

Fundamental Values and Solidarity Policy Paper

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1. Introduction

ESU firmly believes in the fundamental values that underpin the Bologna process, namely [academic freedom](#) (EHEA, 2020), [student and staff participation in higher education governance, institutional autonomy, responsibility for and of higher education and academic integrity](#) (EHEA, 2024). These values, accompanied by a clear commitment to human rights and democracy are a prerequisite for an educational system that aims at contributing to the future of our society as a whole.

Unfortunately, despite these commitments of EHEA member states, Europe is experiencing a democratic backsliding which also takes place in and affects higher education systems. Attacks on academic freedom have risen unprecedentedly in recent years (AFi, [2024](#)). Further efforts to protect student rights (ESU, [2024 Student Rights Charter](#)) such as access to quality public education, freedom of learning, engagement in higher education governance without the fear of repercussions and persecution, and personal safety are needed. To this end, ESU welcomes the development of a monitoring system of the fundamental values within the framework of the EHEA. Member states continuously undermining the fundamental values of the Bologna Process need to be confronted with consequences for their actions.

2. Student participation

Student participation is crucial for upholding fundamental values and student and human rights in higher education. As the main and direct beneficiaries of education and, also, the largest group within the academic community, students should be included in all decision-making processes – both formal and informal – that shape their educational and social lives. Their firsthand experience makes them key stakeholders in evaluating and improving the academic environment. Involving students also strengthens community cohesion, making their engagement essential at every stage of decision-making.

ESU advocates for a higher education governance system that fosters effective, meaningful and democratic students' participation at all levels. The key to

achieving this aim is a student representation body that reflects the diversity of the student population. To effectively carry out their representation mission, political independence, financial autonomy, democracy and the right to manage and administer their own affairs are a prerequisite for student representative bodies. Thus, public authorities need to ensure that student representative bodies can be run and managed entirely by students, with decision-making power vested solely in the student body, free from interference by external entities such as academic staff, public authorities, political parties, or religious groups. A framework for financial independence is equally crucial, ensuring that student organisations can self-govern and pursue their goals without outside influence or restrictions.

European higher education governance is distinguished by its commitment to collegiality, a model that acknowledges the shared purpose of students and academic staff in shaping higher education systems (Klemencic, [2015](#)). Today, this concept has evolved into a partnership model, founded on the shared responsibility of all members of the academic community in higher education governance. Democratically elected student representatives, through active communication with their peers via student unions, can effectively contribute to governance. Likewise, academic staff are expected to engage with their constituents in the same manner, ensuring collaborative and inclusive decision-making.

To avoid tokenisation, it must be ensured that student representatives are actively involved, and not mere observers, and have the right to partake in the decision making process, with equal rights to contribute, equal voting rights compared to other stakeholder groups and the right to access all information necessary, in a timely manner, to make informed, educated decisions. Special attention is to be paid to the needs of international staff and students to enable their engagement.

While de jure provisions may guarantee student participation, it is equally important to encourage and support students in engaging. Serving as a student representative requires significant personal, mental, physical, time, and financial commitment. Barriers to participation lead to a lack of diversity in representative bodies, particularly among marginalised and minority groups. To enable meaningful involvement, financial support should be provided so that no student

representative incurs personal costs. Student representation as informal learning should be recognized as an extracurricular activity and rewarded with ECTS points and supported by policies that, when necessary and adequate, excuse absences from academic activities to allow full participation in representation duties. Higher education institutions should provide flexible solutions, such as tuition-free tolerance semesters, to accommodate full-time student representatives who may need to pause their studies.

Notably, in recent years, student representatives and unions have been experiencing an increase in attacks against them (ESU, [2024](#)). Student representatives must be protected from political persecution and academic repercussions resulting from their commitments. No student should face penalties for their engagement. HEIs and public authorities must ensure campus integrity and establish local, national, and European reporting procedures for any threats to student safety, especially for representatives.

Lastly, student unions themselves must apply democratic principles to guide their activities and coordinate the efforts of elected student representatives and ensure that representatives keep students informed about their activities, upholding transparency. They are also responsible for addressing any violations of these principles by their representatives.

