

ESU – European Students' Union

Formerly ESIB – the National Unions of Students in Europe

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Media Briefing

ESU Statement on the Communication of the European Commission:

An updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training

The European Students' Union welcomes the Commission's updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training. This document provides the headline policy position of the Commission on, inter alia, higher education, and thereby sets the overarching political context for action across all 27 Member States in the decade to come.

In appraising the updated strategic framework, ESU would like to make comments in three broad areas: stakeholder involvement, equity benchmarks and the financing of higher education.

Policy development process: stakeholder involvement

ESU has concerns about the way that the policy development process has taken place in the context of the updated strategic framework, which has resulted in key stakeholders being largely excluded from shaping the future of higher education policy in the EU. Rather than having a 'stake' in the process, we have simply been informed of what has been developed through the annual EU Stakeholders Forum. We draw attention to the difference in the definition of members and partners in the "Education and Training 2010" work program from the one used in the Bologna Process. We would like to see stakeholder involvement in the Lisbon strategy and the updated strategic framework that follows the model of the Bologna Process, whereby representative organisations of the stakeholders in the field, plus national governments and the European Commission, work together in a democratic policy development process based on cooperation and negotiation. The limited inclusion of stakeholders in the updated strategic framework creates a problem of ownership. Not only are the stakeholders the ones who know the higher education field best, but they will also be responsible for the practical implementation of EU policy in HE 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 forum. 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 a more systematic basis.

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 (Vocational Educational Training) 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 complete one’s studies are a problem at all levels of education, and these problems can only be successfully diminished if they are addressed in an integrated way.**

Financing - 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.