



The National Unions of Students in Europe

Policy paper

Social objectives and the economic perspective of the Lisbon Strategy in relation to Higher Education

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Preamble

ESIB – The National Unions of Students in Europe has existed since 1982 to promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at the European level, and towards all relevant organisations and institutions. ESIB currently has 50 member organisations from 37 countries.

Introduction

The Member States of the European Union are working towards an ambitious set of goals, encompassed in a process also referred to as the “Lisbon Strategy”. The ultimate aim of this process is to make the European Union the “most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” by 2010.

The EU has its roots in the European Economic Area (EEA), which necessarily implies that its aims and competencies are primarily in relation to economic growth, rather than education and broad societal development. The Lisbon Strategy treats Higher Education as a central means for sustainable economic growth, which is perceived as the prerequisite for the fulfillment of social objectives. This is due to, for example enhanced employability and the increase in the number of skilled individuals that Higher Education brings about.

The Lisbon Strategy encompasses far-reaching processes that give a central role to higher education and thus affect European students to a considerable extent. In the first instance, ESIB stresses that the effects of the Lisbon Strategy based policies should not negatively affect higher education. With this paper ESIB reaffirms core principles that have to be respected in any reform related to higher education and addresses the actual and potential effects the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy has on higher education.

Social objectives and the Economic Strategy

ESIB notes that recent developments in the implementation of the Lisbon Objectives show a strong tendency to neglect some important elements of the process, namely sustainability, more and better jobs, and greater focus on social objectives. ESIB conceives the latter as a concept which includes a set of commonly shared values, such as democracy, justice, tolerance, solidarity, social mobility and equality. ESIB stresses that the main objective of the Lisbon Strategy should not be reduced to a purely economic goal, but that the social objectives must be at the heart of the process as its major objective.

In the light of the above-mentioned trends, ESIB calls for a prioritisation of the social and sustainable aspects of the envisaged economic growth. It is only respecting the above mentioned humanistic values that can provide a secure basis to foster successful economic growth. In this context, the legacy of the welfare state, which is rooted in European tradition, should be preserved and developed further to the benefit of all.

Higher Education within the Lisbon Strategy

ESIB believes that higher education has a societal, a personal and an economic objective. In view of the role and goals of higher education, it should be possible for all social groups to contribute to social and economic development strategies. Therefore, measures to guarantee equality in access to, progress and success in higher education should be undertaken. An increase in educational attainment levels is of vital importance as a factor of growth. Society benefits from the essential and valuable returns of higher education, both in social and economic terms.

In this respect, national governments should see higher education as an investment, rather than an expense, and act upon this in terms of concrete policy measures e.g. when contemplating public expenditure on a macro-economic level. Furthermore, in the creation of the envisaged "knowledge-based economy", rather than relying on the mobility of graduates and researchers from other regions into the European Union, the Lisbon Strategy should make European higher education the priority, with a considerable and continued investment therein.

The intensity of discussing higher education reforms on the European level is increasing with a view to accelerate the pace leading towards the fulfillment of the Lisbon objectives. Many countries implemented reforms and more reforms are expected to be suggested to governments by the EU. However narrow policy suggestions, without broad consideration of social implications, will not serve to reach the goals of the Lisbon Strategy.

All measures that seek to involve higher education should be grounded in consultation and cooperation with all stakeholders. Furthermore, the higher Education community should be actively involved in the decision-making processes on all levels. It is of vital importance that the ongoing reforms are truly student oriented. Furthermore, the diversity of higher education systems in Europe must necessarily be taken into consideration when addressing higher education from an international perspective.

Economic strategies are closely involving higher education also when it comes to demands of skilled labor. In line with strategic economic goals often certain fields of study are favored. For students it is crucial to have access to fair and accurate information about the study itself, its expected outcomes, and opportunities and possibilities following graduation. Students' personal choice for studies should not be jeopardized by strategies to make certain fields of study more attractive than others, and the promotion of certain fields of study should not occur at the expense of the maintenance and development of others, simply because the former contribute more directly to economic goals.

