

Statement on The Future of Education in Europe and a prospective European Education Area

ESU acknowledges that the vision of the European Education Area to be established by 2025 includes a thorough consideration of several key actions for achieving very ambitious goals.

Nevertheless, we call on the European Union not to restrict cooperation within education only for the EU member states, but to develop the initiative in alignment with, but not replacing the already existing European Higher Education Area with respect to all Bologna commitments. It is also essential that the EU continues to support education reforms in non-EU European countries, as well as by finding a way to have these states engaged in the prospective EEA. We firmly believe that education in Europe does not need any borders.

Students' participation in HE governance, recognised as one of the fundamental values of the Bologna process, is crucial to ensure that needs of students are in the centre of any reforms. Therefore, we expect that the EEA processes will be centred on the real needs of students, and that inclusion of students in decision-making and implementation will be ensured.

After years of an almost exclusive focus on employment and economic growth as the supposedly main aims for HE, the European Union finally acknowledged the importance of social rights. ESU acknowledges that one of the foundations of the EEA is a pillar of social rights. We strongly believe that social inclusion should become an aim of primary importance for the EU in all areas that affect education, such as migration laws, support for marginalized groups and lifelong learning.

Accessible and inclusive mobility

Making mobility a reality for all is much broader than a push for paperless Erasmus - it is a significant responsibility, especially in the post 2020 MFF. While significantly increasing or doubling the amount of people who participate in mobility is a goal ESU wholly agrees with, paying special attention to groups currently underrepresented in mobility is a must.

Mobility has a huge significance on the future of students affecting their future socio-economic status. However students do not have equitable access to mobility opportunities. The most common pitfalls regarding international mobility do not stem from difficulties with bureaucracy or document hurdles, as is often believed, but from lack of funds and support for students in mobility.

These issues are compounded for non-traditional learners, e.g. students with disabilities, mental health issues, older students, students with dependents and students from other marginalized groups. Students with disabilities currently make up a minuscule part of all students engaging in international mobility. This ever present situation does not align with the principles of Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

ESU recommends increasing the Erasmus-successor programme budget tenfold. ESU further recommends paying special attention to students from marginalized groups, both in regards to funding, grants and programme design.

ESU also requests that the Erasmus+ grants cover the living and study costs of the host countries, and that the amount of the grants are based on the cost of life of each Erasmus+ participant country, however it shall never lead to a decrease in the amount of Erasmus+ grants given.

European Student Card

The procedural challenges of transferring personal information from one institution to the other remains a barrier against mobility, therefore ESU welcomes initiatives to ease the burdens put on students when moving from one institution to another. Any solution needs to emphasise protection of individual data and not result in personal information being shared without consent. Use and limits to data sharing should be transparent and limited to the minimum required for registration and access. Students should be the owners of their own data. Higher education institutions shall never use this data in a way that negatively impacts students.

The possibility of a paperless Erasmus can have positive effects, but a card isn't required to achieve those goals. In any case the European Student Card should not be introduced by moving ownership of (existing) student cards to the European level, nor by streamlining local solutions. Student cards are often crucial in service infrastructures and student ecosystems. Organisations run by students are frequently responsible for the creation and distribution of the student cards specifically designed to accommodate for the needs and local circumstances of its student population.

ESU does not support changing these existing systems without consent and involvement from the local students. Changing these systems top-down essentially and critically harms student self-governance.

ESU demands that students in mobility have access to the same rights as domestic students in the host country. ESU further demands the creation of the "status of European student", valid for all students in Europe (possibly the EHEA) both at home and during mobility periods, to which a core of common rights is associated. These rights shall be exercisable across Europe, and should not limit already existing rights, but rather it should create a common basis which all European countries should implement in partnership with their students locally and with the robust involvement of national unions, enshrining student participation.

ESU demands the real and efficacious inclusion of student unions to all impactful discussions on European, national and local levels. ESU further demands that no top-down cross-border solution is introduced that might overtake, endanger or in any way compete with local student card systems.

Mutual recognition

The need for mobility and the removal of barriers of fair recognition of students' and graduates' competencies and knowledge has made recognition a key field of cooperation at European level. A number of multilateral agreements have been made in this regard. Nevertheless, tangible obstacles such as lack of sufficient commitment to implementation, result in mutual and automatic recognition still being far from reality.

ESU believes that automatic recognition of diplomas and periods of study between all countries of EHEA (not be limited only to the EU member states) should be a clear goal of the European Union.

Full recognition, free of legal and political obstacles, contributes to equal opportunities for high-quality education, increasing the mobility of students and graduates in Europe, as well as enhancing graduates' opportunities for employment.

When we agree to pursue a goal of inclusive mobility, we have to ensure full and fair recognition of study periods spent abroad. Recognition should be a tool encouraging students to decide to spend a part of their study abroad.

Due to diverse secondary school and HE admission systems the eligibility criteria for university applicants also differ, which in many cases may limit or even disable access to higher education. In order to enhance access to HE, alternative admission pathways shall be put in place. These pathways can take in consideration methods such as validation of prior learning or entry evaluations, among others. These must be locally designed at every HEI, following national guidelines, and based on academic relevance. ESU believes that everybody who wishes to learn should have a right to entry to any HEI in Europe.

Further development of recognition should not be limited only to formal education, but should also include qualifications gained through prior learning, extracurricular activities and non-formal trainings, which will also empower the role of lifelong learning in society and improve access to education. Accessibility to those non-formal training and extracurricular activities within the European Education Area should be ensured to all students.

