European Students' Union (ESU)
Fighting for students' rights since 1982

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Strategic Priorities 2022-2024

These strategic priorities outline the objectives within ESU's work areas for the three years of 2022 to 2024.

ESU is the voice of European students and represents their interests and needs through a multitude of actions. Mainly, ESU participates and aims to influence the design and the implementation of European policy processes and political strategies on education, particularly from the lens of higher education. Over the next three years, the main processes ESU is and will be focusing on are the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area, the European Education Area and the European Universities Initiative, the Erasmus+ programme, the European Research Area, the Global Students Forum, Next Generation EU, and the Green and Digital Transitions.

Throughout its advocacy and representation, ESU reiterates its commitment in defending and promoting students' rights, academic freedom, institutional autonomy, freedom of speech, recognition of democratic, independent student unions both at the European level and supporting national unions in advocacy, lobby and capacity building. ESU promotes solidarity among unions and concrete support between its members. ESU also strives to promote upward convergence of students' rights within the European Higher Education Area and European Education Area.

While advocating for students rights major problems like the commodification of education, inequity in access to higher education, threats to fundamental values and the climate crisis have to be addressed. The deteriorating mental health situation of higher education students following the Covid-19 pandemic also requires action and gives a framework for ESU's advocacy work. ESU aims to continuously improve the international aspect of Higher Education, as it is an invaluable experience for every learner and can serve to build cross-border solidarity and cooperation to tackle the challenges of our generation.

ESU believes that education as a whole, and higher education more specifically, is not a commodity, rather a public utility, human right, and a social responsibility, the aim of which is to serve multiple purposes, including individual enrichment, global citizenship education, responsibility to the needs of the communities and societies, and acquisition of knowledge and skills to enable students to thrive in a rapidly changing economy and society.

2022 - 2024 CORE PRIORITIES:

1. Defending Student Participation

ESU has long stood against different trends of repression targeting academic and student freedoms in Europe and across the world. These range from systematic attacks to academic and student activists and repression of dissent to more subtle ways to decrease the organisational capacity of students to autonomously organise and to participate in the governance of higher education at the local and national levels. The democratic participation of students is one of the fundamental values of the European Higher Education Area. Unfortunately, the emergence of new institutionalised structures of cooperation between Higher Education Institutions at the European level so far mostly fails in achieving student democratic participation in decision-making processes, particularly on the national level.

Therefore, ESU will focus its work on:

1.1. Monitoring and raising awareness on the breaches and struggles of students' rights to participation;
1.2. Supporting student representatives in their lobby actions to enhance student participation in decision-making processes, as well as actions to increase students' rights in education laws as mentioned in the Students' Rights Charter;
1.3. Enhancing multilevel collaborative and solidarity actions between student movements at the local, national, European and global levels, in collaboration with our international partners and the Global Student Forum;
1.4. Advocating for better working conditions, equal rights and remuneration for the same work are given to students as to other workers regardless of whether the work is done as part of a learning experience or not;
1.5. Supporting the creation of an effective monitoring and implementation system of fundamental values in the EHEA;

1.6. Mainstreaming the recognition of democratic participation of student representation in governance and decision-making processes, as well as their expertise in the relevant students matters, in multidimensional contexts (e.g. European Education Area, European Higher Education Area);

1.7. Raising awareness on the public and institutional responsibility to provide sustainable support and resources for students and student organisations to participate in democratic processes;

1.8. Supporting the endeavours for democratic student participation in international education organisations and global level fora;

1.9. Supporting and acting at European level on student participation in EU initiatives such as European Universities Initiative or the implementation of Next Generation EU.

