

## BM75 - Budva

# Statement Regarding European Parliament Elections 2019

### Introduction

With the upcoming European Parliament elections in sight, the European Students' Union (ESU) aims with this statement to unify the students of Europe and clearly state the European learners' priorities for both the upcoming elections as well as the future work of the Members of the European Parliament.

The European Students' Union (ESU) has outlined the following topics as vital for both the upcoming elections as well as the mandate following it:

1. Inclusive higher education
  - a. Access to EP funded projects for marginalised groups
  - b. Access to education for migrants of both refugee and non-refugee backgrounds
2. Academic and press freedom
3. High quality and sustainably funded higher education

### Access to EP funded projects for marginalised groups

According to the article 165(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the EU has committed to specific goals in the fields of education, highlighting the need for encouraging the mobility of students as one of its aims of particular relevance.

The EU must ensure the accessibility of all its programmes and projects, such as Erasmus and Horizon. This access must also extend to students who are not from EU countries. It is fundamentally unacceptable that programmes funded and managed by the EU and approved by the European Parliament function while violating the principles of Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Human Rights.

The Erasmus programme in its many iterations has been hailed as a flagship project of the EU. Yet, the access to both international mobility and participation in projects for learners from marginalised groups, especially students with disabilities, has not been ensured. In

fact, students with disabilities in all their variety still make up a diminishingly small part of all students in international mobility. In fact, disabilities and chronic diseases remain a major stated obstacle to accessing mobility. As the most stated reason for students not engaging with internationalisation and mobility are financial issues, this is an example of how despite stated commitments, EU programmes remain inaccessible.

Using OECD, EUROSTAT and European Commission's statistical data related to Denmark, France and Sweden, it has been confirmed that students from middle and upper classes are more likely to afford the necessary funds to go abroad than children of working-class parents. According to EUROSTUDENT data from 2017, students who have been on international mobilities are much more likely to have larger income in the future<sup>1</sup>. This means that Erasmus has also unfortunately acted as a multiplier of economic inequality as it is more accessible to students from the higher socio-economic background. ESU finds this continuing tendency socially irresponsible and is looking for MEPs to ensure that EU projects do not follow the trend of entrenching inequalities among learners.

ESU demands that the European Parliament takes a leading role in ensuring the true accessibility of EU programmes and the sustainability of the budgets for the respective programmes it votes on. As the legislative body of EU, the Parliament holds responsibilities to learners in Europe and should live up to these responsibilities.

ESU continues to call for the inclusion of students from marginalised groups, students with disabilities and students from a minority background in existing and future Erasmus programmes as well as any other EU funded programmes on equal footing with all learners.

ESU asks the European Parliament to closely monitor the project of the European Universities Alliances to ensure its inclusivity of the geographical and institutional diversity of higher education in Europe, accessible and fully funded physical mobility for all, taking into account students' socio-economic background. This can be ensured with an active students' involvement and participation in all relevant decision making bodies. ESU strongly believes that all EHEA countries, not only those within the Erasmus+ programme, should be allowed to take part in this project. Finally, the outcomes of this project must not in any way contribute to a two-tiered elitist Higher Education system.

### **Access to education for migrants of both refugee and non-refugee backgrounds**

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<sup>1</sup> Ballatore, M; Ferede, M. K. "The Erasmus Programme in France, Italy and the United Kingdom: student mobility as a signal of distinction and privilege"  
<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.2304/eerj.2013.12.4.525>

Europe is facing a massive backlash as evidenced by the uprising of right-wing extremist and populist parties in EU member states. In times like these, higher education is a line of defence and a precious tool to fight disintegration, social decline and exclusion. To unfold its emancipatory potential, higher education needs to be inclusive and accessible for everyone, regardless of gender, residential status, socioeconomic background, ethnicity or any other factors based on which students and potential students suffer from discrimination.

Migrants of both refugee and non-refugee backgrounds need to be given the chance to live up to their human potential through granting them access to higher education as well as giving them the support they need to successfully obtain their goals in education. The European Union is built on the foundation of intercultural understanding and cosmopolitanism - standing united in diversity. The students of Europe will not stand still and watch how this great heritage is getting destroyed by nationalistic politics of fear and cowardice.

To treat migrants of both refugee and non-refugee backgrounds as equal members of society who hold the same set of rights as everyone else is the only way to maintain social peace and prosperity and meet the most basic obligation of guaranteeing education as a human right for everyone. We, therefore, urge Europe to grant free access to higher education and implement support systems for people with migrant and refugee backgrounds. We stress the importance of abandoning financial burdens, like tuition fees, as well as the need to offer free language courses in each country.

Furthermore, it is necessary to improve recognition procedures to ensure that migrants of both refugee and non-refugee backgrounds who hold a degree from a higher education institution from their country of origin, can either proceed with their further education or enter the labour market in Europe.

