

A vibrant path of multi-colored confetti (blue, green, yellow, orange, red) leads from the bottom right towards the top left, set against a white background with scattered confetti.

A joint vision for Secondary and Higher Education for All in Europe

THE ROAD TOWARDS REALISING
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 4 IN EUROPE



Education International
Internationale de l'Éducation
Internacional de la Educación



OBESSU

Organising Bureau of
European School Student Unions

The European Students' Union



esu

EUROPEAN STUDENTS' UNION

Imprint

A joint vision for Secondary and Higher
Education for All in Europe
Brussels, June 2016

ISBN 978-94-9125604-2



OPEN SOCIETY
FOUNDATIONS

Supported by a grant from the Foundation
Open Society Institute in cooperation with
the Education Support Program of the Open
Society Foundations.



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Introduction

The present joint action programme is proposed by the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU), the European Students' Union (ESU), and Education International (EI) to their members and partners, in order to advance the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 related goals, which the United Nations adopted in September 2015.

The 17 goals and 169 targets make up the most ambitious development agenda the World has ever seen. Composed much broader than the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), they are addressing the eradication of poverty and inequality in all areas of social, economic and environmental development, and acts as guide to actions not only in the Global South, but in each of the World's 193 countries.

Education has been prominently included as Goal 4, which is to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all", as one of the transformative powers to create more sustainable societies. While the MDGs were centred around primary education, there is now explicit commitments to secondary and tertiary education.

In order to realise the transformative power of education, stakeholders in the area of secondary and tertiary education must build on the 25 years of experiences and achievements of the Education for All-movement, which has shown that it is possible to advance the agenda of ensuring access to education through national and international partnerships. While recognizing early childhood and primary education as central to the right to education, this joint action programme represents the first steps towards creating a strong partnership for secondary and tertiary education in Europe.

Equal access to quality education at all levels in Europe is yet to be achieved. European governments must take action to fully achieve the education goal by 2030. Therefore, with this joint action programme, our three organisations

call upon members and partners, as well as policy makers and civil society, to join our vision and demands, to remind European governments about the commitments they have made, while seeking to contribute proactively to the realisation of equitable access to and completion of secondary and higher education in Europe by 2030.

It is our hope that unions, civil society and policy makers at European and national level will take advantage of these visions and demands in implementing Goal 4, just as the action programme may be useful in other parts of the World too.

Defining equitable quality education

Free and accessible secondary and tertiary education is a human right that must be realized for all. Ensuring equal access to and completion of education requires overcoming the interlinking forms of inequalities including socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, religion, language and disability.

Achieving equitable quality education requires a holistic approach and attention to the entire academic community and education system. Students must be supported through the provision of student centred learning. In this process we must also ensure qualified and well-supported teachers and academic staff, modern and adequate quality tools for teaching and learning, and supportive, safe and secure environments.

Quality education must provide the tools for students to meet future challenges and support democratic societies. These challenges are not only solved through math, reading and other hard skills, but also transferable and soft skills such as creative thinking and problem solving; sustainability and citizenship must be embedded into curricula.

Goal 4 and the ten targets

»Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all«

TARGETS

- 4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and Goal-4 effective learning outcomes
- 4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and preprimary education so that they are ready for primary education
- 4.3 By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university
- 4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship
- 4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations
- 4.6 By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy

- 4.7 By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development
- 4.a Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, nonviolent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all
- 4.b By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries
- 4.c By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing states

Priorities proposed for European Secondary and Higher Education

Realising this ambitious education agenda will not be easy, especially not in a European context where governments have shown little interest in creating progressive change. However, there is no doubt that Europe has not yet achieved the targets of the SDGs. Therefore, our aim is to unite students, teachers, academics and universities at national level in advocating for change and holding European governments accountable for the promises they have made. It is evident that as a united group we stand at the core of a successful implementation of the SDG4 and its related targets.

Below we set out eight priorities for equitable quality secondary and tertiary education in Europe. Each priority is accompanied by two demands and one specific policy recommendation, which we hope will inspire the development of joint actions at national level. How exactly to address the demands and policy recommendations may depend on regional and national contexts. We trust you will be able to find the best possible approach in cooperation with other unions in your country.

TARGET 4.7: GOVERNANCE OF EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

1 DEMAND 1: Advancing global citizenship in and through education has to be a priority. There is no doubt that global citizenship is not only something that is taught, but it must also be experienced and practiced in an educational setting. One of the ways we see fit to practise global citizenship is by advancing our institutions' governance systems, empowering students to take a leading role in society and learning to overcome differences.

Today's education institutions, more than ever, require sound participatory, collegial and democratic governance systems, to be developed jointly by their members, students and staff. We demand that democratic sound governance systems are developed in every institution. The institutions must acknowledge students as equal stakeholders, and allow them a voice and vote in all decision-making bodies within the institutions. At the same time, students must be democratically elected, in order to represent the views of the entire student population.

2 DEMAND 2: As educational institutions aim to serve an increasing number of complex aims, the values of deliberation and partnership must be sustained and safeguarded despite trends to enhance effectiveness and efficiency above all else. An inclusive quality education environment requires collegial and democratic governance. Good governance in education institutions can foster an educational culture marked by equality, cultural diversity, human rights, global citizenship, and peace. It contributes to creating a conducive environment for teaching and learning that allows everyone to thrive and develop their skills. Student- and staff-led initiatives are an important element of such a culture. The development of such a culture should be supported by action plans involving students as well as teachers, academics and administrative staff.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

We recommend that all countries implement specific policies at institutional and national levels that ensure students' as well as teachers and academics' fundamental right to democratic representation in all decision-making bodies. Students, teachers and academic staff should hold the majority of votes, as they know their system and context better than external stakeholders.