3. Academic Freedom and Institutional autonomy

ESU firmly believes that the core public responsibility of higher education institutions is to pursue variety and to produce and transmit knowledge, both for the long-term improvement of society and to promote the self-creation of individual students in realising their full potential as human beings. Higher education, through both teaching and learning, as well as the application of evidence-based reasoning and the principle of argumentation rooted in the scientific method, serves as a key pillar for safeguarding and promoting democratic and liberal values. It plays a crucial role in combating disinformation, polarisation, and hate speech both within and beyond academic institutions.

Notably, higher education can only fulfil its democratic mission, if academic freedom as a prerequisite for all fundamental values underpinning higher education is ensured. To this end, the academic community needs to have the conditions provided by public authorities that allow them to exercise their academic freedom, including institutional autonomy and student and staff participation in democratic governance.

A balance has to be struck between academic freedom and institutional autonomy vis-a-vis public responsibility for higher education and student and staff participatory democratic rights. Overly rigid control by public authorities can harm transparency, management, and performance, ultimately undermining the core responsibilities of HEIs. Legal frameworks should not undermine the fundamental values of higher education. At the same time, accountability needs to be ensured, especially as publicly funded higher education bears responsibility towards society. This accountability should be ensured through compliance with minimum quality standards and adherence to principles established at the national and European level, with quality assurance agencies monitoring and assessing how higher education institutions meet these requirements.

Higher education and research institutions should be enabled to steer themselves in respect of their internal organisation and governance, the internal distribution of financial resources, and the design and implementation of learning, teaching, and research. At the same time, staffing, organisational, financial and academic affairs related autonomy should never be at the expense of students, especially with regard to admission systems, curriculum design and study fees and forms of financial support such as scholarships and grants. Policies and strategies relating to the fundamental values should be developed by the institutions within the framework of broader policies set by public authorities that ensure democratic principles and the interests of the public. However, this should not result in a too rigid control of HEIs by public authorities as this goes against the principles of democratic self-governance and may reduce transparency. Therefore, continuous trust-based dialogue based on the principles of collegiality and co-creation between public authorities, HEI leadership and the different parts of the academic community must be established to continuously revise and balance the different rights, needs and requirements against each other.

While academic freedom shares elements with freedom of speech, the two principles are not the same, as academics have a responsibility to adhere to principles of academic integrity, including the upholding of scientific standards, respect for others, ethical conduct, and the impact of teaching and research on people and the environment. A culture of debate and inquiry should be promoted, enabling students and scholars to think critically and challenge established views, which is essential for open academic communities. It is important to remember that the right to criticise and/or protest, even the academic institution one is part of, is a crucial tenet of both academic freedom and freedom of speech.

Defending academic freedom and institutional autonomy requires not only the HE community but also public support. This global challenge is key to fostering sustainable, inclusive societies. Without such support, scholars, students, and institutions become vulnerable to attacks from state and non-state actors, undermining education systems and restricting free thought, ultimately harming social, cultural, and economic development, as well as efforts toward sustainable transition. Collaboration with academic actors and stakeholders who do not defend academic freedom and who support or enable human rights violations is to be discontinued.

Lastly, it has to be emphasised that the freedom to learn, along with students' rights to autonomous self-organisation and representation within higher education governance and campus integrity, are integral components of academic freedom for students at both individual and collective levels. However, across Europe, the freedom to learn is rarely recognized in constitutions or higher education laws, whereas the freedom of science and teaching is more commonly protected. This creates a legal hierarchy that disadvantages students. To address this imbalance, the freedom to learn and students' rights to participate in higher education governance must be equally enshrined in constitutional and other relevant legal frameworks.

4. Responsibility for HE

The quality, accessibility, and equity of higher education depend significantly on funding. Education should not be viewed solely as a tool for enhancing economic competitiveness; it also fosters tolerance, inclusion, democracy, critical thinking,

personal fulfilment, and lifelong learning. These broader objectives must be considered when allocating funds.

Funds for higher education should be seen as investments in public good and responsibility, rather than mere expenses. Sufficient financing is essential for institutions to fulfil their diverse missions while maintaining their independence to operate with integrity and high quality.

Public funding must provide stability and sustainability in higher education development, focusing on long-term goals rather than short-sighted financial gains. It should also avoid prioritizing short-sighted job market demands that focus solely on short-term financial gain. Additionally, necessary financial and legislative frameworks should be established to promote cooperation at local, regional, national, European and international levels, among higher education institutions, research institutes and other relevant institutions. Recent developments, including the internationalisation of higher education, the demand for quality and innovative teaching methods, diverse economic interests in higher education, digitalization, and the need for updated technologies, have significantly impacted the required level of financial support. Failing to address these changes can have serious long-term consequences.

