



ESU's response to the new Skills Agenda for Europe

The European Students' Union (ESU) underlines the importance of equitable access to all education levels in developing life-long skills for employability and active citizenship. The EU and its member states should live up to their commitments to ensure proper financial support and support throughout the learning process to reach the aims described in the New Skills Agenda.

ESU is deeply concerned that these proposals are looked upon mainly from a perspective of the labour market, not paying enough attention to the the point of view of the education sector and its role in building a more inclusive and equitable Europe alongside the Paris Declaration.

Skills Guarantee

ESU welcomes the Skills Guarantee initiative for low-skilled adults, especially the needs-based and flexible approach to learning processes. However, the Guarantee should be approached in the framework of lifelong learning, enabling transition between different education levels and further learning, including flexible pathways to higher education and empowering people to pursue higher education programmes.

Skills assessment and according training should also encompass transversal and soft skills equipping learners not only with skills for a narrowly defined profession, but enabling them to obtain wide spectrum of employability and citizenship skills. For the success of the initiative, it will be key to ensure that the learning offers proposed after the skills assessment are of wide variety, accessible and affordable.

Revision of the Key Competences Framework

ESU calls for a broad involvement of stakeholders in the revision of the Key Competences Framework, which dates back to 2006, to adapt it to the new realities and challenges that Europe faces. While promoting entrepreneurial and innovation-oriented mindsets is very

crucial, we should also emphasize as well social and civic responsibility and competences for democratic culture.

Public authorities need to ensure education and training is not only focused on employability outcomes but also on the societal aspects, like social inclusion, democratisation and participation. Otherwise our societies will continue to suffer from an increase of the extremism and radicalisation among our fellow citizens.

More learning opportunities and transition between education levels

With the strong focus that has been put on Vocational education and training (VET) in the Skills Agenda, it is key to ensure not only the attractiveness of VET, but also its accessibility by making it free of charge and ensuring financial support to students. Moreover, both member states and EU should ensure transparent and smooth transition between different education levels, including VET, short cycle and higher education degrees, according to the learning outcomes and qualifications.

Coalition for Digital Skills and Jobs

We welcome the Commission's proposal to involve national education stakeholders in establishing national digital skills coalitions. Student unions can largely contribute to identifying the current needs and challenges faced.

ESU would like to remind the EU and the member states that a first step will be to make ICT tools accessible and affordable, and to support education institutions in getting adequate digital equipment. Education institutions should explore digitisation policies, with respect to the mission of the institution and needs of its students, serving all different purposes of education.

Revision of the European Qualifications Framework

ESU very much welcomes the Commission's proposal for the revision of the European Qualifications Framework. As members of the advisory group, we have observed that there is room for improvement of this valuable tool.

We support the idea of having a regular update of the national qualification systems in order to ensure that the tool does not become outdated and obsolete. Thus,, EQF should take stock of the developments within other policy initiatives such as the Bologna Process and enable flexible learning paths between education sectors and levels. The involvement of stakeholders at European level have been very valuable, this practise should not only continue but also ensure that this is a reality at the national level.

The EQF should also facilitate the recognition of qualifications held by refugees, asylum seekers and other types of migrants in order to rapidly integrate them within our societies.

ESU calls upon all EU member states to fully implement the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which along with the EQF and qualifications frameworks from other countries, will facilitate and speed-up the recognition procedures. This is of particular importance when it comes to the recognition of qualifications held by refugees, asylum seekers and persons in a refugee-like situation.

Graduates tracking and labour market

The proposed tertiary education graduates' tracking system should be viewed critically, considering multiple purposes of higher education and not solely narrowing tertiary education down to the labour market outcomes. Otherwise this might lead towards unfair ranking systems undermining education institutions in regions with high unemployment or, even worse, jeopardizing them through performance-based funding systems when they might need the most.

Tracking systems should be used to better support students' access, progression and completion. This would help to ensure that graduates leave the education institutions adequately equipped with the skills needed to face rapidly changing environments.

Graduate tracking solely on labour market outcomes carries dangers to intrinsic values of higher education and might cause underfinancing to programmes that do not classify as economically relevant. That negatively affects access and quality of higher education.

Quality Framework for Apprenticeships

When it comes to the idea of setting up a possible Quality Framework for Apprenticeships, ESU would like to recall Commission's attention to the European Quality Charter on Internships and Apprenticeships (<http://qualityinternships.eu/>), an initiative of the European Youth Forum elaborated in close cooperation with ESU.

Mobility opportunities for students

To achieve 20% student mobility by 2020, the European Commission needs to commit to proper financial support through ERASMUS+ programme. The EU should support mobility through increasing grants rather than introducing loans and it must be one of the main focuses when evaluating the ERASMUS+ programme.

While the target is yet to be reached, there are serious concerns among students about who is able to access student mobility and develop various life skills through the experience. It is necessary to develop measures and incentives to increase mobility opportunities and eliminate obstacles for marginalised students.

Modernisation of learning and teaching

ESU positively views Commission's pledge in the Skills Agenda to pay particular attention on innovation in pedagogy and flexibility in curricula. ESU strongly encourages the EU to support member states in developing student-centred learning environments in order to address the needs of different learners and foster skills development.

The EU needs to use the financial tools, as well as facilitate peer learning platforms for implementation of student-centred learning, as well as flexible study pathways and curriculum. While the Skills Agenda calls for clear actions from EU and member states towards upskilling adults and revising key competences, it lacks action lines on education and training to back up the pledges made. ESU emphasizes that student-centred learning is one of the key tools to acquire skills and learning outcomes that are tailor made to learners' interests and needs.

Recognition of prior learning

ESU strongly supports further work on recognition of prior learning by the validation of informal and non-formal learning. Many member states still have not introduced recognition procedures, as it is required by the 2012 Council Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning. Students should be able to have their previous learning recognised, either formal, non-formal or informal, even if they do not hold a formally certified qualification providing access to a certain education programme. Furthermore, EU and member states should commit on eliminating obstacles for refugees and asylum seekers to access formal education.

Modernising higher education

ESU appreciates Commission's willingness to work together with stakeholders in their efforts to support the modernisation of higher education. In particular, regarding competence assessment frameworks, ESU would like to see those for better supporting students' learning and not as another tool for ranking programmes and institutions.