TARGET 4.7: KNOWLEDGE, RESEARCH AND EDUCATION

1 DEMAND 1: Education and research are of key importance for achieving all the 17 SDGs, as they are among the most transformative tools for addressing social and environmental challenges. Furthermore, education and research help ensuring that students as well as teachers, academic staff and citizens acquire the knowledge and skills to develop a more environmentally and socially sustainable world.

Quality education is of central importance: It must be ensured that students at all levels are encouraged to apply critical thinking, and are exposed to research-based education and get acquainted with a diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches, in order to be able to explore new ways, act responsibly within their field of study, and achieve a better understanding of the world we live in.

2 DEMAND 2: Education for sustainable development (ESD) should not be taught separately, but because of its transversal nature, it must be included in programmes of all disciplines.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Governments must ensure adequate public funding for research and education, including areas that do not yield economical but rather societal, environmental or intellectual contributions. This will secure a significant leap forward in education for sustainable development. Only by developing ESD as a horizontal approach for all research areas, we will be able to achieve the comprehensive understanding of our societies.

TARGET 4.5 & 4.A: DISABILITY AND DIVERSITY FRIENDLY INSTITUTIONS

1 DEMAND 1: A precondition for quality education for all is making education institutions accessible to everyone, including marginalised groups. While progress has been made in terms of enhancing diversity, and making institutions more disability-friendly, there is still much to be done. Our institutions must reflect the diversity of our societies and persons with visible as well as invisible disabilities must have access to education institutions in order to ensure the right to education for all.

In the European context special attention must be paid to upgrading existing education facilities. When renovating and upgrading institutions special attention should always be paid to persons with disabilities.

2 DEMAND 2: We must ensure the safety of all and facilitate a thriving diversity within our institutions. Students from minorities, be it sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, ethnicity, religion, racial or something else, still witness attacks and harassment in European education institutions. In a European context we must also pay particular attention to marginalised groups, like Roma, who remain excluded from education systems and/or face grave discrimination. Ensuring the diversity on campus and in schools is also vital for ensuring the quality in education; research has proven that diverse classrooms tend to generate richer and more complex discussions.

In the spirit of target 4.a, institutions should develop and adopt policies, strategies and action plans, and establish positions for Ombudspersons and Equal Opportunity Officers, in order to create a safe campus and school environment free of attacks and harassment, and actively promote a culture of diversity and peace.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

In collaboration with stakeholders, countries should develop and implement National Access Plans, in order to tackle challenges of access and participation at both secondary and tertiary education levels. For higher education this has already been agreed within the framework of the Bologna Process (London Communique 2007, Yerevan Communique 2015), but this is yet to be realized.

TARGET 4.4: FLEXIBLE LEARNING PATHWAYS

1 DEMAND 1: The flexibility of learning paths can still be enhanced. Students should enjoy viable choices between different study programmes and directions within higher education, and from and to other sectors. Students who have pursued a vocational qualifications still face major challenges in some systems to enter higher education. In some binary systems, despite the Bologna degree system, there are unnecessary hurdles for moving from another type of higher education to another. These challenges create frustration for the students and hamper their education, with a loss for the society as a whole.

If we want to increase the number of persons with relevant skills to meet future challenges, we must also come up with better solutions for recognising both non-formal and formal learning. This should be done by employing a comprehensive approach towards skills that is not limited to employment and entrepreneurship only, but also includes soft skills and skills for active citizenship. The Bologna Process has created European momentum in this area at the level of higher education, and the SDGs oblige us to take this work further and ensure full implementation at all levels, working towards fulfilling the European lifelong learning strategy.

2 DEMAND 2: Current migration patterns call for special attention to be paid to the integration of refugee students (prospective as well as current), graduates, teachers and academics. These students, teachers and academics are often particularly vulnerable and face additional obstacles in accessing and enrolling in secondary and higher education due to the lack of documentation.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Europe already has provisions in place that should help facilitate the recognition process of refugees without documentation of their skills. However, so far governments have to a large extent neglected the implementation and adherence to the Lisbon Convention. Now is an ever more pressing time for aligning national legislation and frameworks with the Lisbon Convention, and develop similar policies for secondary level education.

Therefore, governments and education stakeholders must come together to develop new approaches to assess the education level of refugees who wish to enter the education system. European governments must ensure the right to education of all, and special attention must be given to newly-arrived minors and youth.

TARGET 4.C: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS

1 DEMAND 1: Teachers are at the core of quality education. Today, more is expected from teachers than ever before. This requires a genuine supportive working environment for teachers and academics, including attractive working conditions, continuous professional development and specialised training in addressing diverse student populations, and sufficient preparation time.

2 DEMAND 2: The role of academics as competent teachers is essential in creating quality education, and must be given due recognition. Furthermore, it is important that institutions apply fair and transparent processes for recruitment and development of academics' teaching competences.

Higher education institutions have the primary responsibility for the quality of their staff and for providing them with a supportive environment that allows them to carry out their work in the best possible manner. Such an environment should recognise the importance of teaching, offer more opportunities for continuous professional development of teachers and academics, and encourage academic activity to strengthen the link between teaching and research.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Ensuring quality continuous professional development for teachers and academics is essential for increasing the quality of education. This includes didactical and pedagogical skills as well as subject knowledge. All teachers in secondary schools should be trained and qualified. Continuous professional development should be publicly available and funded for teachers and academics at both secondary and tertiary level.