Commodification

Commodification is changing the perception of higher education from a public good and public responsibility to a private and limited commodity. This change fosters a customer mentality and encourages a for-profit approach to investment in education. But education is not a commodity and narratives that reduce people to numbers or customers must be resisted, reminding policymakers of the multiple purposes of education, which benefits society beyond economic outcomes. This also applies to education not being included in trade agreements. ESU calls for a carve-out of public and private education from European proposals for trade and services agreements and their negotiations, and calls for its explicit exclusion from the EU, EEA and EFTA trade agreements. ESU strongly believes that the responsibility to make full reservation on education in trade policies and agreements lies both with the EU and national governments (ESU, [2019](#)).

Performance-based funding

Funding allocated according to the performance of education institutions (such as the number of graduates or ECTS points granted) is used as a steering tool, and it should be developed in close collaboration with student representatives while allowing for flexibility and choice, and implemented only after a thorough analysis and monitoring of the potential negative incentives it gives to the decision makers in the HEIs. Funding based on the number of degrees completed on schedule or ECTS points obtained can give higher education institutions an incentive to rush students through their education at the cost of quality.

ESU strongly advises that such output factors, if used at all, should not only be based on quantity, but should also take into account integral aspects of academic and student life, notably diversity in the student population, size of the HEI, and regional differences and location, the disciplinary profile/specialisation.

When the performance-based funding model is used, it should be ensured that the fiscal stability of higher education institutions' funding is not compromised, institutional autonomy is preserved, and that institutions are not overburdened with excessive reporting requirements, and that the core funding of different disciplines or academic fields is safeguarded. Nevertheless, transparency in funding allocation must be a priority, ensuring that information is easily accessible to students and their representatives. Students should also play an active role in defining the performance indicators, drawing on their experiences as direct beneficiaries of education and related services. Furthermore, contrary to a one-size-fits-all indicator system, a certain degree of flexibility is required in order for HEIs to be able to identify issues in need of improvement relevant for the HEI and encompass the possibility to reflect the diverging needs for improvements between faculty/department levels as well. Thus, performance-based funding, if applied, should be at least dialogue based, ensuring the inclusion of students in discussions at all levels and allowing for adjustments to prevent negative side effects.

Education free of tuition fees

Public investment has had the largest drop across EU countries in recent years (Commission, [2024](#)), with policy measures transforming education from a protected public service into a target for funding cuts. This prioritisation of short-term savings over long-term accessibility undermines the right to education. To consolidate budgets, more and more countries and HEIs are introducing tuition fees, shifting the financial burden onto students. This approach poses a substantial barrier to the right to education as well as the connected right to choose an occupation freely, especially given the diverse socio-economic backgrounds of students. Tuition fees disproportionately impact those from lower-income families, making access to education more selective (ESU, [2020](#)). All education must become and/or remain free of tuition fees for all students, regardless of nationality or background (ESU, [2023](#)).

The imposition of high fees on international students, particularly those from non-EU/EEA countries, is unethical and discriminatory. Such fees hinder internationalisation and create barriers for migrants and refugees, contradicting the principles of mobility and the spirit of the Bologna Process. Public authorities must address the unequal treatment of international students regarding tuition fees by establishing a fair legislative and administrative framework.

ESU is committed to promoting accessible and sustainably funded higher education, viewing tuition fees not as a funding method, but rather as an unfair and unsustainable burden. Where fees exist, "socio-economic tuition scholarships" should be provided to cover both direct and indirect costs, ensuring access for all societal levels. The cost of tuition should not be higher for individuals who already hold a degree.

Tuition-free education should not only be seen as a means to enhance graduate employability. Higher education institutions and policymakers must strive for inclusive and publicly funded education systems that adequately prepare students for life beyond their studies, while ensuring access for diverse groups, including individuals from various socio-economic backgrounds, refugees, international students and non-traditional students.

Public investments in higher education institutions and Public-Private-Partnerships

Legal frameworks and policy strategies in higher education must protect the rights of scholars and students, safeguarding academic freedom and preventing two-speed systems. The autonomy of funding decisions by research councils and funding bodies should be respected to ensure research diversity. True academic freedom and high-quality tertiary education depend on sufficient public funding to cover operational costs.

