Strategic Priorities 2018-2020

“Equal educational and social opportunities in an open and democratic Europe where students shape a sustainable future.”

- ESU’s vision

The new strategic priorities outline the objectives within ESU’s work areas for the three years of 2018 to 2020. Five specific objectives have been identified based on the cross-policy clusters. These are: Mobility and Internationalisation, Social Dimension, Quality of Higher Education, and Public Responsibility, Governance and Financing of Higher Education. ESU adopts a strategic priorities framework with long-term objectives to ensure the organisation is working towards a defined direction. ESU wants to work on necessary reforms for increased access and inclusivity in Higher Education, supported by an active role of students and equal participation in governance. ESU strives for an innovative learning environment, where education is not only a mean for employability, but most importantly a public good for the whole society. ESU strives to be an inclusive environment, where equity in participation and contribution is of utmost importance. ESU has set its strategic priorities as a cohesive vision, which is further detailed by the annual plans of work until the expiration of these priorities. Each plan of work establishes a clear link between its actions and the strategic priorities.

1. Necessary reforms for increased access and inclusivity in Higher Education

Today, we share the ambition of making higher education accessible for all, however, this is far from the reality. This manifests in the way that still big groups of potential students are left out from our higher education systems. Not only the right to study in itself, but also to benefit from the potentials of gaining intercultural competences, networks and experiences. Such an experience benefits from an international higher education funded by public means.

Therefore, ESU will focus on:
1.a Formalised and well-functioning procedures for fair recognition of prior learning, encompassing non-formal and informal learning, including non-documented when necessary.

1.b Strategies for balanced mobility and widened participation in the renewed Erasmus+ programme

1.c ESU works towards facilitating widened participation among students in higher education, most notably students from marginalized groups and students lacking representation. Such action is taken through fighting for publicly funded, free higher education.

1.d Concrete and research based policies for widening access to higher education, including equitable rights for completion. National access plans should become a widely implemented Bologna tool and its’ scope should be widened to include at least student support and measures to help completion.

2. Co-creation through meaningful participation

Building higher educational systems that are designed to meet future needs and are motivating for students as well as wider society requires the active participation of students. Only by listening to, and involving the ones experiencing and benefiting from higher education practices we can increase quality and reach ambitious targets in higher education and research. We view with concern and condemn seeing the decline of student participation in decision making bodies. ESU will work towards:

2.a Equal and meaningful engagement of students: students are full academic members and equal partners in all’ formal and informal decision-making bodies within HEIs and on the national level as a prerequisite for participation in the Bologna process.

2.b Students being co-creators of curricula and learning outcomes all across Europe to become a reality on the programme level.

2.c Member unions being supported in their involvement in European higher education policies. ESU will facilitate the work of an informal network of unions that are working with EU advocacy.

2.d A united global student voice.

3. Innovative learning environment
ESU is committed to developing or promoting existing innovative means of transforming the learning and teaching environment in order to make it truly and comprehensively student-centred. This entails fulfilling a role as advocate and of a facilitator of such transformation and this role is to be manifested by achieving the following goals:

3.a Student-centred learning and accompanying teaching competences, including language, pedagogical and didactical competes, and constant personal development of teachers, are being treated by the political and expert bodies as the priority, and by higher education institutions as a concrete approach to be implemented at all levels and in all elements of education.

3.b Quality assessment procedures are seeing implementation of SCL approach as one of the fundamental indicators of quality and an essential part of an effective learning and teaching process at all HEIs regardless their specificity and differences.

3.c Process of digitalisation of HE is performed in a way which leads to improved quality of education and a more student-centred learning and teaching process. Furthermore, digitalisation should not be used as a tool to reduce funding for education. On the contrary, implementing digitalisation in a quality enhancing way requires increased investment.

3.d Extra-curriculum activities of students which lead to acquiring of both generic and specific competencies are recognized through fair qualification-based assessment

3.e Easily accessible open educational resources are a political goal of HE policy-makers at the European level, as well as of stakeholders’ organizations, and are being actively promoted and supported by these organizations.