TARGET 4.3: QUALITY LEARNING OUTCOMES

1 DEMAND 1: Quality learning outcomes rely on strong national education systems, with a broad and balanced curriculum that is reinforced by holistic assessment systems and practices. The primary purpose of assessment is to improve teaching and learning, as well as to contextualise the learning experience for the students.

It is important that institutions establish a transparent process around the formulation of learning outcomes. The intended learning outcomes must be explicit and aligned with national policy and curriculum, as well as with the purposes of higher education, as the Council of Europe has suggested. It is important that learning outcomes are developed in line with the revised European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESGs).

2 DEMAND 2: Principles of student centred learning will enhance the quality of the students' experiences and thus facilitate the achievement of the desired learning outcomes. A prerequisite of student centred learning is that academics have the necessary academic freedom to adjust the curriculum and pedagogical methods in order to meet the needs of the students in the classroom.

It is therefore important that the different modes of learning used during the course as well as the final assessment of students are determined by the intended learning outcomes. To that end standardised testing must be terminated; education must recognise teachers' and academics' capability to conduct formative assessment throughout the learning process placing students and their individual learning context at the core of the assessment.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Rankings, other kinds of "league tables" and mechanical use of learning outcomes have proved to be misleading as indicators of relative or absolute quality. The testing regime takes resources away from teaching and learning, causes stress among students as well as teachers and academics, and has created its own industry of companies profiting without being held accountable. It is time that governments reject the testing regime and instead rely on national curriculum and quality assurance systems, institutional decisions, and the academic community as a whole to foster conscious and skilful graduates from both secondary and tertiary education.

TARGET 4.3: FINANCING EDUCATION AS A PUBLIC GOOD

1 DEMAND 1: In order to ensure equal access to quality education, education must first be acknowledged as the fundamental human right that it is. While we welcome that target 4.1 stipulates free primary and secondary education, we strongly regret that SDG4 only addresses higher education as “affordable”, when in fact, higher education according to the Bill of Human Rights should become “progressively free”.

We must keep reminding governments and legislators about the fact that education is a human right; a public good and a public responsibility, and should remain so. Any attempt to commodify or privatise education should be rejected in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

2 DEMAND 2: A large number of private education providers have been involved in the education post-2015 process and are preparing to offer their services as means to achieve the goal of equitable quality education for all. States have committed to provide free education and must, thus, ensure free education for all, and not rely on private providers to fill the gap. Preventing this development from rooting is important, since once the development of commodification has started it is hard to reverse.

Governments therefore must deliver on the promises they have made, with the SDGs as well as in the Bologna Process such as the Bucharest Communique, and ensure that education is a public responsibility, and that no private person or company profit from it. This is important also in relation

POLICY RECOMMENDATION 4.3

The key to further economic and social development in Europe lies in education. However, quality education cannot be achieved without sufficient funding, something the Education 2030 Framework for Action also emphasises. Governments therefore must meet the target of spending 6 percent of GDP or 20 percent of the total public expenditure on education. This will help reverse the trend of decreased spending per student that we have been witnessing following the financial crisis. The key to further economic and social development in Europe lies in education.

to companies making profit from standardized curricula and testing. Developing conscious citizens with skills to meet future challenges should be the only profit from education.

TARGET 4.B: PREVENTING BRAIN DRAIN

1 DEMAND 1: We welcome scholarships as a mean to expanding access to and completion of higher education, but scholarships must not become state-sponsored brain drain from the Global South to the Global North. We are very concerned by the way in which scholarships have been presented throughout the post-2015 process. Scholarships must never turn into a business for the donating country leading to brain drain effects in the Global South, but should rather be viewed as empowering the individual students.

Countries who offer scholarships to students from developing countries must do so in a manner that allows the student to continue in whatever direction they themselves deem best upon graduation. If the graduate would like to remain in the country of study, a fair period of time to apply for jobs need to be honoured, but at the same time opportunities to return to the home country must also be respected.

2 DEMAND 2: In order to increase the transformative potential of scholarships we must also ensure that the scholarships are awarded to those most in need and to a representative group of students. There is nothing transformative in supporting students from the Global South, who would be able to finance the education themselves even without the scholarship.

Ensuring equity in scholarships is most easily achieved by distributing them on a need-based basis that pays careful attention to marginalised groups such as persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities and indigenous people.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

A number of donor countries rely heavily on scholarships to boost their Official Development Aid (ODA). With increased attention to the UN's recommendation that 0.7 percentage of the GNI should be allocated to ODA we worry that the tendency will only increase, but we simply cannot accept that scholarships should be counted as ODA, since historically the donating countries are the ones who benefit the most, and it will harm the equitable approach to scholarships.

Therefore, we recommend that need-based scholarships are created and not counted in the ODA contributions.

Accountability

We believe the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes the SDGs, places too little emphasis on accountability. Civil society fought hard for mechanisms for monitoring and accountability but Member States ultimately refused to include this in the final agreement. If we are to be successful in realising the full education agenda we must have sufficient and robust evaluation mechanisms in place that holds States to account for their commitments.

Only through cooperation between Governments and civil society will we be able to achieve the ambitious targets of the SDGs we set out to meet. Teachers, academics, university and student unions have an essential role to play in developing new policies and ensuring the successful implementation of these policies. Therefore unions must be part of all decision-making processes, as well as potential national evaluation and review-mechanisms.

