

These strategic priorities outline the objectives to be advocated for within ESU's various work areas for the five years of 2025 to 2029. The chapters, goals and indicators in this document are not put in the order of priority.



Strategic Priorities



ESU Strategic Political Priorities

2025–2029

The European Students' Union promotes and represents the interests of almost 20 million students, represented through national unions of students in ESU, to all key European decision-making bodies. ESU participates in and aims to influence European policy-making, particularly from the lens of higher education.

In its work, ESU is guided by its aims and values:

- To promote the views of students on the educational system as a whole.
- To promote the social, economic, political and cultural interests of students and the human rights of students which have a direct or indirect effect on education and on the status and welfare of students in society.
- To promote equal opportunities for all students regardless of their political belief, religion; ethnic or cultural origin, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic background or any disability they may have.
- To promote access to quality higher education for all people.
- To promote European and global cooperation and to facilitate information exchange with students and students' organisations.
- To promote co-operation with other organised groups in matters pertaining to education and student life.
- To provide assistance and support to students' unions in Europe in their work to protect and fight for student interests.

Current context of higher education:

Current context of higher education. In recent years, Europe has faced numerous crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and the ongoing triple planetary crisis. These challenges have been accompanied by a rise in anti-democratic sentiments, disinformation, polarisation, and radicalisation.

Additionally, rapid technological advancements have left the higher education sector struggling to keep pace, while political responses remain insufficient. Many higher education systems are also grappling with financial pressures due to underfunding and the increasing commodification of education. The outlined Strategic Political Priorities have been developed against this backdrop of complex political challenges affecting students and higher education institutions and systems alike.

Equal Access to Higher Education

Over the past few years, the costs of living in European countries have increased significantly, in line with high rates of inflation and increasing energy prices. Many students are already living in a difficult economic situation, and so they have been particularly affected by the increased prices. In most countries, the increase in costs has been even higher for students than the general inflation, because of sharp price increases for e.g. accommodation and food. Equal access to higher education is fundamental for a democratic society with a high degree of social mobility. In order for education to be available to all, both costs of living and studying needs to be kept low. This also applies for international students, as ESU believes that higher education should be accessible to all.

Goals for 2029

- Increasing affordability and accessibility of higher education.
- Tuition-free higher education is more broadly available in European countries.
- Further the participation of persons from vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups in higher education.

Actions

- All higher education systems implement concrete strategies to support students, as well as legal requirements and financial incentives for HEIs.
- Promote the creation of a report by the Commission on the living conditions of students within the EEA including steps forward for an inclusivity framework.
- Advocate for a Council recommendation on student support services, establishing minimum standards for the investments in student grants, HEI retention efforts, healthcare, mental health support, housing, transport and other services.
- Ensure that student housing will be tackled in the European Affordable Housing Plan and that student poverty will be one of the focus areas in the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Democracy and Governance

Democracy in Europe is under threat, impacting students' lives and representation. Many young people feel disconnected from political processes, with their voices often sidelined in decisions affecting their education and future. This disconnection is worsened by barriers like limited access to governance and lack of awareness about their rights. Active student participation is vital for fostering an inclusive and democratic educational environment. Mechanisms that empower students in decision-making and active citizenship are needed, ensuring their perspectives are valued and building a more democratic society.

a. Student representation and participation

Active student participation and representation are vital for effective governance in higher education. Many institutions, like the European University Alliances, still lack proper frameworks that ensure student voices are heard in key decisions affecting their academic lives. To address this, we must protect and broaden the representation we already have, as well as bolster student participation across all levels of governance to foster inclusivity and collaboration. By empowering students to engage in policy-making, we can create a more democratic landscape that values their insights and enhances the overall quality of education.

Goals for 2029

- Safeguard student representation based on democratic electoral principles.
- Expand student participation in all spaces of higher education governance.

Actions

- Advocate for a student participation framework for the Alliances, recognizing students as equal partners, based on principles of representativeness, democratic elections and independency.
- Develop and advocate minimum requirements for student participation in QA procedures and governance.
- Promoting the recognition of student participatory and representative functions to elevate their status and foster societal appreciation.
- Advocate for transparency as a core value in higher education governance, ensuring open access to decision-making processes, policies and financial information for students.

b. Fundamental values

The link between values and education has gained attention recently, especially within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Efforts are being made to establish a shared understanding of fundamental values (academic freedom, institutional autonomy, academic integrity, responsibility for and of HE, student and staff participation) along with a monitoring framework. However, many students remain unaware of these principles and their role in promoting democracy and social cohesion. Raising awareness of these values and advocating for European-level protections of student rights is vital to fostering an educational environment that upholds democratic values and encourages active civic participation.

Goals for 2029

- Raising awareness on the importance of Fundamental Values, Education for Democracy and Citizenship Education.
- Advocate for European level instruments to safeguard student rights and support students affected by infringements.

