



BM71 - GDANSK

Statement on the role of education in promoting peaceful and cohesive societies

Europe today is facing the challenge of increasing inequality fostered by the economic crisis and fueled by austerity policies. This has resulted in many people feeling insecure, even fearful about their future and wellbeing. The atmosphere of fears and insecurities have in part created and led to a worrying increase in xenophobia, intolerance and extremist movements in many European countries.

Consequently, the number of politicians and societal movements that act and speak out against values of democracy, tolerance and solidarity is growing. This fosters hate speech that not only targets members of our society, but also the very idea of European unity. The focus is being drawn to separation instead of inclusion. A negative change has come out of fear and lack of understanding. Social exclusion and the lack of space for intercultural dialogue feeds radicalisation. This can lead to the justification of aggressive behavior, verbal or physical, towards persons not belonging to the locally defined majority of citizens. Given the fact that media coverage on the refugee crisis mainly focuses on the consequences, and not the context, a general climate of misinformation is prevalent throughout every layer of society.

Failure to fulfill the duties expected by a functional, just society, such as striving for a societal inclusion that disregards members' nationality, social status and background, has led to a worrying increase in the normalization of xenophobia and racism. Income, social status and housing opportunities among others, are directly related to differences in educational background within families and/or ethnic origin. Ultimately, the inequalities and presence of closed layers of society are a breeding ground for prejudices, alienation, a lack of critical thinking, and exclusive nationalism.

Education has a crucial role to play in society, and through developing knowledge and understanding of differences and shared values, and the promotion of inclusion, tolerance and valuing of diversity, education is essential to building social cohesion and reducing conflict. Through the use of education- both formal and informal- learners are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and understanding necessary to develop their behaviours and attitudes to ensure that human rights and fundamental freedoms are protected, and promoted, within society.

ESU takes a strong stand against any kind of violent or verbally aggressive extremism and condemns all kind of related violence and hate speech that counters or disrupts the values ESU stands for. ESU strongly believes that free and accessible education is a core tool to prevent extremist development and the spread of hate speech and related violence. Therefore, adequate and various measures need to be provided and actively disseminated to overcome fear, stereotypes, xenophobia and discrimination. ESU calls upon society to truly engage in the fight against extremism and confront the current events with the needed determination.

The European Students' Union (ESU) is being used to refer to "ESIB - The National Unions of Students in Europe" Belgian asbl BE0890.019.936, due to the fact that both legal entities are going through a merging process. Likewise the visual identity of ESU is being used instead of the one from ESIB.

ESU believes that an awareness of the importance of social inclusion is crucial to fighting back against the rise of extremism. Attending and participating in Education is not only supposed to give us certain skills, but also increases our understanding of the importance of being active and responsible citizens. We demand that higher education institutions, ministries of education, and political decision makers in higher education take a strong stand to ensure social inclusion, and engage in broadening access and diversifying the student population in order to ensure they are reflective of the societies within which they exist, as well as striving to become safer spaces for participation.

Additionally, student organizations need to take a critical look at their own structures and ways of work: Whose voices are heard and whose are left out. It is all organisations' responsibility to make everyone feel safe about participating. Education and student activism form an integral part of the positive development of civil society

Students' unions on both a local and national level have a crucial role to play on the promotion of integration and internationalisation at home, in order to challenge prejudices and stereotypes, by enabling the exchange of ideas and personal contacts between people.

Furthermore, ESU demands that Higher Education Institutions engage with all the other relevant actors to create more opportunities for internationalisation and mobility, as we are convinced that intercultural exchange fosters the deconstruction of stereotypes. Higher Education provides the needed space for intercultural learning and confronting biases; a diverse higher education community with diversity in both the student population, academic staff and curriculum fosters shared understanding and critical thinking that contributes to create a better society for all. ESU calls upon relevant stakeholders to put measures, including financial support, in place to ensure that Higher Education mirrors society and its diversity as the exchange of perspective both broadens out the horizon for each student, and increases the societal relevance of Higher Education.

ESU demands that Human Rights Education is embedded in all learning activities at higher education institutions, whilst at the same time we stress the need for a holistic approach throughout the entire educational pathway. The focus should be on how knowledge and skills can be used to promote human rights, and work for inclusive societies.

ESU believes that one of the main drivers for intolerance is misinformation. Therefore, we stress the need for academia to tackle misinformation about historical and geopolitical developments in order to create a possibility for informed discussion.

Expressing oneself freely and challenging social dogmata, exclusion and discrimination can only be realised if freedom of speech is guaranteed. In the context of a research based discourse which academia should commit to, academic freedom is of essential importance. However, the label of academic freedom shall not in any way be used to legitimize hate speech.

ESU believes that Higher education has a responsibility to equip students with a critical approach to sources, a diverse range of opinions and perspectives and communicative skills and mindset. This gains even more importance nowadays, as the diversification of the media outlets is increasing, resulting in a rise of echo chambers, where people on the one hand do not get exposed to opinions that differ or counter their own, and on the other, are unable to reflect on the sources of their information. ESU considers it a crucial task of higher education to combat the reflex to consider feelings as truth instead of facts, and to actively oppose the "post truth society" that is emerging.

ESU expects that Higher Education Institutions commit to actively follow up the Paris declaration by promoting its core values and concretely finding measures to ensure safe and inclusive participation. For instance one of the urgent measures to be put in place in order to achieve this is to ensure fair recognition of prior learning for refugees, asylum seekers and other displaced people.

ESU is convinced that education promotes and actively contributes to an inclusive and just society, and one that ensures societal cohesion - the best possible conditions for society to strive for. Therefore, ESU commits to constantly fighting for social inclusion in general and into higher education in particular. ESU commits to actively defending freedom of expression and academic freedom, also by speaking up when they are being used to justify hate speech. It is important to understand the role prejudices have in reinforcing patterns of public speech against vulnerable people. ESU also commits to putting its efforts and capacity building in becoming more inclusive and diverse, in order to promote understanding and multicultural dialogue. ESU members understand their roles as multipliers and change agents, in order to strive for equal and inclusive societies, both in their respective contexts, and in wider European society.

ESU firmly believes that education can and should be a tool for the promotion of peaceful and cohesive societies. As the umbrella organisation representing students in Europe, we reject the current discourse that chooses to address the rise in hate speech and extremism with an equally aggressive dialogue, and instead wish to promote the positive role education can play in developing just and peaceful societies. We call on others to stand with us in recognising the value and importance of education that promotes and develops active citizenship and peace, and which instils the values and beliefs necessary to build resilient societies.