Under the New Public Management paradigm, the push for diversified funding sources has been misused to justify cuts in public investment in education, increasing reliance on private financing. This shift threatens academic autonomy and independence, as funders may seek to influence institutional priorities. Therefore, third party funding should only serve as a supplement to public funding and public authorities must establish regulations for these income sources to prevent economic interests from dictating funding decisions. Donors should cover the full costs of the research they support rather than using partially funded projects to redirect public research funds toward narrow commercial interests.

Additionally, the European Council of Higher Education and EHEA members must establish clear guidelines and a roadmap for Academia-Industry relations (Public-Private Partnerships). This roadmap should prioritise academic needs over private and for-profit interests, ensuring that industry partnerships create mutual benefits while safeguarding the independence of research and learning through sustained public investment and transparent management of private funds.

Rankings

Rankings can both have positive and negative effects, depending heavily on the design and the underlying purpose of the ranking.

HEI rankings are highly subjective and vary based on chosen indicators, failing to capture the diversity of higher education institutions (e.g. different profiles, demographics, location, etc.). A high ranking does not necessarily reflect an institution's overall quality across all research fields or study programs. Thus, while

rankings can support students to find an institution that fits their wanted profile through accessible and comparable information, this is only truthfully achievable if rankings consider a diverse range of student-centred parameters and are based on programme or at least faculty levels.

Originally designed under the auspices of New Public Management (i.e. aims tied to commodification) rather than student guidance, rankings heavily impact higher education financing. Especially in performance-based funding systems, HEIs that outperform others in specific metrics (most commonly a mix of student numbers, graduates, research publications, and ability to attract third-party funding or women in leadership roles) will receive more money, shifting HEIs' strategic focus toward improving these metrics at the expense of others (e.g. student wellbeing, diversity, community outreach, student and staff participation, green campuses or ethics).

Consequently, HEIs put more focus on research in their strategic governance, deprioritising learning and teaching. In addition, the limited flexibility in adapting indicators to the specific needs of HEIs based on what is actually relevant to the specific institutions has side effects. Institutions may face a dilemma between improving metrics that the ranking system rewards instead of improving uncommon metrics such as student wellbeing or inclusivity (given the effects of rankings on HEI funding).

Lastly, international rankings favour well-established, wealthy HEIs, especially in regions that align with the Anglo-Saxon or Chinese HEI models, putting smaller and less wealthy institutions at a disadvantage. Regional biases in rankings further exacerbate inequalities between HEIs, both globally and even within Europe. Rankings influence a perception of better or worse HEIs, contributing to brain drain and shaping employers' views on the value of degrees depending on the rewarding HEIs. Ultimately, the commodification of higher education, driven by rankings, has deepened disparities between institutions.

At the same time, rankings can push HEIs to become more accountable due to comparability, which is why a balanced and holistic approach regarding parameters and rankings with different foci is needed to curb the current dominance of commodification driven rankings. Rankings should support learners'

choices and evaluate the quality of education rather than being tools of institutional prestige.

5. Responsibility of HE

Education is a core institution of our society and one of the main pillars of modern civilisation. It plays a central role in social and economic development, democratic empowerment and the advancement of the general well-being of societies, while also contributing to the ecological transition and the fight against climate change. Higher education institutions produce not only new research and highly skilled graduates but also have the responsibility to communicate their knowledge to the surrounding world and collaborate with businesses, public institutions, and other organisations and movements in their surrounding community. In order to fulfil this role, HEIs have to meet a set of obligations towards the broader society, of which they are a part.

For centuries, HEIs have been a space for democratic discussion, freedom of expression, research and learning, participatory governance, and international solidarity. These and other aspects of the fundamental values must remain at the core of higher education. HEIs have an obligation to integrate these into every aspect of their operations, and make sure that the fundamental values are respected, furthered, and implemented.