Actions

- Promote a Council recommendation on the upward convergence of student rights within the EU & promote the CoE Students Rights Charter.
- Advocate for an European approach to a human rights defenders support tool for politically persecuted students at risk.
- Promote values-based education (education for democracy, active citizenship education, service learning, SDGs) in curriculum design and third mission of HE.
- Establish a monitoring of attacks against academic freedom of students and student representatives.

Future-proof higher education

Recent crises have exposed the unpreparedness of European higher education systems to address global challenges. Students deserve a future-proof education, where they are equipped with updated knowledge about global and local challenges, as well as the knowledge and skills to contribute to solutions within their field, which is especially important in addressing the urgent need for a twin transition in response to the triple planetary crisis.

To better safeguard education against large-scale crises, it requires coordinated investment and macroeconomic reforms at the European level, including national funding, EU support, stakeholder involvement, and monitoring. To this end, the Erasmus+ budget needs to be increased to ensure that the program's objectives can be met.

Additionally, recent political developments, making students which are a vulnerable societal group a de facto playball of other political issues, have left students from several EHEA countries excluded from Erasmus+, limiting their ability to participate in cross-European study mobility, Erasmus+ and internationalisation.

Goals for 2029

- Participation of Region-14, the Republic of Moldova and Hungary in the Erasmus+ program.
- Ensure equal rights for international students as domestic and EU students.
- Advocate for increased financial resources and instruments to support the higher education sector and European University Alliances.
- Reduced direct and indirect carbon emissions from HEIs, and foster knowledge about relevant climate and environmental issues through curricula.

Future-proof higher education

Actions

- Creation of a strategy on how to advocate for the integration of excluded countries in the Erasmus+ program.
- Creation of a research paper on the living and study conditions of international students in Europe.
- Creation of an action plan to lobby the Erasmus+ budget for the next 2028 - 2034 EU Multiannual Financial Framework.
- Advocacy for the creation of a special EU funding instrument for investments in HE, integration of HE in other investment tools (esp. Regarding Green Deal, RRF & similar new tools).
- Development of guidelines for greener HEIs.
- Advocacy for the implementation of Education for Sustainable Development (ESDs) and similar frameworks in all study programs.
- Promotion of alternative mobilities, such as Blended Intensive Programmes (BIP), to increase accessibility for students who cannot access traditional mobilities and similar frameworks in all study programs.
- Advocate for long-term and sustainable EU funding for European Universities initiative, ensuring that specific funding is allocated to support student participation within the alliances.
- Advocate for increasing the Erasmus+ budget for the multiannual financial framework for years 2028-2034.

Student-centred Digitalisation

The rapid spread of AI-based and other technologies have emerged to be a hot topic on European level. At the same time, while HEIs have begun to embrace the usage of such tools more and more, significant disparities persist in the implementation of digitalisation strategies and legal frameworks across countries, accompanied by ongoing confusion and insufficient knowledge related to digital tools as well as insufficient infrastructure. These gaps need to be addressed to ensure that digitalisation does not exacerbate existing inequalities or further marginalise vulnerable communities. A cohesive and inclusive approach is necessary for digitalisation to benefit all students equally.

Goals for 2029

- Ensure equal opportunities in the access to digital tools, devices and infrastructure and the implementation of more inclusive study environments.
- Advocate for a higher education tailored to the unique needs and goals of each student and for the use of artificial Intelligence in higher education that puts the students, their interests and their rights at the centre.

Actions

- Include the quality assurance of digital learning tools and methods in the European Standards and Guidelines (ESGs) for Quality Assurance.
- Work at the European level on a common approach to implement AI use and digital tools in higher education within the EU (Digital Education Action Plan, AI act, STEM Education Strategic Plan, EU Teachers Agenda, etc.), the EHEA (e.g. Bologna tools, Commitments) and CoE.
- Advocate for equitable funding in digitalisation to ensure that administrative staff, academic staff and students have the digital equipment, software, and knowledge to use AI safely, critically and constructively and to promote proper training opportunities for all the parties involved.
- Promote digitalisation in open education, including Open Educational Resources (OERs) and open research outputs to encourage free and accessible knowledge sharing across the EHEA.
- Promote a sustainability perspective on the environmental impact (e.g. through the excessive consumption of resources) in the usage of AI and digitalisation.
- Supervise the development of the European Data Union Strategy & promote students' rights to privacy.