It is academic values and cooperation between higher education institutions that should dominate the processes of internationalisation of higher education. Policies thereon should consider academic values and avoid misusing various modes of education provision to make profit at the expense of the role of higher education in society. Treating higher education as a commodity would be detrimental to crucial goals of higher education.

Lifelong learning is desirable and complementary to accessible higher education. Notwithstanding the expansion of lifelong learning, the quality of higher education should increase continuously. Higher education should empower people with the ability to improve their knowledge, skills and competences without being obliged to participate in further courses or study programmes.

Furthermore, in attempts to increase the number of graduates, non-traditional types of education should also be taken in consideration at the enrollment stage. An opportunity to study should be given to people with various prior learning experiences.

The Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy

National governments, together with various stakeholders and actors in higher education, are currently involved in the creation of the European Higher Education Area also known as the Bologna Process. Great achievements have been made so far, in terms of making the Bologna Process inclusive and transparent, with active contribution from national governments, higher education institutions, students and relevant international organisations.

Other European frameworks should not be used as a substitute to the Bologna Process, in order to carry out reforms which could not be agreed upon within the Bologna Process, or which have a different political aim to the Bologna Process. The Lisbon Strategy is not an umbrella initiative which encompasses Bologna Process as well as it should not be used by the EU to gain competences in the educational sector.

Financing of Higher Education

Developments in institutional governance and initiatives to set up new models for the financing of higher education have considerably increased in pace, which has also been due to responses to the challenges of the envisaged knowledge-based economy.

In this respect, it is of utmost importance that higher education institutions are based on democratic structures and not perceived as business organisations. All reforms concerning higher education institutions should involve students as partners on all levels and at all stages, ensuring the inclusion of students in the governance of higher education institutions and in the decision-making process thereof.

When considering resources of higher education, and the optimum use thereof, it is important that higher education is not subject to abrupt cuts in public funding, as this is a threat to the quality of higher education. Furthermore, an increase in public funding should accommodate the growing need for graduates and research as the economies are increasingly relying on knowledge.

ESIB supports endeavors by Higher Education Institutions for the appropriate use of their allocated funds. An accurate and well-planned approach, including cooperation between higher education institutions, student organisations, governments and other stakeholders, can result in constructive solutions to contemporary challenges as regards financing of higher education.

In this respect, it is necessary that policies on financing of higher education are adjusted according to local circumstances and characteristics. Uniform suggestions on an international level are not appropriate in this field. Governments should not underestimate the long-term effects of their policies regarding financing of higher education and are to adjust international policy suggestions in such a way that they are relevant to national requirements.

ESIB believes that the only guarantee for critical thinking and academic freedom is a commitment to continued and increased public financing. Reforms in financing of higher education should consider solutions that would avoid burdening students financially. In the event of a scarcity of public funds, tuition fees are often used as a simple way to increase the amount of private funds. ESIB opposes approaches which neglect their social implications. In this context, students should not be made to accumulate debts during their studies. Higher education that is accessible according to one's ability and desire to learn, rather than one's ability to pay, becomes threatened, when the problem of lack of funds is addressed by such measures.

The External Effect of the Lisbon Strategy

ESIB firmly believes that the principle of solidarity should form the basis of the Lisbon Strategy. The Lisbon Objectives should benefit the whole European continent, rather than just the member states of the European Union, in order to avoid unbalanced development in social and economic terms.

The Lisbon Objectives can have a negative impact on developing or undeveloped countries or regions. In this regard, ESIB stresses that cooperation between world regions is the way to achieve balanced global development.

The EU should undertake measures to avoid the above-mentioned negative consequences as much as possible.

Implementation of the Lisbon Strategy

Measuring the process only by performance and outcome benchmarks should be avoided. There is the need for a constant evaluation and monitoring of a wide range of policy effects, particularly in relation to the society at large.

It is important that national considerations, especially the variety of economic and social circumstances in different countries, are taken into account and that uniform models of policy suggestions are avoided. Special local or national structures should be set up in order to monitor the implementation of any reforms related to the Lisbon Objectives. Particular attention should be devoted to transitional countries which face social and economic challenges of different magnitude.

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