Higher education as a public good

Open and equal access to all levels of education is a prerequisite for individual and societal development and well-being. Access to higher education for all creates social mobility of which a democratic, merit-based society is dependent, as there is a significant positive relationship between education, employment, and income. Equal access to higher education should be provided to everyone (ESU, [2023](#)), independent of their background or financial status. Higher education is a human right, which is guaranteed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Higher education has an obligation to continuously interact with the society of which it is a part. This includes equal access to higher education for all citizens, proactive work to make knowledge and research results available to the general public, and researching topics which are of interest and value to other parts of society, and ensuring collaboration and consultation with society through representatives such as public authorities, NGOs, initiative groups and citizens. However, the latter does not mean that all research has to be of interest to others or fall under the category of specialised applied research. Basic research also remains a core activity of HEIs. Producing knowledge for the sake of knowledge is an integral part of higher education, but it must be balanced with its obligation to contribute to the development of free and democratic societies and the wellbeing of their citizens.

Active citizenship education and education for democracy

Active citizenship education and education for democracy aim to increase civic engagement and societal participation. Active citizenship education equips individuals with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to participate actively in their communities and broader society (ESU, [2024](#)). Education for democracy, on the other hand, focuses on preparing individuals to understand, appreciate, and engage with democratic institutions, values, and processes. This is especially crucial in times of rising polarisation and hate speech accompanying the backsliding of democracy in Europe. Study programs should thus integrate elements through student-centred learning regarding the defence and promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Sustainability

ESU believes in the importance of sustainability in higher education ([2019](#), [2023](#), [2024](#)), and, as stated in the Magna Charta Universitatum ([2020](#)), that HEIs have a responsibility to engage with and respond to the aspirations and challenges of the world, to benefit humanity and contribute to sustainability. This is an obligation that should be reflected in all aspects of HEIs, including education, research, institutional practices and governance. Meaningful contributions to a greener and better world necessitate cooperation between institutions and disciplines,

concrete planning and reporting, sufficient funding and meaningful involvement of students and staff.

Sustainable development and active citizenship are crucial parts of the public responsibility of higher education and key in empowering students to shape a sustainable future. Institutions should integrate Education for Sustainable Development (ESDs) holistically across all programs, ensuring graduates are equipped to tackle climate and ecological crises and foster democratic, inclusive, and socially sustainable societies. All students shall acquire up-to-date knowledge about global and local challenges, as well as the knowledge and skills to contribute to solutions within their field.

Internships

ESU considers internships an educational pathway that fosters work-based learning, by allowing students to put theory into practice as a means to equip students with relevant knowledge and experience regarding their field of study (ESU, [2019](#) and [2023](#)). All degrees should allow for the students to obtain relevant work experience through internships, traineeships or apprenticeships as part of the degree.

As a part of a student's education, internships should be relevant to the respective field of study, and be carried out with qualified supervision and mentorship from both their workplace and higher education institution. Student interns should not be used as free or cheap labour, and all educational internships, both as a part of formal education and outside of it, should be included in the ban on unpaid internships.

Disciplinary Orthodoxy

Academic fields often have structures that are shaped by dominant ideas, methods, and standards. This can be a challenge for scholars who want to question the mainstream or explore new ideas, as they may be pushed to the margins. Some disciplines, especially in the humanities, face criticism for using methods like case studies or small-scale research, which focus on specific events or groups, but these approaches are still valuable. Scholars have a responsibility

to encourage new ideas and perspectives, promote openness to different approaches, and work across disciplines. This is essential for advancing knowledge and improving both research and teaching while staying true to the scientific method.

Diversity in academia

In order to generate and disseminate knowledge that accurately reflects the world we live in, researchers, educators, technical staff and leaders need to have varied backgrounds, allowing them to include a variety of experiences in their work and reflecting the diversity of society at large.

Diversity in higher education does not happen by itself. Proactive measures are needed in order to challenge the existing power dynamics and promote the inclusion of underrepresented groups. It is necessary to foster an environment that challenges gender stereotypes and breaks down glass ceilings for marginalised and underrepresented groups, including persons from non-academic backgrounds, disabled and racialised persons. Universities should ensure that individuals from all backgrounds have equal opportunities to enter into and advance in careers in academia. HEIs should actively promote equality through inclusive and intersectional leadership and governance structures.

Open research

ESU believes in an Open Science culture that encourages collaboration, transparency, and the dissemination of research to benefit society as a whole. Publicly and partially publicly funded research, research data and teaching materials should be available to everyone. Researchers should be adequately enumerated for their research, and the intellectual property of research should remain with the author. The creator should publish both data and paper under public copyright licences to improve open education in general. HEIs and local communities should discover possibilities to cooperate more on research projects that would work for the development of communities.