4. Increase the value of multiple purposes of education

As students enrolled in Higher Education we need to achieve knowledge and understanding of our surrounding society and rights, enabling us to be a greater part of the knowledge society. We take responsibility and aim to make our knowledge universally accessible. For this we need to put higher emphasis on the necessary tools to gain in-depth understanding of what we know outside formal education and how it can be used in a changing world for the public good. In recent years there has been an increased focus on education as mainly an instrument for employment. This is problematic as it neglects the multiple purposes of education and often leads to commodifying policies. As adapting to the fast changing and challenging environment around us stays important, as well as gaining competences that can be beneficial for entering into the job market, the purposes of education must remain wider, public
and must give us relevant abilities to also change the circumstances we find ourselves in.

4.a Equal rights and remuneration for the same work is given to students as to other workers regardless of whether the work is done as part of a learning experience or not.

4.b The importance of independent research and accompanying funding necessary for carrying it out, is recognized in the national and European-level funding schemes.

4.c ESU is strongly involved in movements which promote evidence-based arguments in the political discourse.

4.d HEIs and policymakers are treating democratic competencies as equally important as other benefits of Higher Education.

4.e Within the Bologna process there is stronger emphasis on compliance with, and support of, the fundamental values of EHEA. These values are a prerequisite for participation in the Bologna Process.

4.f Monitoring commodification tendencies in the European Higher Education Area and supporting initiatives which combat commodification.

5. Social Dimension: Addressing the living conditions of students

We recognize that society and higher education are mutually dependent. Therefore, the concerns of students encompass unequal structures in our societies. Some people are more likely to access and excel in higher education by virtue of the advantages they have in society alone. Hence, it is paramount to challenge these structures and engage in policy making processes which relate to the social dimension of learning and the conditions around it.

5.a The financial situation of students is often precarious. ESU will strongly involve itself in movements countering this intolerable situation. ESU will lobby for state-funded support systems for all students which ensure equitable access to higher education.

5.b It is important that students with disabilities or health issues, including mental health, get the support they need to succeed in their studies. ESU will advocate for broad access to specific support, health and mental health support for students and provide NUSs with lobbying and advocacy tools.

5.c ESU opposes all forms of existing and planned tuition fees as they are a barrier toward the access to higher education. ESU will act in its capacity to support protests against tuition fees.
5.d The structural disadvantages students with different backgrounds are facing, entering and excelling in higher education, must be made visible and taken into account in decision-making processes.

6. An inclusive European Students’ Union: equity in participation and contribution

At ESU BM72 a membership strategy was approved. Throughout the process of implementation, we need to strategically steer ESU to improve its relevance and inclusiveness for the members to grow stronger within the organisation. We need to develop new ways of participation in ESU events that are accessible to all members and their representatives. ESU will also improve the communication between ESU and NUSs in order to make ESU more inclusive. Through the following measures, we make ESU participation more meaningful:

6.a ESU creates new ways of participation using, for instance, digitalization to improve accessibility. Inclusiveness is increased by consulting all ESU full- and candidate members when crafting (policy) documents, strategies and plan of works and making the process itself more transparent. ESU keeps members active by communicating and by providing them clear goals for lobbying and advocacy.

6.b Increased interaction and collaboration between members and ESUs activities through a larger number of participants in internal working bodies, candidates running in the elections and increased level of responsiveness.

6.c Structured fora for efficient and widely used exchange of information and experiences between members within different fields which can help all members to achieve policy goals.

6.d In order to enrich the organisation increased capacity building for ESU s/elected representatives is taking place.

6.e The organization should place more emphasis on the working conditions and structures in which its representatives and staff operate. There are high standards expected of those representing students on an international level, yet they are not fully supported while doing so. ESU will evaluate aspects of these conditions, and internal and organisational structures and present the Board with concrete plans to improve these.

6.f Making ESU more inclusive and promoting an open collaborative working environment. This includes but is not limited to emphasis on mental health and accessibility for first time participants and people of all gender identities. And also, ESU needs to continue working to take sufficient actions to create a zero-tolerance environment for harassment within its activities.