ESU calls upon the European Commission and other EU bodies to develop mutual recognition open for all EHEA countries which prioritises access to higher education and mobility, as well as support for building trust between countries and HEIs.

Investing in education

As a public and common good, education must be prioritised among sectors in which governments invest. ESU welcomes the European Commission proposal to increase the amount EU member states and countries at large invest in education. However, ESU finds the 5% of GDP investment in education benchmark to be low and unambitious. Education is an underfunded sector across the world and often the first to suffer from cuts during times of economic difficulty.

According to EUROSTAT, in 2015 and 2016, the average percentage of public investment in education was already 4,9% of the GDP with roughly one third of the countries spending significantly more than 5% of the GDP on investment in education. Seeing as the average spending is already at 4,9%, and yet a significant amount of EU countries still experience chronic underfunding in higher education, we do not consider a 5% minimum as enough.

Spending minimally on all sectors of education is not acceptable. This is neither enough for supporting learners through their path in the education system, nor for teachers, which is a priority according in the communication on the future of education in the EU. There is an unavoidable need for incentives to increase funding in countries, and governments have to spend more than the bare minimum on investing in education.

ESU welcomes the understanding that free and accessible education should be a high priority in Europe and firmly believes that a separate minimum of public investment in higher education should be established and recommends setting it on at least 2% of the GDP.

European Universities Networks

ESU has significant concerns about the proposal to create European Universities Networks. We welcome the willingness of the European Commission to strengthen cooperation between Higher Education Institutions in Europe. However, ESU believes that the only way to create a truly European space for educational enhancement is to ensure a continued focus on building capacity and collaboration among all HEIs in Europe. As the proposal currently stands, ESU believes that the European Universities Networks risks creating a two-tiered, elitist system, due to the ability of well-funded and affluent institutions to more easily access project or research funding.

If the European Commission is to continue to develop European Universities Networks, then ESU insists that the criteria for application to any Network is inclusive and reflects the diversity of experience and expertise across Higher Education in Europe. The ability to involve institutions that do not have a research-intensive focus will be dramatically hampered by any Networks structured to cater for research collaboration as a primary aim. Any new Network funding must not duplicate an elitist system of Networks already in existence. Any new network can only be created if the highest standards of student participation are guaranteed. Without such reassurances around broader criteria, ESU would not be supportive of the development of a European Universities Network.

ESU understands that the EU plans to provide funding for the establishment of 20 European University Networks by 2025. However, the criteria and scope for participation in these Networks remains unclear, including if or how they would differ from already existing structures. ESU believes that these Networks must be developed to create collaborations on the basis of the social dimension and widening participation across European Higher Education. Furthermore, the enhancement of teaching and learning is not sufficiently prioritised and should be a primary focus of any funding criteria. The criteria should also ensure that the diversity of institutions is reflected, including Technological or Applied Sciences HEIs, smaller Colleges, and is inclusive of vocational education.

When it comes to decision making within these potential networks, students must be included in all decision making processes and should adhere to the highest standards of student participation among network members.

ESU demands the commission to roll out a well knitted social security net for inherent accessibility for all students for the soon to be established European Universities networks. We highlight the need for a robust system of publicly financed tuition free education, appropriately sized study grants and no pitfalls of bureaucracy around study visas. The study programmes offered through these Networks need to ensure that all target measures for equal access plus necessary support structures are in place, making the education truly accessible for all.

Furthermore, there has been talk about a "European Degree", ESU is sceptical about this initiative as we don't see any clear added value as the development should focus on enhancement of teaching and learning and the social dimension.

We acknowledge the European Universities Networks' target to achieve the Commission's increased mobility goals, as well as its commitment to include the approach of virtual mobility. However, ESU demands more clarity on the concept of these increased goals, as well as on the stated mobility goals, since outcomes achieved through virtual and real mobility differ significantly.

ESU stresses that this cross-border cooperation can only be utilized through the application of a student centered approach to HE, as well as through incentivising innovative teaching and learning as a central focus from the very beginning of discussions, which should also be properly stated in the selection criteria.

ESU welcomes the fact that the creation of European University networks is aimed at building synergies between the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area. However, we demand that the EHEA is included as a whole in all the projected goals rather than narrowing the process of globalization of education to EU countries alone.

The transparency and inclusiveness of the procedures and consultations

ESU considers the current processes of consultation regarding the EEA as unclear, inadequate and not cohesive. Student representation in matters affecting current and future students across Europe - and not only in the EU - is absolutely crucial. Several aspects of the consultations that have taken place thus far have not been transparent, in particular regarding their content and possible recommendations.

European Students' Union calls for transparent consultation processes complete with the publication of minutes from consultation meetings and meetings with stakeholders, which includes non-EU students who would no doubt be affected by any recommendations on an European Education Area. Real and efficacious involvement in consultation processes is crucial for a democratic outcome. Furthermore, to embed true student participation in the development of the European Education Area, ESU demands that students are involved in more than mere consultation. The concepts of student engagement and partnership can only be realized if the student perspective can be evidenced through the ideas stage, development, planning, implementation, and evaluation of any project. As the process is likely to affect a vast amount of stakeholders in unforeseeable ways, the openness of this process is crucial and cannot be understated.

ESU highlights the absolute need to include all higher education stakeholders in creating any recommendations regarding the future of education in Europe and a prospective Education Area.