Civil society must take it upon themselves to strengthen the existing evaluation mechanism of the SDGs by collecting data and examples of non-compliance.

To this end, national data collection and data collection under the Bologna Process must be strengthened. It is important that we not only collect more data, but that we also find more meaningful ways of measuring terms such as quality, access, and soft skills. National unions have a clear mandate in engaging themselves with statistical offices, as well as other professionals, to help redefine how we measure the value of quality education.

At the same time, we must also ensure that the development agenda is not misused to justify regressive policies that have no effect, or worse is directly counter-productive to the agreed targets. How this challenge is solved remains unclear, but national unions are encouraged to collect stories for a black book that can be used to raise awareness around abuse of the education development agenda.

Conclusions

These are our eight priorities for quality secondary and tertiary education in Europe. However, SDG4 is an ambitious goal with equally ambitious targets, and there are probably many other priorities at national level.

We believe these eight priorities form a strong basis for cooperation and urge you to work in collaboration with other stakeholders at national level.

To do so we have gathered a list of all national members of OBESSU, ESU and EI respectively for you to use to unite for equitable quality education for all at national level. Experiences from the past 15 years have shown us that we need a strong European-wide movement in order to advance secondary and higher education and ensure the full implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Contact information for unions

ESU—The European Students' Union is the umbrella organisation of 45 National Unions of Students (NUS) from 38 countries. The NUSes are open to all students in their respective country regardless of political persuasion, religion, ethnic or cultural origin, sexual orientation or social standing. Our members are also student-run, autonomous, representative and operate according to democratic principles.

ESU was formerly known as ESIB—The National Union of Students in Europe. ESU's name and image is legally being used by ESIB asbl, BE-890.019.936, Rue de l'Industrie 10, 1000 Brussels (Belgium).

You can find the full list and more information on each of our Member Organisations at: www.esu-online.org/about/members

MEMBERS OF THE EUROPEAN STUDENTS' UNION

ARMENIA

Armenia Armenia National Students Association (ANSA)
ansa@esu-online.org | www.ansa.am

AUSTRIA

Austria Österreichische HochschülerInnenschaft (ÖH)
oh@esu-online.org | www.oeh.ac.at

AZERBAIJAN

Azerbaijan Azerbaijan Students Union (ASU)
asu@esu-online.org | www.asu.az

Azerbaijan Student Youth Organisations' Union (ASYOU)
asyou@esu-online.org | www.atgti.az

BELARUS

Belarus Belarus Student Association (BSA)
bsa@esu-online.org | www.studentby.org

BELGIUM

Belgium Fédération Des Etudiants Francophones (FEF)
fef@esu-online.org | www.fef.be

Belgium Vlaamse Vereniging van Studenten (VVS)
vva@esu-online.org | www.vvs.ac

BULGARIA

Bulgaria Bulgaria Barski Studentski (UBS)
ubs@esu-online.org

Bulgaria Nacionalno Predstavitelstvo na
Studentskite Saveti v Republika Balgaria
(NASC)
nasc@esu-online.org | www.npss.bg

BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

Bosnia & Herzegovina Unija Studenata
Republike Srpske (SURS)
surs@esu-online.org | <http://www.su-rs.org>

CROATIA

Croatia Hrvatski Studentski Zbor (CSC)
csc@esu-online.org | www.hsz.hr

CYPRUS

Cyprus Pagkypria Omospondia Foititikon
Enoseon (POFEN)
pofen@esu-online.org | www.pofen.org.cy

CZECH REPUBLIC

Czech Republic Studentská Komora Rady
Vysokých Škol (SKRVS)
skrvs@esu-online.org | www.skrvs.cz

DENMARK

Denmark Danske Studerendes Fællesråd
(DSF)
dsf@esu-online.org | www.dsfnat.dk

ESTONIA

Estonia Eesti Üliõpilaskondade Liit (EÜL)
eul@esu-online.org | www.eyl.ee

FINLAND

Finland Suomen ammattikorkeakou-
luopiskelijakuntien liitto (SAMOK)
Samok@esu-online.org | www.samok.fi

Finland Suomen Ylioppilaskuntien Liitto
(SYL)
Syl@esu-online.org | www.syl.fi

FRANCE

Fédération des Associations Générales
D'Etudiants (FAGE)
fage@esu-online.org | www.fage.org

Union Nationale des Etudiants de France
(UNEF)
unef@esu-online.org | www.unef.fr

GERMANY

Freie Zusammenschluss von StudentInnen-
schaften (FZS)
fzs@esu-online.org | www.fzs.de

HUNGARY

Hallgatói Önkormányzatok Országos
Konferenciája (HÖÖK)
hook@esu-online.org | www.hook.hu

ICELAND

Iceland Stúdentaráð Háskóla Íslands (SHÍ)
shi@esu-online.org | www.shi.hi.is

IRELAND

Ireland Union of Students in Ireland (USI)
usi@esu-online.org | www.usi.ie

ISRAEL

Israel National Union of Israeli Students
 (NUIS)
nuis@esu-online.org | www.nuis.co.il

ITALY

Italy Unione degli Universitari (UdU)
udu@esu-online.org | www.udu.it

LATVIA

Latvia Latvijas Studentu Apvieniba (LSA)
lsa@esu-online.org | www.lsa.lv

LITHUANIA

Lithuania Lietuvos Studentu Sajunga
 (LSS)
lss@esu-online.org | www.lss.lt

LUXEMBOURG

Luxembourg Union Nationale des
 Etudiant(e)s du Luxembourg (UNEL)
unel@esu-online.org | www.unel.lu

