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STATEMENT ON THE STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS 2021

Education as a pillar of the society

Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, held a speech on September 15th 2021, reflecting on the past year, the challenges the European Union has faced and the work yet to be done. It is clear that the pandemic strained the Union economically, politically and socially, however, joint efforts in medical intervention and public health security have assured that the COVID-19 vaccine is available to EU citizens. Still, we are far from achieving global immunity against the coronavirus, necessary to protect the lives of our most vulnerable members of the society. ESU calls on all national governments, as well as students` unions, to promote and share scientifically relevant information on COVID- 19 vaccination¹, thereby promoting active participation in vaccination efforts around the EU and globally, as well as to support the global calls to increase vaccine production and its availability for all the societies in the world.

The importance of youth participation is highlighted in the speech, giving meaning to students` representation and the work of all students` organizations in assuring the sustainability of, not only our environment, but all aspects of education and life. Words shared were: "Because our youth put meaning into empathy and solidarity. They believe we have a responsibility towards the planet. And while they are anxious about the future, they are determined to make it better." ESU, with its member unions, has long stood for equality, social justice and inclusion, academic freedom, quality of education, environmental sustainability, globalization (...) and will continue to support students, demand changes in our education systems and society. ESU will continue to help all those feeling left behind by the systems on a path to a sustainable future.

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<https://www.ema.europa.eu/en/human-regulatory/overview/public-health-threats/coronavirus-disease-covid-19/treatments-vaccines/covid-19-vaccines>

ESU is not alone in these efforts. All young people in Europe must have the same rights, access to education and quality of life - goals hard to achieve, but necessary to work on together.

European youth bears the potential to change the way we live and directly influence the future of education, economy and society, to provide better working, living and studying conditions. Therefore, recognizing this potential is important in all aspects of education and governance.

Even though the Next Generation EU recovery plan has been put into practice to tackle the economic shift during the pandemic, higher education was², and still remains, underfunded and unsupported by the National Recovery and Resilience Plans by the Member States, and involvement of stakeholders (especially students) in the creation, design and implementation of the plans has so far been scant. Especially in relation to country-specific recommendations of the 2020 European Semester, which mentions that the educational outcomes of learners "may aggravate socio-economic disparities and existing structural challenges, if not counteracted by appropriate reforms and investment."³ Additional emphasis is placed on digital skills, structural reforms and social inclusion, as better education systems lead to an increase in Europe's productivity and competitiveness.

ALMA, the new programme that will be launched to allow European youth to find short-term working opportunities in EU Member States promises to be a positive step toward building individual training and working opportunities, especially for the so-called NEET (not in employment, education or training). Nevertheless, in order to serve its function of 'upskilling' and 'reskilling', the lifelong learning perspective of the programme cannot be overlooked, as well as the obstacles to an integrated, balanced labour market. If we look at the recognition procedures between EHEA countries, both in terms of prior learning and automatic recognition, there is still a long way to go before the European youth will be able to benefit from a seamless recognition of their competences, as many students deem these processes non-transparent, too long, and report on the lack of inter-institutional trust.⁴ Additionally, allowing young people to work abroad shortly is a very positive thing on an individual level and for building European identity, but it is important, that this programme is not used as an alternative to increase labour standards in host countries, nor contributes to the migratory disbalance of the highly-skilled individuals across Europe.

² <https://www.esu-online.org/?policy=bm80-next-generation-eu-can-not-avoid-considering-the-next-generation>

³ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1591720546579&uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0500>

⁴ https://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/BWSE2020-Publication_WEB2.pdf

That is why it is imperative that the higher education students take part in the design and the implementation of such a programme, as they tend to migrate more, leading to the disparity in the intellectual capacity across Europe.⁵ Even though migration is yet to be linked to higher education, ESU strongly encourages the integration of the educational aspect and students` participation in ALMA, from a lifelong learning perspective.

2022 will be the Year of European Youth, and we can only hope that 2022 will not remain so only on paper, but that it shall be lived and practiced across international borders and national structures. Now, more than ever, input is necessary from young people, to shape the post-pandemic era, in a way in which they demanded even before the pandemic, especially in regards to digitalization.

Building the future of education

Through the State of the Union Address, it became clear that one of the priorities in pandemic recovery needs to be education, with an emphasis on higher education, research and innovation. Digital skills and competencies must not only be regarded in the economic aspect of Europe`s prosperity, but rather as an integral part of education and society. Digital transitions in public services are important, however, they must also be put into practice within the educational sector, to revolutionize the learning process according to the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027.⁶ We are pleased to see that the cybersecurity policies are being developed, which will help protect society from systematic or individual attacks on their rights and property. In line with that, cybersecurity must not, in any way, limit the academic freedom and rights of the students, and must protect their personal information and data. Proctoring services and other monitoring services that strain these liberties, must not find their way in cybersecurity until their use is protecting students and institutions individually.

Furthermore, the efforts within the European Green Deal are appreciated and they need to shape the future. The world we know today has a long way to adapt, and we support a stronger dedication of the Member States toward achieving set goals, but also of the individual higher education institutions toward environmental sustainability.

⁵ <https://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Brain-Drain-final-report-ESC41-Google-Docs.pdf>

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/deap-communication-sept2020_en.pdf

We believe in borderless, equal education free of commodification, built jointly between students, HEIs, governments, and international organizations, standing firmly on the pillars of social equality and inclusion, youth participation, research, and innovation. ESU will continue to strongly advocate for digitalization of higher education in its most ambitious form, sustainability and student engagement, not only within the organisation, but through its National Unions of Students as well.

In light of the Conference on the Future of Europe, the Year of the European Youth, Next Generation EU and the path towards the European Education Area, it is high time for a pan-European discussion on the role education should have for the prosperity of our continent and its society. ESU will carry on these discussions and work towards the creation of sustainable and innovative education through all levels of its engagement and representation.