2. An inclusive HE Environment

In an increasingly globalised world inclusive education serves as an indispensable characteristic of modern learning. Higher Education must recognise and respond to the needs of learners as well as the rapid societal changes that frame the learning environment of students. However, efforts cannot stop at acknowledgement but must lead to efforts of active inclusion. Inclusion in education is rooted deeply in the democratic principles of justice and equal opportunity. Consequently, inclusion involves modernising the provision of instruction, curricula, co-curricular, learning environments, assessment and learning outcomes to meet learning needs. Flexible learning pathways and the recognition of prior learning are among the main tools to achieve this. Furthermore, it is paramount to recognise the effects of dated frameworks of learning on student wellbeing. In recognising students' needs, there has to be an effort to provide educational, as well as social, economic, and welfare student support services that align with these student needs. Moreover, it is necessary to foster a broader study and knowledge on the matter of student financing and student policy data collection in order to have a comprehensive view of students' socio-economic conditions in the EHEA.

Therefore, ESU will focus its work on:

2.1. Advocating for the Social Dimension within the EHEA as an integral part of high quality education by supporting the monitoring of the implementation of the principles and guidelines for strengthening the social dimension on the national and institutional levels;

2.2. Calling for public funding streams and incentivising strategies for widening access and breaking down social, economic and institutional barriers between

all educational levels, with a lifelong learning perspective, and in the transitions between education and the world of work;

2.3.   Raising awareness for the need of effective, accessible and user-friendly student support services including, but not limited to: student counselling, financial support services, mental health services and services for students with disabilities. Students should be given access to information on these services;

2.4.   Supporting member unions and working at the European level towards establishing professional training for administrative and academic staff on implementing strategies for inclusion in higher education;

2.5.   Campaigning for mental health and mental wellbeing to be kept as a focus when implementing curriculum design and designing the learning environment and process as a whole;

2.6.   Supporting the creation of quality assured flexible learning pathways for students of diverse backgrounds, including part-time students and students who have already worked as well as marginalised groups and minorities, to equitably access, participate and succeed in their education as recognition of prior learning is essential for maintaining flexible study pathways;

2.7.   Advocating for access to digital tools, as well as training and resources to enhance the skills and the environment needed for making use of them;

2.8.   Implementing and promoting the Students at Risk initiative on the European level;

2.9.   Foster activities that study and analyse socio-economic conditions of students across Europe;

2.10. Actively promoting a discrimination-free environment in HE on every basis.

3. Internationalisation

The COVID-19 pandemic has completely changed the perception of internationalisation and mobility. The health crisis has brought new ways of adapting to communication that were used for cross-border learning. ESU is continuing to promote that virtual learning should be used only in addition to physical mobility, not as its replacement. Our ambition of making higher education accessible is still jeopardised because there are learners left behind our higher education systems. ESU will hence advocate for creating better, sustainable and accessible conditions for mobility and internationalisation, taking into account its effects on countries involved.

Therefore, ESU will focus its work on:

3.1. Promoting the broadening of the existing or setting new automatic recognition treaties for validated higher education degrees within EHEA and globally through tools such as the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the Global Recognition Convention;

3.2. Addressing the main causes of brain drain and brain gain, while raising awareness on good practises in higher education that can tackle this topic;

3.3. Stressing the importance of accessibility of sustainable physical mobility and its differentiation from blended and virtual mobility. ESU finds physical mobility to be a key factor when discussing structural mobility advocating to remove barriers;

3.4. Equalising financial support and access for EU and non-EU students studying;

3.5. Promoting the accessibility of intercontinental student mobility as that which exists for mobility within Europe;

3.6. Advocating for the increase of financial resources for the Erasmus+ programme and for the increase of opportunities for student mobility at the European level;

3.7. Promoting diversity and equal position of Higher Education Institutes in European Universities alliances.

4. A sustainable and innovative HE

The responsibility of HEIs in general society cannot be ignored in a comprehensive approach towards a sustainable future. ESU is continuing to advocate for an innovative learning and teaching environment. Starting from the concept of climate justice, HEIs should implement study frameworks that are student-centred and sustainable at environmental, economic, and social levels. Focusing especially on environmental sustainability, the focus should be on combining investment in technologies and infrastructures with a stronger commitment for an eco-sustainable culture and responsible digital innovation. A major factor suppressing progress is the issue of vested interests in the funding of HEI.