MACEDONIA

Macedonia National Student Union of
 Macedonia (NSUM)
nsum@esu-online.org

MALTA

Malta Kunsill Studenti Universitarji (KSU)
ksu@esu-online.org | www.ksu.org.mt

NETHERLANDS

Netherlands Interstedelijk Studenten
 Overleg (ISO)
iso@esu-online.org | www.student.no

Netherlands Landelijke Studenten
 Vakbond (LSVb)
lsvb@esu-online.org | www.lsvb.nl

NORWAY

Norway Norsk Studentorganisasjon
 (NSO)
nso@esu-online.org | www.student.no

POLAND

Poland Parlament Studentów Rzeczypo-
 spolitej Polskiej (PSRP)
psrp@esu-online.org | www.psrp.org.pl

PORTUGAL

Portugal Fórum Académico para a Infor-
 mação e Representação Externa (FAIRE)
faire@esu-online.org | www.faire.pt

ROMANIA

Romania Alianța Națională a Organ-
 izațiilor Studentești din România (ANOSR)
anosr@esu-online.org | www.anosr.ro

SERBIA1

Serbia Studentska Unija Srbije (SUS)
sus@esu-online.org | www.sus.org.rs

Serbia Student Conference of Serbian Universities (SKONUS)
skonus@esu-online.org | www.skonus.org

SLOVAKIA

Slovakia Študentská Rada Vysokých škôl (SRVS)
srvs@esu-online.org | www.srvs.sk

SLOVENIA

Slovenia Studenska Organizacija Slovenije (SSU)
ssu@esu-online.org
www.studentska-org.si

SPAIN

Spain Coordinadora de Representantes de Estudiantes de Universidades Públicas (CREUP)
creup@esu-online.org | www.creup.es

SWEDEN

Sweden Sveriges Förenade Studentkårer (SFS)
sfs@esu-online.org | www.sfs.se

SWITZERLAND

Switzerland Verband der Schweizer Studierendenschaften (VSS-UNES-USU)
vss-unes-usu@esu-online.org
www.vss-unes.ch

UKRAINE

Ukraine Ukrainian Association of Student Self-government (UASS)
uass@esu-online.org | www.uass.org.ua

UK

UK National Union of Students (NUS-UK)
nusuk@esu-online.org | www.nus.org.uk

MEMBERS OF EDUCATION INTERNATIONAL—EUROPEAN REGION

ALBANIA

Independent Trade Union of Education of Albania (SPASH-ITUEA)
bspsh@albmail.com | www.fsash-spash.com

Trade Union Federation of Education and Science of Albania (FSASH)
fsash@abcom-al.com | fsash@icc-al.org
www.fsash-spash.com

ARMENIA

Branch Republican Union of Trade Union Organizations Workers of Education and Science of Armenia (CRSTESA)
armeducate@gmail.com

Comité Syndical National des Travailleurs de la Culture Physique (du Sport et du Tourisme) (CPCST)
cpcst_@mail.ru

AUSTRIA

Gewerkschaft Öffentlicher Dienst (GÖD)
helmut.skala@aon.at | www.goed.at

AZERBAIJAN

Independent Trade Union of Education Workers of the Azerbaijan Republic (AITUCEW)
atiahir@mail.ru

BELARUS

Belarusian Trade Union of Workers of Education and Science (BTUWES)
wr@estu.by | www.estu.by

BELGIUM

Onderwijs (ACOD)
onderwijs@acod.be
www.acodonderwijs.be

Centrale Générale des Services Publics Enseignement (FGTB-CGSP)
enseignement@cgsp.be | www.cgsp.be

ACV-Openbare Diensten/CSC-Services publics (ACV-OD/CSC-SP)
luc.hamelinck@acv-csc.be
www.openbarediensten.acv-online.be
www.ccsp.be

Christelijke Onderwijscentrale (COC)
coc.brussel@acv-csc.be | www.coc.be

Christelijk Onderwijzersverbond (COV)
cov@acv-csc.be | www.cov.be

Confédération des Syndicats Chrétiens de l'Enseignement (CSC-Enseignement)
csc.Enseignement@acv-csc.be

Syndicat Libre de la Fonction Publique—Vrij Syndicaat van het Openbaar Ambt (SLFP - VSOA)
sfp@slfp.eu | www.slfp.be

BOSNIA HERZEGOVINA

Higher Education and Science Union of Employees of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HESUEBH)

dervisfpihura@gmail.com

Trade Union of Secondary and Highly Education (TUSHENSC)

ssvoonkbih@bih.net.ba

Trade Union of Education, Science and Culture of Republika Srpska (TUESCRS)

onk@inecco.net

BULGARIA

Syndicat des Enseignants Bulgares (SEB)

sbu_centrala@abv.bg | www.sbug.bg

Syndicat des Enseignants Podkrepa (PODKREPA)

teachers@podkrepa.org

www.podkrepa-obrazovanie.com

CROATIA

Croatian Teachers' Union (CTU)

sindikats@shu.hr

Independent Trade Union of Workers in Secondary Education of Croatia (ITUWEC)

nszssh@nszssh.hr | www.nszssh.hr

Independent Union of Research and Higher Education Employees of Croatia (IURHEEC)

uprava@nsz.hr | www.nsz.hr

CYPRUS

Cyprus Turkish Secondary Education Teachers' Union (KTOEOS)

