the European Commission

Higher and more relevant skills for all

ESU believes that every individual should have an opportunity to access desired pathway to obtain education and develop skills. **That require higher education systems and institutions to be flexible,** offer flexible learning pathways and access pathways to include non-traditional learners.

Further, in order to enhance employability, address individual learning needs and interests, **student-centred learning approaches must be fully endorsed and implemented** by higher education institutions that empower active student participation in curriculum design and the internal quality assurance of teaching, learning and assessment activities. 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. Further work is need for incorporating learning outcomes for general and transversal skills such as creativity, critical thinking, digital skills and intercultural understanding.

Learning outcomes should be fully implemented and students involved in the design of programme and intended learning outcomes, also in discussions and decision making on assessment methods and criteria. Decisions in higher education should be taken by the institution involving all stakeholders, and never by the majority of external bodies.

University – Industry partnerships should complement learning process by offering quality internships and traineeships, and acting as consultants, but never endanger independence of research, teaching and academic values. There is also a need to improve the 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.

In order to provide wider mobility opportunities, ministers have committed to removing barriers 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 to have an international experience at home for those who are not mobile. Proper funding should be secured to offer more opportunities for mobility periods abroad, including abolishment of ERASMUS+ Masters loan scheme.

Better visibility and use of available skills

National policies should better tackle recognition of prior learning, including validation of skills, and therefore fostering further learning process.

Efforts should be taken to inform students about their qualifications as outcomes of education and training. Member states and institutions need to ensure proper documentation of skills according to national qualification frameworks. Also those skills are not yet sufficiently taken into account in the recruiting process or put to use in the workplace.

To further support individuals and companies, EU tools and services on skills and qualifications need to be better explained to all students, employers and authorities. Before developing new mechanisms there is a need of using the existing transparency tools to their full potential reaching harmonisation.

ESCO is still under development and causing many uncertainties among the Member States. Even though potential is clear, ESU does not believe it is the right time that ESCO is put onto the agenda as the priority. ESCO should support development of EQF and its use, but it is essential to finish referencing processes in order to have sufficient information on how ESCO could be used best and contribute to member states.

Better understanding of skills needs and trends in the labour market

Trends and needs in the labour market change very rapidly and answer to labour market needs should contain long-term strategies. Only developing hard skills approach is no longer addressing the challenges of always changing world of work. Instead more transferal skills should be incorporated in curriculum.

Furthermore, it is of high importance to ensure wide access to different education disciplines in order to cater for people's' interests and competences. That includes available public funding and student support to be able to complete the studies.

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.

Relevance of higher education should not be measured in economic outcomes and employment, forgetting about other purposes of education than enhancing employability. System-level graduate tracking should not have impact on higher education programmes and curriculum based on instrumentalised education outcomes, like wages or employment levels of graduates.

Supporting National Reforms

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 and policies affecting education 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. The same rules should apply to funding offered by the EU to member states for implementation of reforms.

Students need to be equal stakeholder both on national and EU level in further implementation of skills strategies and policies.

1.3.- Proposals within the EU Skills Agenda

Revision of the European Qualifications Framework - EQF (2008), aimed at increasing transparency and comparability of qualifications, including an improved understanding of third country qualifications

Further development of the EQF should be focused on strengthening the cooperation of Member States and all the stakeholders, therefore building trust in each other's qualifications frameworks and educational quality systems. It is important to keep in mind importance of recognition of skills and qualifications for further education, and not just the labour market, following the principles of Lifelong Learning. Formal qualifications must ensure ways to validate skills acquired through non formal and informal learning, with special attention to transversal skills, as this is just a way of acquiring knowledge through different more flexible learning paths, that core principles of learning outcomes and qualifications frameworks give solid ground for.

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

- **Contribution of the European Students' Union (ESU) to the public consultation on a renewed Modernisation Agenda for Higher Education in the European Union** (February 2016)
<http://www.esu-online.org/asset/News/6001/ESU-Response-Modernisation-agenda.pdf>
- **Employability With Students' Eyes** (SAGE project publication, March 2014)
<http://www.esu-online.org/resourcehandler/772537ca-7a18-4f01-9cee-9a2e6d2843d1>
- **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/>