BM76 - Sofia

Resolution: Students' perspective on the first cycle of European Universities, towards the second call

After the resolution: **'A critical analysis of the European Commission's call for the European Universities Alliances'**, ESU feels it is important to assess the current state of the process of the creation of the European Universities after the issue of the first call. Drawing from cases coming from several EU countries, the resolution aims at providing the students' perspective on the designing phase of the applications; a set of additional criteria that need to be implemented in the second call to ensure the inclusiveness of the project for HEIs and students; and a reflection on some forms that student representation should take in the alliance in order for it to be up to the standards that are upheld at the local and national levels.

The state of the art of the European Universities: some national cases from a students' perspective

The first critical element of the state of the art of the European Universities is the complete lack of involvement of the students and their representatives in the designing and drafting of the applications: in all the countries involved in this resolution (Romania, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Austria, the Netherlands, Estonia) this kind of involvement was nonexistent, or it came too little, too late. In many countries, students' unions lament a lack of information about the HEIs involved in the alliances, and the content and the specific goals set up by the institutions involved. Another concern is that, since the alliances will be selected by summer and will start working between September and November 2019, the time for the selected alliances to start the projects before the official start of the European Universities will be so short that only virtual mobility could be provided. Since the funds given by the call are really small –after the corrigendum of 15th January 2019 the maximum amount of money for medium-sized European Universities has risen from 6 euros per year per student to a maximum of 21 euros per student each year–, HEIs are thinking either to involve private interests as associate partners, or to use current Erasmus + funds to cover the long term mobility (which is not covered by the call). The possibility of funding these alliances is being taken into consideration by some governments: on the one hand, this would be a way to lower the risk of commodification within the alliances; on the other, an imbalance among the HEIs might arise according to the different level of engagement of the governments and the availability of funds. The

regional imbalance created by the current criteria based on Eurovoc is shown by the case of the Netherlands, where some of the alliances that submitted an application were based on existing networks, which expanded to include just one or two central-Eastern European HEI(s). An example of how the exclusion of non-Erasmus+ countries affects the inclusiveness of HEIs is Switzerland. Swiss universities are excluded from joining an alliance. The partner universities of the University of Basel, which form an already existing cooperation, have joined forces with other European universities in order to be recognized as European universities and to receive EU funding. The University of Basel remains outside. Eucor, the European Campus, teamed up this summer to send a joint open letter to the European Commission on 25th June requesting Switzerland's eligibility in the programme. This example is proof of why Swiss universities fear of being left behind by current European developments.

With the current trends on how student representativeness is being developed within the alliances, it is useful to report the experience of a student representative within the alliance 'Una Europa', consisting of Freie Universität Berlin, Università di Bologna, University of Edinburgh, Uniwersytet Jagielloński in Kraków, KU Leuven, Universidad Complutense de Madrid and Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. From the 4th to the 5th of April 2019, the first Students' Congress of 'Una Europa' took place in KU Leuven. The Congress was supposed to be the first meeting including (up to 3) student representatives from each university.

The program of the Congress included sessions on higher education, European representation and politics, student representatives and also offered some time to have a meeting sharing thoughts, concerns and other issues related to the network their universities are joining. However, it is necessary to point out that some of the students present at the meeting were not student representatives but they were selected by the person in charge of this project in that university; while those who were student representatives were not fully aware of what European Universities are or what was their role in the Congress. This situation shows how the idea of student representatives developed by the rectors of 'Una Europa' does not meet in any way the standards that are common practice at the local and national levels.

During the second day of the Congress, the students who attended the event had a meeting to discuss the future of the representation in 'Una Europa', social dimension policies for the network, how to implement the coordination between the local unions, among other subjects. In this experience, the students' board is not a political organ within the alliance, rather a council whose composition is not clearly defined, and whose powers do not allow them to influence or have a main position in the decision-making process of the alliance.

ESU's criteria for the second call

Bearing in mind the current situation resulting from the first call, ESU calls for the second call to include a certain set of demands:

- **Regional Balance :**

A redefinition of regional balance based on a different basis than Eurovoc, to ensure that students all over Europe in a broader sense find access to the European universities. HEIs outside of the Erasmus+ countries should be explicitly allowed to take part in the alliances, but will not be able to receive funding from the Erasmus+ programme. Furthermore, ESU calls upon an explicit promotion of small HEIs rather than only promotion of research-oriented HEIs.

- **Social Dimension:**

Students in the alliance have the same rights on access, tuition fees and student welfare.
For each of these rights, the minimum benchmark is set by the institution that has the highest standard. Institutions must set out a clear roadmap for this upward convergence on students' rights. European funds for this convergence might be assigned.

- **Study reform and Quality Assurance:**

ESU demands that new learning (and teaching) formats become and explicit eligibility criteria, since mobility alone cannot characterize the added value of a network. Taking quality higher education into account, ESU demands that the European Universities create clear common concepts of credibility and modularity of their degree programs. In choosing programs, as well as exams, students should be given great flexibility. The taken courses should be freely recognized. ESU demands that at European Universities it will be possible to retrieve failed exams at other locations, also remotely if necessary. To ensure a good common quality of education, the networks have to provide uniform semester hours. The application should also state how the alliance will provide common Quality Assurance.

- **Digitalisation:**

An audit management system, which is standardized. Also, digital workspaces (e.g.: Moodle, ILIAS or Olat) are standardized within a network and are unconditionally open to all students of this network.

- **Student representativeness:**

Attached to the application, a report signed by the student representatives of all the partners of the alliance must be provided, which certifies and describes the involvement of the students in the process of designing the call, and describes which role the student representatives will have in the decision-making bodies of the alliance. A minimum of 25% of seats in these decision-making bodies must be assigned to student representatives, equally divided among the partners of the alliance.

- **Sustainability:**

The European University Alliance has to be a sustainable project. To ensure this, the EU must provide ecological transport infrastructures between the locations of the networks. Taking the sustainability aspect into account, ESU, therefore, remarks that forms of transport alternative to air travel should be encouraged. A European express train network is to be further expanded. Train tickets should be provided for mobility.

- **Physical mobility:**

The equipollence between physical, blended and virtual mobility must be eliminated. In order to count for the achievement of the objective of the call, only physically mobile students must be counted.

- **Private partners:**

The role of the associate partners must be clarified in the second call. Furthermore, associate partners can have voting powers in the decision-making bodies of the alliance only if they factually represent a part of the academic community of one or more of the partner universities (for instance students' unions).

ESU further remarks some points on funding. Funds for European alliances should not go at the expenses of other Erasmus + programs: therefore, any increase in the budget allocated to the project shall be linked with an equal or a superior increase in the funds for the whole Erasmus + project.

What should ESU do?

The best way to assure student representatives are going to be involved in the decision making process is for them to be able to participate in the delegation of each university (with the rector, vice-rector for international relations or a person in charge) and to participate in the meetings of the alliance, not just by bringing part of ''student councils''.

ESU needs to defend the rights of the student representatives and support them in this process.

During the aforementioned whole process, constant communication needs to be provided between the student representatives in the alliances, the local unions, NUSes and ESU to provide an understanding of the needs of students in these alliances, even if the local union is not part of the NUS. Then, this can be used by ESU to create comprehensive strategies to represent the collective needs of students at the European level.

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