

ESU – European Students’ Union

Formerly ESIB – the National Unions of Students in Europe

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ESU Statement on the Communication of the European Commission:

An updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training

With this contribution to the updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, the European Students’ Union, representing 11 million students in Europe, shares its vision on the future priorities for higher education policies after 2010. We will focus on the three strategic goals closely linked to the Lisbon strategy/Social Agenda: cooperation, equity and sustainability in higher education.

Introduction: Organisation of the process

First of all, we would like to share our main concern about the process itself and the way it is organised, which results in key stakeholders being excluded from shaping the future of higher education in the EU. The definition of members and partners in the “Education and Training 2010” work program are distinctly different from the one used for the Bologna Process. In the Lisbon strategy, the definition of stakeholders is limited to social partners and national governments. In the Bologna Process, it is the representative organisations of the stakeholders in the field, plus the national governments and the European Commission. The Bologna Process is thus far more democratic and based on negotiation and joint development among the stakeholders. The concept of social partners, which is used for the composition of the working groups of “Education and Training 2010”, does not apply to the education sector. A better concept for the composition of these working groups is the concept of stakeholders. The stakeholder principle recognises that although all actors within the higher education system work towards the same goal, they do so from radically different perspectives and life experiences. This leads to the conclusion that, besides the social partners, institutions and students should also be included in the working groups. The limited inclusion of stakeholders creates a problem of ownership. The stakeholders are not only the ones who know the higher education field, but they will also be responsible for practical implementation in the higher education institutions themselves. Thus ownership over the suggested reforms is vital for their proper implementation.

We therefore welcome the Commission’s conclusion that “priority should be given to a greater involvement of stakeholders” (COM(2008) 865 final, page 12), however we would like to stress the importance of more frequent stakeholder involvement than the current annual stakeholder consultation forums. To achieve the abovementioned results and a full contribution from stakeholders, the latter should be involved in the policy dialogue, policy design and implementation on more systematic basis.

I Cooperation rather than competition to achieve excellence

1.1. Excellence as development of homogenous quality education

ESU – European Students’ Union is the umbrella organisation of 49 national unions of students from 38 countries and through these members represent over 11 million students. The aim of ESU is to represent and promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at a European level towards all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, Council of Europe and UNESCO.

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The term “excellence” can be misleading in its use. A question which arises is “Are we trying to achieve excellent higher education or are we going to concentrate our resources only on students considered as gifted?”. While the former will have a positive effect on all students and lead to the development of coherent education system across Europe, the second will create a distinction between groups of students. Students participate in higher education for different reasons and thus have different expectations and needs. This should be reflected in a more inter- and multidisciplinary approach to education, as well as in an opportunity for students to obtain skills, competences and knowledge in the fields that fit their own purpose. Given the fact that the student population is not homogeneous, flexibility in study paths is crucial for giving every student the possibility of finding a suitable and challenging educational path. However, considering that students’ peers are a major source of learning, and a way of improving equality in higher education, separating different levels of perceived talent must be avoided. School and higher education systems which separate students with ‘supposedly’ different level of ability are, in fact, demonstrating a lack of flexibility and creating social inequalities in terms of the further opportunities open to separated students.

1.2. Cooperation as the basic principle promoted to facilitate higher education development in Europe

Increasing the resources for both institutions and students creates the minimal conditions in which a knowledge-based society can develop. As an approach, cooperation should be the basis for the development of institutions and students. To create the necessary breathing ground for innovation it is necessary to promote an interdisciplinary approach in education as well as research. Although this interdisciplinary approach can be achieved within one higher education institution, the cooperation between institutions in the form of networks for teaching and research can give this approach added impulse. The European Union should financially encourage the creation of such networks.

Competition in the field of knowledge development and application necessarily implies that new information is hidden from competitors, at least partly and temporarily, and thus hinders the fruitful free exchange and development of knowledge. ESU stresses that knowledge should be created and used to serve societal aims and that the spirit of cooperation should guide the development of knowledge and innovation. In this respect, ESU stresses the importance of ensuring support for such independent research, which is in the interest of society as a whole. This is of public interest and should not be jeopardised by the trend of increasing competition in higher education. Furthermore, ESU calls for the establishment of a European instrument for the sharing of knowledge and research freely between all relevant actors, while at the same time respecting their respective intellectual property rights.