info@ktoeos.com | www.ktoeos.com

Cyprus Turkish Teachers' Trade Union (KTOS)

ktos@ktos.org | www.ktos.org

Organisation of Secondary School Teachers of Cyprus (OELMEK)

info@oelmek.com.cy

www.oelmek.com.cy

Association of Teachers of Technical Education Cyprus (OLTEK)

oltek.t@cytanet.com.cy

Cyprus Greek Teachers' Organisation (POED)

poed@cytanet.com.cy

Eastern Mediterranean University Union of Academic Staff (DAÜ-SEN)

dausen@emu.edu.tr

www.emu.edu.tr/dausen

CZECH REPUBLIC

Czech and Moravian Trade Union of Workers in Education (CMOS-PS)

cmos.skolstvi@cmkos.cz

DENMARK

The Danish Union of Teachers (DLF)
dlf@dlf.org | www.dlf.org

Dansk Magisterforening (DM)
dm@dm.dk | www.dm.dk

Uddannelsesforbundet
info@uddannelsesforbundet.dk
www.uddannelsesforbundet.dk

Gymnasieskolernes Lærerforening (GL)
gl@gl.org | www.gl.org

ESTONIA

Estonian Educational Personnel Union (EPU)
ehl@ehl.org.ee | www.ehl.org.ee

Federation of the Estonian Universities,
 Institutions of Science, Research and
 Development (UNIVERSITAS)
universitas@universitas.ee
www.universitas.ee

FINLAND

Finnish Union of University Professors (FUUP)
professoriliitto@professoriliitto.fi
www.professoriliitto.fi

Finnish Union of University Researchers
 and Teachers (FUURT)
riku.matilainen@tieteentekijoidenliitto.fi
kirsti.sintonen@acatiimi.fi
www.tieteentekijoidenliitto.fi

Opetusalan Ammattijärjestö (OAJ)
oaj@oaj.fi | www.oaj.fi

FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

Trade Union for Education, Science and
 Culture in the Republic of Macedonia
 (SONK)
sonk@sonk.org.mk | www.sonk.org.mk

FRANCE

Fédération Formation et Enseignement
 Privés (FEP-CFDT)
contact@fep-cfdt.fr | www.fep-cfdt.fr

Fédération CGT de l'Éducation, de la
 Recherche et de la Culture (FERC-CGT)
ferc@cgt.fr | www.ferc.cgt.fr

Fédération Nationale de l'Enseignement,
 de la Culture et de la Formation Profes-
 sionnelle Force Ouvrière (FNEC.FP-FO)
fnecfp@fo-fnecfp.fr

Fédération des Syndicats Généraux de
 l'Éducation Nationale et de la Recherche
 (SGEN-CFDT)
fede@sgen-cfdt.org | www.sgen-cfdt.org

Syndicat National des Chercheurs
 Scientifiques (SNCS)
sncs@cnrs-bellevue.fr | www.sncs.fr

Syndicat National des Enseignements de
 Second Degré (SNES-FSU)
internat@snés.edu | secgenez@snés.edu
www.snés.edu

Syndicat National de l'Enseignement
 Supérieur (SNESUP-FSU)
international@snésup.fr; sdp@snésup.fr
www.snésup.fr

Syndicat National de l'Enseignement Technique Actio Autonome (SNETAA-FO)
snetaanat@aol.com | www.snetaa.org

Syndicat National Unitaire des instituteurs, professeurs des écoles et PEGC (SNUipp-FSU)
snuipp@snuipp.fr | www.snuipp.fr

UNSA-Education
national@unsa-education.org
www.unsa-education.org

GEORGIA

Educators and Scientists Free Trade Union of Georgia (ESFTUG)
esftuggeorgia@gmail.com
www.educator.ge

GERMANY

Bundesverband der Lehrerinnen und Lehrer an Beruflichen Schulen (BLBS)
verband@blbs.de | www.blbs.de

Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft (GEW)
info@gew.de | gew-international@gew.de
www.gew.de

Verband Bildung und Erziehung (VBE)
bundesverband@vbe.de | www.vbe.de

GREECE

Federation of Secondary School Teachers of Greece (OLME)
olme@otenet.gr | www.olme.gr

Hellenic Federation of University Teachers' Associations (POSDEP)
posdep@posdep.gr | www.posdep.gr

HUNGARY

Trade Union of Employees in Higher Education (FDSZ)
fdsz@fdsz.hu | www.fdsz.hu

Teachers' Democratic Union of Hungary (PDSZ)
pdsz@t-online.hu | www.pdsz.hu

Syndicat des Enseignants de Hongrie (SEH)
psz@pedagogusok.hu
www.pedagogusok.hu

Democratic Trade Union of Scientific Workers (TDDSZ)
szecsenyi.tibor@quantil.hu

Workers Councils' Teacher Branch (KPSZ-KPT)
www.munkastanacsok.hu

ICELAND

Kennarasamband Islands (KI)
ki@ki.is | www.ki.is

IRELAND

Association of Secondary Teachers,
Ireland (ASTI)

info@asti.ie | www.asti.ie

Irish Federation of University Teachers
(IFUT)

ifut@eircom.net | www.ifut.ie

Irish National Teachers' Organisation
(INTO)

info@into.ie | www.into.ie

Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI)

tui@tui.ie | www.tui.ie

ITALY

CISL-Scuola (CISL-S)

cislscuola@cisl.it | www.cislscuola.it

Federazione Lavoratori della Conoscenza
CGIL (FLC-CGIL)