A learner-centred E(H)EA

Since the implementation of the Bologna Process across Europe, learner-centred education remains an aspiration that still needs to be fully operationalized across both the European Higher Education Area and the European Education Area. Over the years, the integration of this approach has been inconsistent across institutions and countries. While the Bologna Process promotes flexibility, employability, and lifelong learning, significant barriers persist, including rigid curricula, outdated teaching methods and limited student participation in decision-making processes. By 2029, the E(H)EA must establish a comprehensive system that ensures inclusive, learner-centred education, fostering flexible learning pathways and embedding a strong quality culture across all European education institutions.

a. Flexible Learning Pathways

Flexible learning pathways are essential for ensuring that higher education adapts to the diverse needs of all students, including part-time learners, working professionals, parent-students and marginalised groups such as refugees and students with disabilities. By providing automatic recognition, personalised learning and facilitating the recognition of prior learning and non-traditional learning experiences across Europe, higher education institutions can allow students to pursue education at their own pace. By 2029, flexible learning pathways will help foster breaking down barriers for non-traditional learners, fostering an inclusive and adaptable educational framework.

Goals for 2029

- The establishment of a Europe-wide system of automatic recognition and recognition of prior learning.
- Advocacy for the empowerment of all learners across Europe through student-centred education pathways that foster transversal and future-proof skills.

Actions

- Advocacy for a revision of the Council Recommendation on validating non-formal and informal learning (2012) with the inclusion of specific adapted provisions for HE.
- Advocacy for a systematisation of recognition of prior learning and qualifications for refugees and other marginalised groups within the Council of Europe framework.
- Develop ESU policy for a student-centred social and flexible approach based on the EHEA's PAGs for the EU Skills Agenda (encompassing the announced The Skills Portability Initiative, European Strategy for VET, Action Plan on Basic Skills, STEM Education Strategic Plan, Pact for Skills).

b. Transforming Quality Assurance

As higher education systems across Europe become more interconnected through initiatives like European University Alliances, the quality and recognition of learning experiences must remain consistent and reliable. With the growing importance of cross-border education and diverse educational tools, such as microcredentials and the push for a European degree framework, it's essential that quality assurance evolves to reflect these developments. Ensuring student perspectives are integral to this process is key to building an education system that is both high-quality and responsive to societal challenges.

Goals for 2029

- Enhanced student participation in the ESGs and meaningful implementation of Social Dimension and Fundamental Values.
- Enhanced automatic recognition and recognition of prior learning procedures.

Actions

- Advocacy for ESGs that reflect the social dimension of education and public responsibility and student involvement in governance.
- Advocacy for the inclusion of microcredentials within national qualification frameworks, ensuring they are aligned with ESGs and recognized across borders.
- Co-creation of the Council of Europe Convention on Automatic Recognition and raising awareness within the student unions.
- Development of up-to-date policy on ECTS and advocacy for including ESU stands in revision of ECTS Users guide.
- Development of an ESU position and advocacy strategy for QA framework for the European University Alliances.



These Strategic Political Priorities (SPP) define the key objectives that the European Students' Union (ESU) will advocate for across its work areas from 2025 to 2029. The SPP were co-created by ESU's membership and Executive Committee (EC), with contributions from a Task Force that operated between May - October 2024. This Task Force included representatives of National Unions of Students and of the EC to guarantee. During BM86 a consultation session was conducted, including a PESTEL analysis of current political trends regarding general and higher education trends, which was analysed by the Task Force. The final document received approval at ESU's 88th Board Meeting in November 2024, held in Oslo, Norway.

The following are the implementation steps for the SPP:

1. The SPP are designed for a five-year period, outlining clear political goals and strategies for achieving them. Annually, they inform the Plan of Work adopted by the Board, which directs the EC's actions during its mandate. The SPP are integrated across the work clusters identified in the Plan of Work.
2. At each annual Spring Board Meeting, the EC provides an update on the SPP implementation as part of the General Activity Report.
3. After 2.5 years, the EC conducts a mid-term review, assessing the political landscape. Necessary adjustments are proposed to the Board. A report on the implementation is delivered, regardless of whether changes are proposed or not.
4. ESU's Policy Papers and Statements elaborate on its vision for higher education and complement the SPP by providing further detail on the outlined goals.

The SPP framework aligns with several key European (higher education) events:

1. European Elections 2024 (informing the development of this SPP)
2. Council of Europe Ministerial Conference 2026 (informing the mid-term review)
3. EHEA Ministerial Conference 2027 (informing the mid-term review)
4. European Elections 2029 (informing the development of the next SPP)

2024

May-September:

Task Force on SPP, Consultations with the board, Drafting

June:

European Elections

November:

Adoption

2025

May:

Reporting, Next Plan of Work

2026

May:

Reporting, Next Plan of Work

September:

CoE Ministerial Conference

2027

May:

Reporting, Next Plan of Work, EHEA Ministerial Conference

May - September:

Mid-term evaluation

November:

Mid-term reports + amendments (if needed)

2028

May:

Reporting, Next Plan of Work

2029

May:

Final Reporting, Next Plan of Work

May - September:

Task Force on SPP, Consultations with the board, Drafting

June:

European Elections

November:

Adoption