1.3. Mobility as the main instrument for successful cooperation – more support is needed

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The internationalisation of higher education has provided many opportunities for the fostering of a cooperative approach in higher education. Special attention has to be made on increasing mobility and the sharing of knowledge. Student mobility is arguably one of the largest drivers of change in higher education in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Within the European Union, by far the largest action for community cooperation in the field of education has been within the field of mobility, through landmark programmes such as Erasmus and Tempus. Within the wider Europe, the now maturing Bologna Process aims to create a European Higher Education Area in which students and staff should be able to move freely between countries and institutions. Although surveys show a great interest in studying abroad, the number of European students studying in foreign countries is still marginal. The joint coordination of degrees, curricula, qualifications frameworks, quality assurance and recognition practices are all part of this process towards mobility. However, the majority of students will never be able to experience study abroad without the necessary financial compensation. The next generation of mobility grant schemes need to be developed to accommodate two major deficiencies. Firstly, the total amount of money available to support people going abroad needs to increase to cover both fees and variable living costs in the host country. Secondly, grant schemes need to be expanded beyond the borders of the European Union towards all the 49 Bologna countries so the European project can expand. Together with this effort, special procedures for student visas need to be implemented. Most importantly, despite over 20 years of effort being put into facilitating student exchanges, the overall level of student mobility remains in the single digit percentages. To push things forward, a new and ambitious target is required, and for this reason ESU proposes that the EU should set a mobility **target to achieve 20% student and staff mobility by the year 2020.**

II Equity in higher education

2.1. Focusing on all levels of education

The further expansion of higher education is of crucial importance to the success of the growth and jobs strategy. The effects of globalisation continue to confront the citizens of Europe with a shift towards a more insecure labour market and the loss of less academically based jobs. Education should help those people that are confronted by the negative effects of globalisation to adapt to such changes by teaching them the necessary competences to integrate into the labour market. ESU sees education as a tool for promoting social mobility by means of combating and preventing unemployment not only for young people, but for all citizens.

To avoid social inequities that are reproduced in higher education, higher education systems should improve the equity and access for those groups who, due to educational disadvantages caused by personal, social, cultural or economic circumstances, need particular support to fulfil their educational potential, such as early school leavers, the long-term unemployed, migrants, women of all ages and people with disabilities and people from low socio-economic backgrounds. The European Students’ Union acknowledges the importance of previous levels of education in fighting inequalities, whilst at the same time stressing that if

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no positive action is taken and the necessary support for students ensured, higher education might even deepen existing inequalities as well as create new ones for potentially secure groups of students. The problem of high drop-out rates can only be solved by an integrated approach of primary, secondary and higher education. Public intervention should not be focused on one of those sectors but should guarantee a strong and integrated education sector instead. In this spirit the concept of dropouts from various segments of the LLL pathway might serve to be more useful than current methods of measuring the problem.

2.2. Comprehensive research on cost-sharing policies and their implications on equity is needed

Looking at the higher education sector, there are several problems concerning high drop-out rates. In particular, the financial situation of students and the quality of their education are areas that deserve attention in this respect. Students are taking up work to cover their living costs. The majority of student jobs are not linked to the subject of their studies, which results in increased workload for students, affecting negatively the quality of their studies. Without the necessary support, they end up below the poverty line, compromising their time and energy to study. Another strong contributor to high drop-out rates is the lack of inspiring teaching methods as well as study organisation which is incompatible with the current lifestyle of students created by high demands society places on their lives. Recent studies such as “Public/private funding of higher education: a social balance” of the Hochschul-informations-system have proven that information concerning financial obstacles and financial discrimination can be gathered. Moreover, it proves that by studying all aspects of public and private contributions in a comprehensive way, including the cost of public social services and differing study-related costs, we gain new information about student support systems in different countries, which conflict with the cost sharing principle that current EU equity and efficiency policy is based on. It also confirms that, in many countries, state support systems do not serve their goal of supporting students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The European Students’ Union urges the EU to continue its research into existing inequalities and possible solutions to fight them, and to base its equity and efficiency policy on this, taking into account all aspects of equity and ensuring that this policy does not negatively affect any particular group of students.