The funding provided for research, be it coming from domestic or EU sources, should always cover the cost of peer-reviews, in order to support the accessibility for researchers to open-access publications.

Lifelong learning

HEIs have a responsibility to ensure that education is not only accessible to traditional degree students, but also to people who need upskilling, reskilling or just want to learn more throughout their lives. These students need access to programs and courses which are more flexible and adaptable with respect to scheduling, teaching, and preferably tailored curriculum for people with existing experience from professional life. In addition, higher education should be integrated in a whole-system approach to education, fostering synergies between all levels of education and formal and informal learning environments. HEIs primary focus should be on degree education and the development of lifelong learning offerings should not lead to a reduction of resources in degree education.

Working Conditions of Academic Staff

ESU is concerned about the fact that academic staff are increasingly hired on short-term contracts and working much more than full time because they have to constantly fundraise for their own job through grants (ESU, [2024](#)). This takes valuable time away from focusing on high-quality research and teaching as well as threatens academic freedom due to the dependency on public-private partnerships. Furthermore, the lack of job security and the over-burdening of staff threatens their mental health and contributes to employment inequality as those who are unable to work extra hours due to e.g. caring responsibilities or health fall behind in the highly competitive “publish or perish” working environment. This is not only unhealthy and unfair, but it also harms the quality of research and education. Time spent on teaching and on contributing to the democratic structures of higher education institutions must be valued and made space for in contracts.

While student jobs in higher education provide valuable income and a pathway into academia, they often come with insecure contracts and power imbalances that disadvantage students. The issue is even more pronounced for doctoral

students, who face exploitation as their employers also control their academic assessments, creating a dependency that can affect their future careers. Ensuring fair conditions for doctoral students is essential. These jobs should meet minimum standards for good working conditions. Additionally, outsourcing non-academic staff also leads to exploitation and frequent violations of workers' rights, especially for those on temporary contracts.

Good working conditions go beyond fair pay and job security—they also require a safe and inclusive environment. Higher education institutions must implement strong protections against discrimination and gender-based violence, including clear reporting mechanisms and decisive actions to address violations, upholding thus academic integrity.

6. Academic integrity

Academic integrity is essential to quality education and a safeguard of academia. Tackling academic fraud (i.e. any action that can undermine the fairness, trust and integrity of academic processes) requires collaboration among students, teachers, researchers, administrative staff, and policymakers. Fraud-free education builds trust, and academic fraud undermines the fairness and integrity of the academic process.

Legal frameworks and transnational collaboration

Academic integrity transcends national boundaries and has implications for the trust between higher education systems. Therefore, transnational collaboration is crucial to ensure consistent policies and standards. Both academic and non-academic institutions (such as private businesses offering illegal services) can undermine academic integrity, making it necessary for higher education institutions and public authorities to take legal steps to safeguard these standards. Notably, the rise of AI and digitalization has fueled essay mills, diploma mills, and contract cheating, which require coordinated efforts among national regulators, HEIs, legal authorities, and international bodies to address.

Comparable data should be collected on national levels in collaboration with HEIs (taking into account GDPR) in order to develop effective policies. Peer-learning activities for and between institutions should be promoted. Quality assurance processes should integrate a focus on academic integrity systematically.

Student Involvement in Policy Creation and Misconduct Frameworks

Student involvement in creating frameworks for addressing misconduct and participating in investigations and disciplinary actions is a prerequisite of academic integrity, as their experiences and views are essential for policy-creation, investigations and support structures and ensures trust of students in the processes. Measures in case of misconduct should be proportional as especially students are learners who may make mistakes, notwithstanding their responsibility to respect principles of academic integrity. HEIs need to stand in solidarity with victims and witnesses and deliver transparent and timely investigation leading to concrete outcomes and measures.

Power Abuse and Zero-Tolerance Policy

Abuse of power within academia, particularly cases of sexual harassment, blackmail, or bullying, demands swift and transparent action from higher education institutions. Power imbalances between staff and students, as well as between senior staff and subordinates, necessitate a zero-tolerance approach to combat such abuses. Discrimination and harassment can also occur among peers, and HEIs must stand in solidarity with victims and witnesses, ensuring timely investigations that lead to concrete outcomes. Anonymized data of these investigations, including numbers of persons involved, time of investigation and results should be collected to ensure accountability and informed policy-making.