Therefore, ESU will focus its work on:

4.1. Actively promoting the cohesion between research and education as well as evidence-based policymaking;

4.2. Campaigning against the commodification of education, including raising awareness on the impact of financial resources, HE management models as well as structural reforms on the public responsibility of higher education;

4.3. Enhancing resources for didactical, pedagogical and methodological training for the teaching staff to promote student-centred innovation in learning and teaching, particularly to help students gain more transferable skills (sustainability, entrepreneurship, human rights as well as global and democratic citizenship, data literacy) for the good of the society;

4.4. Advocating for sustainability to be embedded through a social justice lens into education policy as well as the curricula;

4.5. Supporting NUSes in assessing sustainable financing and public responsibility models to mitigate or eliminate possible commodification tendencies;

4.6. Interlinking education and research to promote the OpenScience approach, research and academic integrity, also in relation to the third cycle of higher education;

4.7. Monitoring the emergence of any structural cooperation models between HEIs to prevent possible harmful imbalances within the national higher education systems and EHEA as a whole;

4.8. Proposing and supporting legislative changes, which will lead to removing obstacles in the further implementation of Bologna tools and other developments resulting in a higher convergence of HE systems across the EHEA;

4.9. Advocating for cooperation between students and HEIs on a European and global level on sustainability as well as to encourage divestment from shares in fossil fuel companies;

4.10. Define and act upon the decolonisation of education in Europe;

4.11. Actively engage in the discourse and use of Artificial Intelligence, learning analytics in the educational context and its impact on students, their education, and rights;

4.12. Raise awareness amongst the student movement on Intellectual property rights.

5. Quality Higher Education

ESU stresses that quality education for all should be the goal of planning, providing, and assessing higher education. Quality Education must continue to be a priority and primarily focus on enhancing the quality of higher education institutions and programmes, while ensuring that students are able to achieve the intended learning outcomes and their learning experience remains at the forefront of institutional missions. Quality assurance processes should continue to enhance learners'

experience in EHEA while gaining a higher level of ownership of their own learning, its delivery and quality.

Therefore, ESU will focus its work on:

5.1. Promoting Student-Centred Learning, and translating the current and future components of Higher Education through this approach;

5.2. Developing QA tools to ensure the quality of digital education as well as advocating for technological research and development in digital education to serve the students' needs;

5.3. Being a close partner for the developments and the process of the implementation and revision of the ESGs;

5.4. Advocating for the implementation of Bologna Tools, including Qualifications' Framework, ECTS, and digitalised register of learners' education;

5.5. Being actively involved in reducing the cross/border barriers in achieving the outcomes in areas such as recognition, joint degrees, and joint programs;

5.6. Developing the ESU's Quality Assurance students' pool according to the ESU QA Pool strategic development plan;

5.7. Continuing and strengthening the advocacy for student participation in the processes concerning the quality of education, the structure of educational programmes, and quality assurance;

5.8. Supporting QA of European Universities.

6. Organisational Development

ESU will work on introducing different models and organisational development strategies to identify organisational problems and opportunities to produce/sth techniques and processes for facilitating organisational and financial growth and improvement.

Therefore, ESU will focus its work on:

6.1. Establishing an improved communication stream and membership engagement to achieve increased involvement of the member organisations in ESU's work on all levels;

6.2. Ensuring diversified sources of funding for ESU by working towards building a financial plan that is sustainable and fit for purpose;

6.3. Strengthening institutional memory and continuity in our advocacy capacity through the creation of a student movement library;

6.4. Strengthening the stability and capacity of ESU's human resources both within the secretariat and hacks team;

6.5. Enhancing public visibility in a way to be recognized as an actor inside & outside of the HE bubble;

6.6. Creating a framework on capacity building for members: support on campaigning, guidance on finding funds, training new members;

6.7. Strengthening our role in multi-level lobbying in the EU and EHEA as well as building stronger ties with partner organisations with a common vision and goal;

6.8. Further assessing and developing of ESU`s expert pools` governance documents and strategies and aligning them with ESU`s priorities;

6.9. Developing stronger impact in the field of research in higher education by establishing stakeholder cooperation and providing students` voice in the research community;

6.10. Further streamlining its operations by examining ESU's 'BM twice a year' model and its resource-intensive and time-consuming nature.