2.3. Indicators and benchmarks for equity in higher education – fewer words and more action

To demonstrate concretely the EU’s willingness to improve equity in higher education, work should be done to develop a **set of indicators and benchmarks on access**, participation in and completion of higher education to improve the participation of under-represented groups, while improving their social, academic and financial reality. **The European Students’ Union strongly encourages European ministers to give a higher priority to problems concerning equity and to make this part of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training by introducing a compound indicator on equity as part of the follow up to the “Education and Training 2010” programme.**

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A benchmark on equity in higher education was supported by the first EU stakeholders’ forum. In addition, the Bologna Process is increasingly supporting concrete action by Member States in the area of the social dimension. In the ministerial summit in London in 2007, the ministers agreed to report on the progress in the social dimension through national action plans. In the Communication “An updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training” it is acknowledged that the main challenges in education and training systems, including “promoting equity and active citizenship”, should be addressed in a joined-up policy across the systems as a whole, including higher education, as well as VET and lifelong learning. At the same time, unfortunately, there is no proposal for a concrete target for equity in higher education. **ESU would like to stress that problems of equal access to education and equal opportunities to accomplish one’s studies is a problem at all levels of education and these problems can only be successfully diminished if all levels are addressed in an integrated way.**

III Financing

3.1. Target for the percentage of GDP dedicated to HE funding

ESU is deeply concerned about the Commission’s proposal for the proportion of GDP to be spent on higher education has been set at 2 % for public and private financing **combined**. Higher education is a public good, and therefore needs to receive a guaranteed minimum of public financing. Private financing should be in addition to, and not a substitute for this. Facilitation mechanisms also need to be put in place to ensure that financing issues do not endanger individual participation in higher education.

IV. Sustainability

4.1. Looking long term at social returns from higher education

Apart from globalisation, Europe is also challenged by demographic changes which will lead to a smaller proportion of young people in most European countries. This challenge strongly affects our economies and should thus been taken seriously in every aspect of the Lisbon strategy. A decrease in the workforce will create a considerable challenge for the education sector. To retain a strong and vibrant economy it will be even more important to increase the participation of a larger proportion of young citizens. Extensive research has shown a positive relationship between higher education graduates and economic growth. Due to globalisation, the need for a highly educated workforce will be even more crucial that it was in the past. This means that if Europe wants to build up a strong and sustainable economy, widening access to higher education should be priority number one.

4.2. Active citizenship, democracy and intercultural understanding – at the heart of higher education

A crucial aspect of sustainability is active citizenship and democracy. Education is of crucial importance in order to sustain and increase future generations. Education allows citizens to be

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more sensitive to the democratic spirit. This contribution of higher education to civic responsibility and democracy is not self-evident and should never be taken for granted. Higher education should not only provide the labour market with highly skilled workers, but should also provide society with active democratic citizens. Demographic changes will confront Europe with a decreasing workforce, which will lead to new discussions about the migration of the workforce from regions which are not confronted by such a decrease. The current discussions about immigrants in many European countries are worrying in this respect. Nationalist and conservative parties acquire more influence, hand in hand with xenophobia, Islamophobia and intolerance. The rise of extremist political parties across Western Europe, as well as the anti-gay movement in Eastern Europe, are real threats to European social and cultural values as well as to the increasing need to allow new immigrants into Europe to work. In this respect, the European Students' Unions supported the EU's initiative to devote 2008 to intercultural dialogue, but strongly believes that this was one step in the right direction rather than an end point. Xenophobia and cheap political rhetoric against immigrants need to be fought from within as well as by the higher education sector itself. Degrees should be built on the principles of personal development and responsibility, cultural and interdisciplinary understanding in the form of generic learning outcomes.

4.3 Addressing sustainability issues in higher education

Higher education should set the example for a truly sustainable society by saving and using renewable energy, using environmentally-friendly materials, cutting waste and increasing the use and accessibility of public transport. Secondly, ESU in its survey has found that cultural, societal and ethical dimensions are generally not part of the curriculum, threatening the ability of our citizens to deal with complex problems such as sustainability. Both more generic and ethical skills should be included in the learning outcomes of our degrees and qualifications frameworks, including those on a European level. Moreover, ESU believes that the academic community should be stimulated to become more active in debates concerning social cohesion and sustainability, actively speaking up against populist lies concerning, for example, immigration and global warming.