organizzazione@flcgil.it | www.flcgil.it

Scuola (UIL)

segreteria@uilscuola.it
www.uilscuola.it

LATVIA

Latvian Educational and Scientific
Workers' Trade Union (LIZDA)

lizda@lizda.lv | www.lizda.lv

LITHUANIA

Lithuanian Teachers' Union (LMPS)

lmeps@takas.lt | www.lmeps.lt

Lithuanian Education Employees Trade
Union (LEETU)

vk@lsdps.lt | www.lsdps.lt

Federation of Lithuanian Education and
Science Trade Unions (FLESTU)

info@svietimoprofsajunga.lt

Christian Trade Union of Education
Workers (CTUEW)

ldforg@ldf.lt | www.ldf.lt

LUXEMBURG

Syndicat Education et Sciences/Onof-
hangege Gewerkschaftsbond Letzte-
burg (SEW-OGBL)

sew@ogb-l.lu | www.sew.lu

Syndicat National des Enseignants (SNE)

sne@education.lu | www.sne.lu

MALTA

Malta Union of Teachers (MUT)

info@mut.org.mt | www.mut.org.mt

MOLDOVA

Education and Science Trade Union
Federation from Moldova (ESTUFM)

sinded@mail.ru

MONTENEGRO

Trade Union of Education of Montenegro (TUEM)

spcg@spcg.me | www.prosvjetasind.co.me

NETHERLANDS

Algemene Onderwijsbond (AOB)

beleid@aob.nl | www.aob.nl

CNV Onderwijs (CNVO)

info@cnvo.nl | www.cnvo.nl

NORWAY

Norwegian Association of Researchers (NAR)

post@forskerforbundet.no
www.forskerforbundet.no

Skolenes Landsforbund (SL)

skolenes@skolenes.no
www.skoleneslandsforbund.no

Utdanningsforbundet/Union of Education Norway (UEN)

post@utdanningsforbundet.no
www.utdanningsforbundet.no

POLAND

National Science Section NSZZ, “Solidarność”, KSN “Solidarność”

ksn@interia.pl | www.solidarnosc.org.pl

National Education Section NSZZ “Solidarność”, SKOIW “Solidarność”

edukacja@solidarnosc.org.pl
www.solidarnosc.org.pl

Związek Nauczycielstwa Polskiego (ZNP)
znp@znp.edu.pl | www.znp.edu.pl

PORTUGAL

Federação Nacional dos Professores (FENPROF)

fenprof@fenprof.pt | www.fenprof.pt

Federação Nacional dos Sindicatos da Educação (FNE)

secretariado@fne.pt | www.fne.pt

Sindicato Nacional e Democrático dos Professores (SINDEP)

carloschagas@netcabo.pt
gabestudos@netcabo.pt

ROMANIA

Fédération des Syndicats Libres de l'Enseignement (FSLE)

fsli@upcmail.ro | www.fsli.ro

Federația Națională Sindicală (ALMA-MATER)

secretaram@ucp.ro | www.almamater.ro

RUSSIA

Education and Science Employees' Union of Russia (ESEUR)

eseur15@gmail.com | www.ed-union.ru

SERBIA

Employees in Science and Research of Serbia (SSS-Serbia)

djurdjica@imi.bg.ac.rs | nauka@sindikats.rs

Nezavisnost Teachers Trade Union
(NTTU)

ugsprosv@eunet.rs

www.nezavisnost.org.yu

Teachers Union of Serbia (TUS)

obrazovanje@sindikats.rs

www.sind-obr.org.yu

The Union of Education, Science and
Culture of Kosova (UESCK-SBASHK)

sbashk2004@yahoo.com

jehonao@gmail.com

SLOVAKIA

Trade Union of Workers in Education &
Science (OZPŠaV)

ondek@ozpsav.sk

Union of Education and Science Workers
of the Independent Christian Trade
Unions of Slovakia (ZPŠaV NKOS)

zpsav_nkos@centrum.sk

SLOVENIA

Education and Science Trade Union of
Slovenia (ESTUS)

info@sviz.si | www.sviz.si

SPAIN

Confederación Intersindical Galega
(CIG-ENSINO)

galiza@cig-ensino.org

www.cig-ensino.org

Federación de la Enseñanza del Sindikato
ELA/STV (IFE/ELA)

irakasbilbo@elasind.org

Federación de Trabajadores de la
Enseñanza de la UGT (FETE/UGT)

ugt@fete.ugt.org | www.feteugt.es

Confederación de Sindicatos de Traba-
jadoras y Trabajadores de la Enseñanza—
Intersindical (STEs-Intersindical)

stes@stes.es | www.stes.es

Federación de Enseñanza CC.OO.
(F.E.CC.OO.)