Ethics Committees and Ombudspersons

To ensure high ethical standards and mainstream public responsibility, higher education institutions and public authorities must establish ethics/disciplinary committees and clear guidelines in the form of a Code of Ethics/Conduct. These

committees must include democratically elected student representatives, as full members, with complete access to all the information.

Ethics committees should be operationalized as structures that oversee academic integrity, ethical conduct of all teaching and learning-related activities, but also extracurricular activities that involve members of the academic community, research safety, and possible negative impacts of research on society at large, encompassing social, economic and ecological concerns. They should have the authority to act independently, including self-initiated investigations. Higher education institutions have the responsibility of informing students about the ethics committees, the codes of conduct and reporting mechanisms. Teaching and administrative staff should be trained for prevention and early intervention in ethical breaches.

For fair student treatment, institutions need transparent, accessible channels for complaints that ensure confidentiality and protect complainants of negative consequences, covering issues from unfair exams to sexual misconduct and whistleblowing. Ombudspersons should act as neutral mediators, ensuring students are informed about complaint processes and campus policies on harassment and discrimination and that they receive proper care before, during and after procedures. Student representative bodies should be involved in the selection process of ombudspersons and there should be procedures in place in case ombudspersons lose the trust of students.

Preventing discrimination requires a cultural shift where power dynamics do not hinder reporting or create fear of retaliation. Confidential, independent, and anonymous reporting mechanisms are essential. Ombudspersons should track complaint trends and recommend policy changes to HEIs and public authorities, ensuring fairness and safety on campus.

Promoting Academic Integrity

Academic integrity should be promoted by the entire academic community, encompassing mandatory training for both students and staff, alongside measures such as diverse teaching methods, student-centred learning connected to learning outcomes, and clear sanctions for misconduct. Transparent and

accessible information on academic integrity must be provided to students, and anonymous evaluation systems as an internal quality assurance tool should be implemented to provide feedback but also hold teachers accountable through measures in case of strong underperformance. Lastly, a culture that allows students to make mistakes is needed, as academic pressure connected to a non-existing error culture fosters misconduct.

Leadership and training

Higher education institutions must recognize and support the role of academic leaders, fostering a relationship of trust and professionalism between leaders and the wider academic community both between staff and between staff and students. Leaders should be capable of setting strategic priorities and resolving conflicts, a challenge often heightened when they are elected from within their peers. Special attention must also be given to the growing prevalence of online misinformation, especially on social media platforms.

Academic leadership should be viewed as a valuable career progression, and those interested should be supported in developing the necessary skills. Recruitment for these roles should be open, transparent, and inclusive, ensuring equal opportunities for all qualified candidates, including those from outside the institution.

Learning Analytics, Data Privacy and Fair Use of Digital Tools

Learning analytics involves collecting and analysing student data to optimise learning experiences. Discussions on AI-based tools in learning analytics must prioritise protecting student rights and personal data. Students' data should not be used for marketing or research without clear consent, and any AI-based tools should only be used based on active opt-in choices without consequences, if a student doesn't opt in It should always be possible to opt out at a later point if a student changes their mind. Only students' data relevant for the learning analysis should be collected.

AI and digital tools can have many positive effects for students and staff. However, digital tools should only assist in education and not replace human judgement. AI

systems, while efficient, can reflect biases from their creators, underscoring the need to carefully monitor their use. HEIs must ensure that AI does not perpetuate biases or unfairly penalise certain student groups (ESU [2024](#)).

Particular attention is needed for online exam proctoring, where personal data privacy is violated on a regular basis. Thus, proctoring should always come with non-privacy invasive alternatives.

Intellectual Property

Students and researchers alike hold intellectual property rights (i.e., all intangible creations of the mind that can be protected by legislation under patent, copyright and/or trademark laws) and thus have the full rights to exercise all the benefits derived from it.

Higher education institutions must foster a culture that enables students, researchers, and teachers to produce original creations, inventions, and discoveries as part of their activities, both within and outside of classes. A learning environment that allows the dissemination of knowledge provides students with the opportunity to be productive and create intellectual property. At the same time, their ownership of intellectual property should be fully protected and respected.