This is often a difficult task, especially for migrants with a refugee background. There is a need for fast and free services responsible for translating and recognising university documents especially with regards to transcripts of records.

When individuals want to further their studies in a new country without being able to prove their former achievements, rules have to be implemented that allow students to either continue studying while providing the documents, or, in case this is not possible, offering alternatives such as assessments allowing students to have their prior learning recognised when being forced to leave their home country. In cases when a degree cannot be recognized to the full extent, complementary courses must be provided to enable full recognition.

ESU welcomes the Council of Europe's pilot project for a European Qualifications Passport for Refugees, which certifies the applicant's qualification in language proficiency, education and work experience. ESU calls for the EU to encourage Member States to take part in the project, as well as making it a widespread tool for recognition of prior learning for refugees, accepted by HEIs and in the job market in the EU and throughout the EHEA.

The most basic tool to facilitate integration through education is to develop a European legal framework enabling higher education institutions to accept migrant students of both refugee and non-refugee backgrounds regardless of their residential status.

### **Academic and press freedom**

ESU bears witness to troubling developments in Europe's political landscape. From specific attacks on students' organisations, journalists, or higher education institutions to a broader attempt at dismantling rights and freedoms essential to free societies.

Sensationalism and lack of substantive news coverage by mainstream media institutions have led to a general lack of trust toward traditional information providers. Ultra-nationalist, racist and populist political forces are making use of this, pandering false information and viewpoints designed to sow hate and discontent amongst the public. ESU believes that access to information is a key component in combating these trends and that both high-quality journalism and high-quality education are crucial to ensuring an informed public. Governing bodies, including the European Parliament, have a direct role in tackling this issue.

The European Parliament has to prioritize their role in guaranteeing the safeguarding and advancement of these principles. Member states should be pressured to cease any attacks on the free press and to ensure the safety of every journalist, to prevent cases such as the killing of blogger Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta and the rape and murder of the reporter Victoria Marinova in Bulgaria. Responding to the latter case, the Director-General of Unesco highlighted that "attacks on journalists erode the fundamental human right to freedom of expression and its corollaries, press freedom and free access to information".

Recent developments in several European countries are perceived as worrying signals of attacks on academic freedom within the EU.

The European Parliament has to put the fight for academic freedom across the Union to the forefront, giving support to student organisations and other independent actors in their struggles against governments and political forces attempting to curb academic freedom. High-quality education can never be dictated or censored by outside actors.

In a changing society with the uprise of political forces moving towards isolation, exclusion, and mistrust, while restriction and denial of human rights are increasing, ESU stresses

the importance of strong civil action. Government actions restricting people's rights to free association and freedom from state surveillance are threatening liberty in countries.

An active civil society has to work hand in hand with broader attempts to involve a disengaged and distant electorate in practical democratic processes. This is especially important for the demographic group that participates the least in parliament elections and referenda – young people. ESU wants MEPs to encourage young citizens and students to actively raise their voice, get actively involved in fighting for a better future and underlining the right to demonstration.

### **High quality and sustainably funded higher education**

The European Union faces global and internal challenges: climate change, extremism and social exclusion are issues that are difficult to solve alone. At the same time, governments across the EU have continued to make significant cuts to education. European lawmakers must understand that high quality education is a foundational structure of thriving societies, and thus an important public good and public responsibility.

The development of European higher education must be student-centred. Students must be included in the decision-making processes as both experts and decision-makers on all levels, including European initiatives such as the European Education Area. The EU cannot establish sustainable and just education policies without consulting students.

The next Commission should assign the portfolios of education, innovation and research to a single Commissioner. Higher education, research and innovation are in many cases closely linked to each other and combining these areas should provide synergies. The implementation of the European Education Area should fall under the responsibilities of the Commissioner.

In future Multiannual Financial Frameworks, the European Union must contribute more to research, education and lifelong learning. These are the key elements in increasing social mobility and welfare, answering to global challenges and promoting international mobility. It is essential that the European countries strive together for higher education of the highest quality and do their utmost best to realize the key principles agreed upon in the Bologna process. European cooperation in the field of higher education and increased cooperation

between higher education institutions is essential to strengthening the European knowledge economy.

For students, the most important European investment in higher education is the Erasmus programme. Erasmus funding is still far from the goal of being increased tenfold. The new parliament must commit to increasing the funding for Erasmus to secure access to mobility for a larger number of students, especially those from underrepresented groups. Mobility offers students the unique possibility to acquire essential international and intercultural competences. Increased mobility will also contribute to social cohesion and European integration.

The European Union should, therefore, commit to a sustainable level of public investment in higher education. ESU believes that a separate minimum of public investment in higher education should be established and recommends setting it to at least 2% of the GDP.