fe@fe.ccoo.es | www.fe.ccoo.es

Central Sindical Independiente y Sindical
de Funcionarios, Sector de Enseñanza
(CSI-CSIF)

ense001@csi-f.es | www.csi-f.es

Federación de Enseñanza de la Unión
Sindical Obrera (FE-USO)

f.ense@feuso.es | www.feuso.es

SWEDEN

Swedish Teachers' Union/Läraryrket

kansli@lararforbundet.se

www.lararforbundet.se

Lärarnas Riksförbund (LR)

lr@lr.se | www.lr.se

Swedish Association of University
Teachers (SULF)

kansli@sulf.se | www.sulf.se

SWITZERLAND

Dachverband Schweizer Lehrerinnen und Lehrer (LCH)

info@lch.ch | www.lch.ch

Syndicat des Enseignants Romands (SER)

ser@le-ser.ch | www.le-ser.ch

Schweizerischer Verband des Personals Öffentlicher Dienste (VPOD)

vpod@vpod-ssp.ch | www.vpod.ch

TURKEY

Syndicat des Fonctionnaires Publics du Secteur d'Education (EGITIM-SEN)

international@egitimsen.org.tr
www.egitimsen.org.tr

UNITED KINGDOM

Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL)

info@atl.org.uk | www.askatl.org.uk

Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS)

enquiries@eis.org.uk | www.eis.org.uk

The Teachers' Union (NASUWT)

nasuwt@mail.nasuwt.org.uk
www.nasuwt.org.uk

University and College Union (UCU)

hq@ucu.org.uk | www.ucu.org.uk

National Union of Teachers (NUT)

enquiries@nut.org.uk
www.teachers.org.uk

Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association (SSTA)

info@ssta.org.uk | www.ssta.org.uk

Ulster Teachers' Union (UTU-UK)

office@utu.edu | www.utu.edu

UKRAINE

Free Trade Union of Education and Science of Ukraine (VPONU)

info@kvpu.org.ua

Trade Union of Education and Science Workers of Ukraine (TUESWU)

trukhanov.g@gmail.com

MEMBERS OF ORGANISING BUREAU OF EUROPEAN SCHOOL STUDENT UNIONS

OBESSU—The Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions is the platform for cooperation between the national school student unions active in general secondary and secondary vocational education in Europe. It was founded in April 1975 in Dublin, Ireland and brings together 27 Member, Candidate and Affiliate Organisations from 22 countries all over Europe. All Member Organisations are independent, national, representative and democratic school student organisations.

You can find the full list and more information on each of our Member Organisations at: www.obessu.org/members-list

AUSTRIA

Aktion Kritischer Schüler_innen (AKS)
aks@aks.at | www.aks.at

BELGIUM

Vlaamse Scholierenkoepel (VSK)
info@vsknet.be | www.vsknet.be

BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

Asocijacija Srednjoškolaca u Bosni i Hercegovini (ASuBiH)
asubih@yahoo.com | www.asubih.ba

BULGARIA

Bulgarian School Student Union (BSSU)
n_u_s@abv.bg | www.nusbg.weebly.com

CZECH REPUBLIC

Česká středoškolská unie (CSU)
kancelar@stredoskolskaunie.cz
www.stredoskolskaunie.cz

DENMARK

Danske Gymnasieelevers
Sammenslutning (DGS)
kontakt@dgsnet.dk
international@dgsnet.dk
www.dgsnet.dk

Erhversskolernes Elev-Organisation (EEO)
eeo@eeo.dk | www.eeo.dk

Landssammenslutningen af
Handelskoleelever (LH)
lh@handelselever.dk
www.handelselever.dk

ESTONIA

Eesti õpilasesinduste liit/Estonian School
Student Councils' Union (ESCU)
opilasliit@opilasliit.ee | opilasliit.ee

FINLAND

Finlands Svenska
Skolungdomsförbundet (FSS)
kansliet@skolungdom.fi
www.skolungdom.fi

Suomen Lukiolaisten Liitto (SLL)
toimisto@lukio.fi | www.lukio.fi

Suomen Ammattiin Opiskelevat (SAKKI)
toimistosihiteeri@sakkinet.fi
www.sakkinet.fi

FRANCE

Union Nationale Lycéenne (UNL)
contact@unl-fr.org | www.unl-fr.org

GERMANY

SV-Bildungswerk e.V. (SVB)
kontakt@sv-bildungswerk.de
www.sv-bildungswerk.de

ICELAND

Samband Íslenskra Framhaldsskólanema
(SIF)
neminn@neminn.is | www.neminn.is

IRELAND

Irish Secondary Students' Union (ISSU)
studentvoice@issu.ie | www.issu.ie

ITALY

Unione degli Studenti (UDS)
unionedeglistudenti@gmail.com
www.unionedeglistudenti.net/sito

KOSOVO

Kosovar Youth Council (KYC)
kyckosova@yahoo.com | www.kyc-ks.org

LITHUANIA

Lithuanian School Student Union (LMS)
lms@moksleiviai.lt | www.moksleiviai.lt

LUXEMBOURG

Union Nationale des élèves et
étudiant(e)s du Luxembourg (UNEL)
info@unel.lu | www.unel.lu

ROMANIA

Româniai Magyar Középiskolások
szövetsége (MAKOSZ)
office@makosz.ro | www.makosz.ro

Consiliul Național al Elevilor (CNE)
contact@consiliulelevilor.org
www.consiliulelevilor.org

SERBIA

Unija srednjoskolaca Srbije/Union of
secondary school students of Serbia
(UNSS)
unss@srednjoskolci.org.rs
www.srednjoskolci.org.rs

SLOVAKIA

Stredoškolská študentská únia Slovenska
(SUS)
suska@suskaweb.sk
www.studentskaunia.com

SLOVENIA

Dijaška organizacija Slovenije/School
Students organisation of Slovenia (DOS)

predsedstvo@dijska.org

www.dijaska.org

SPAIN

Confederación Estatal de Asociaciones
de Estudiantes (CANAE)

info@canae.org | www.canae.org

SWITZERLAND

Union der Schülerorganisationen CH/FL
(USO)

info@uso.ch | www.uso.ch

ISBN 978-94-9125604-2