



ESU's vision for the European Education Area

Education is a cornerstone of the development of societies and it has been so in Europe for as long as we can remember it prospering and developing. Quality education that aspires to the freedom of thought and creativity is a guarantor for developed and democratic societies and this shall be fully embraced by the evolving European Education Area 2025 (EEA).

European Students' Union welcomes a vision of EEA which prioritizes **accessibility, inclusiveness, sustainability, quality and progress**. These features are of essential importance now more than ever as we go through challenges and changes across the globe. It is important to note that the actions, initiatives and discussions about EEA should always bear in the background a holistic approach as without successfully developed primary education we can't achieve a quality higher education and vice-versa.

The vision of EEA shall be built upon the principles of accessibility and inclusiveness to make sure it doesn't leave anyone behind - whether those are countries whose reform agendas have been slow or individuals whose needs are specific and require more individualized approach. With the effects of the current pandemic some predict a drop of student numbers, the financial stability of higher education institutions (HEIs) is hit hard and the future is uncertain. Therefore, publicly funded higher education shall be a crucial element of the EEA to ensure sustainability and stability in the system of higher education.

For a sustainable EEA an essential discussion is the rapid digitalization happening in higher education, especially since COVID19 has a major footprint on this. ESU welcomes the revision of the Digital Education Action Plan (DEAP) and stresses the need to look into basics first for a successful implementation of the updated DEAP contributing to the vision of EEA 2025. The new DEAP needs to include actions that will support the HEIs with adequate funding in order to equip all their students with necessary digital technologies and communication means that will guarantee quality access to e-learning or blended learning. Another fundamental action is massive retraining opportunities for the university staff and academic members who are not sufficiently experienced in applying digital tools for education. Digital and innovative pedagogical approaches shall be extensively promoted among academia as these novelties can have a profound influence on education in larger numbers. In the scope of innovative pedagogies, deployment of AI-powered learning systems, learning through open data and learning laboratories are a key priority for the COVID19 affected reality of university education. AI-powered learning should not be limited to only a few universities. Furthermore, the DEAP should bring direct opportunities for students to learn about AI and understand the changes and perspectives AI can bring to massive university education. Learning through open data should become an important component of university learning: it is essential for students to learn to understand the data and use it to address societal and economic issues we face. And last, the DEAP should support universities to rapidly build online laboratories - an interactive environment for creating and



conducting simulated science experiments for instances when the real laboratories can not be physically accessed.

Related but not limited to the digital transformation is the application of microcredentials in the EEA with the purposes of creating personalized and flexible offerings for university students, resolving the skills mismatch and promoting lifelong learning opportunities. As the microcredentials become more and more widely available through various platforms, ESU stresses that they need to be an inseparable part of higher education in EEA and EHEA - not just in the future but already now. Microcredentials should be a part of the public education - developed in close cooperation with different stakeholders including but not limited to the private sector. Starting from the European and national qualifications frameworks, we need to make the microcredential compatible to those. Regular discussions and cooperation should take place among the ENIC/NARICs, national authorities and university departments to look into the existing frameworks. Furthermore, the responsible Quality Assurance (QA) agencies need to make sure that the QA procedures look into offering and recognition of microcredentials by universities. Universities in EEA need support in resources and peer learning in order to advance their knowledge and capacity for issuing and recognising microcredentials. The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) shall be fully applicable for microcredentials enabling an easier access to recognition in higher education. With a European approach to the microcredentials we shall ensure for students access to educational content in different languages and from different institutions around Europe which are recognized by HEIs and employers in the European area.

As the world grows more virtually and less physically connected, the significance of internationalization and international physical activities shall not be forgotten in the EEA. Virtual mobility should be used as a supplement to face-to-face education and an emergency solution when traveling is impossible, however, it shouldn't replace the aspirations and the funding for face-to-face international experiences. The travel needs of international students enrolled in degree programs or mobilities should be considered as an essential journey. We all have learned now to live with the pandemic, it has and it will still have effects on the developments of EEA and the life-changing international study opportunities shall not be suspended as the developments go.

In the same spirit of internationalization, as well as creation of synergies, the development of EEA shall be connected to - and cooperative with the already existing European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that has brought multiple initiatives and reform agendas throughout the past couple of decades. The key commitments of EHEA - the QA, automatic recognition and implementation of the ECTS shall successfully transfer to the vision of EEA. Meaningful and impactful implementation of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) across EEA should be driven by supportive initiatives and projects that first look into the needs of HEIs in regards to improving the quality of education provision and then

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The European Students' Union (ESU) is the umbrella organisation of 46 National Unions of Students (NUS) from 40 countries. The aim of ESU is to represent and promote the interests of students at the European level towards all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, Bologna Follow Up Group, Council of Europe and UNESCO.



develop/improve the system of QA. Distinguishing between (1) identification of the needs to achieve quality education and (2) a functional QA system will be essential in order to ensure a quality higher education provision in EEA.

Further developing the understanding of the quality higher education, we advocate for innovative leadership and management structures for higher education in EEA. Governing structures of higher education should guarantee independent and effective student participation by law, and should aim to be less bureaucratic and more transparent without sacrificing on budgets and democratic procedures. The flagship initiative of the European Commission - the European University Alliances should clearly reflect this innovation and efficiency, at the same time their example should not limit the possible strategic cooperation models that can evolve in EEA. In our most recent statement on European Universities, we look into a student-centered vision of the European Universities that can promote collaborative and open universities in EEA.

Universities in EEA - all and not few of them, should set higher standards for community engaged institutions whose activities are related to meeting the societal and economic challenges outside of the university walls. Most urgently, education on active and democratic citizenship and sustainable development should be mainstreamed in order to empower students to shape democratic, inclusive and socially sustainable societies.

Finally, the EEA should embrace further and work more towards meaningful student participation which is a unique feature for the European continent across the higher education systems of the globe. Funding and resources should be allocated for the maintenance and further development of the student representation structures in order to help them meet the challenges of the changing world. Capacity building for student bodies, meaningful participation of students and their equal involvement in decision-making across EEA shall be a priority incentivised on all - local, national and European levels.