From the outset of their higher education, students should learn to develop and protect intellectual property through integrated copyright and intellectual property training in the curriculum. It should be mandatory for HEIs to develop clear guidelines and communication on intellectual property. These guidelines should be co-created with student representatives and be easily accessible to all students, emphasising the importance of their ownership of intellectual property and valuing their achievements in accordance with legislation. Policies must mandate a consensual agreement on intellectual property ownership before students begin their research, ensuring HEIs do not misuse their dominant position over students. Students should have the right to opt out of having their written assignments processed by anti-plagiarism software, as this practice can unintentionally infringe upon their intellectual property rights by utilising their work without proper consent.

Acknowledging the need for HEIs to establish agreements with students regarding shared intellectual property ownership when students significantly use institutional facilities for creation, students have intellectual property rights. Study contracts that require students to unconditionally transfer their intellectual property rights to HEIs or corporations must be abolished, as they diminish the role of students. Any violation of student ownership of intellectual property is considered unethical and constitutes academic misconduct, warranting prosecution by academic integrity bodies.

Public-Private Partnerships: Ethics of Internships and Intellectual Property

Cooperation between HEIs and industries can expand student opportunities through quality internships and real-world projects. Workplace learning should be learning-based, provide proper guidance, fairly paid, and aligned with labour standards, including social security and legal contracts. The practice of using internships to cut employment costs or replace paid jobs is unethical and must end.

Engagement of HEIs with industry partnerships must remain voluntary, transparent, and prioritise students' competencies and skills development as education should serve broader societal needs, not just economic ones. Industry influence on joint research and teaching content should be limited, with intellectual property agreements between students, HEIs, and industry partners safeguarding the intellectual property produced during the workplace learning period.

Scholarships provided by industry should cover the full duration of a study program without being contingent on periodic results. Students should not face repayment obligations or extended work terms tied to such scholarships, ensuring their freedom to pursue education without undue pressure or retaliation for unwanted results. Furthermore, students should not be offered industry scholarships that require reimbursement of financial support, whether in monetary terms or through an excessive work commitment, as this could restrict their opportunities and compel them to accept financial aid to continue their education.

7. Solidarity

Solidarity between students and from broader society is required to ensure a universal right to access higher education. In the era of diverse student mobility, particularly with global education's increased prominence, many students more frequently move between jurisdictions. In the spirit of a community of knowledge, on both a global and European level, initiatives such as European university alliances and global exchange programs emphasize the importance of upholding fundamental values beyond national borders. Indeed, a threat to academia anywhere around the globe undoubtedly impacts academia as a whole. Enabling and accepting different standards of academic and fundamental values, would threaten the whole realisation of the previously developed principles. Therefore, the global student community should feel concerned and engage when fundamental values, such as the one enshrined in the Student Rights Charter (ESU, [2024](#)), are at risk. Through solidarity actions, students do not only exchange best practices and build capacity to overcome those challenges, they also represent an engaged and determined civil society actively fighting for student rights. By doing so, students reaffirm and reinform the values they are promoting.

Additionally, it is important to reiterate the rights of students to raise their voices on topics that indirectly impact higher education, but due to their nature impacts students and their right to education, such as for instance, wars and international conflicts, major crisis (eg. climate change), major infringement of fundamental rights.

However, solidarity also encompasses supporting students at risk and refugee students. Indeed, special support should be granted to students that are being persecuted because of their involvement in student representatives' bodies. Therefore, special procedures should be put in place in order to enable those students to pursue their study programs in a safe environment, whether it be at national level or by welcoming them in safe countries, through some programs such as the "student at risk" program. It is fundamental that those programs are not only implemented at national level, but also encouraged by international bodies such as the Council of Europe or the European Union.

Finally, in a sense of inclusivity, solidarity and common responsibility to the academic community, it is necessary to guarantee that every student gets granted the right and the effective possibility to study in the country they are located. This concerns particularly the rights of refugee and forcibly displaced students.

Annexed positions:

- [Statement on Commodification](#)
- [Statement on Sustainability](#)
- [Statement on education for sustainable development](#)
- [Statement on sustainability of higher education](#)
- [Statement: Ensure Quality Internships, Traineeships and Apprenticeships in Europe](#)
- [Statement on quality and fair Internships](#)
- [Policy paper on Social Dimensions](#)
- [ESU's position on sustainable and attractive academic careers](#)
- [ESU Student Rights Charter](#)
- [ESU Statement on Artificial Intelligence](#)