

The European Students' Union – ESU

Formerly known as ESIB – The National Unions of Students in Europe

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RE: ESU Reaction to the study, published by EURYDICE on Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: social dimension and funding 2011

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European students' union (ESU) welcomes the findings of the EURYDICE report that Social Dimension of higher education needs urgent attention. Countries need to make increased investments into widening access and student success in higher education, in order to progress towards the 40% attainment benchmark for 2020.

ESU has always been strongly advocating for a clear focus on the Social Dimension in higher education policy, expressed not only in Communiqués, but also being met with concrete measures, implying national targets and sufficient budgetary allocations. The EURYDICE report reconfirms that improved European wide monitoring and guidance is needed (such as the Observatory on Social Dimension that is under development).

The EURYDICE reports documents the great differences in European countries in delivering effective student support schemes. Today, many countries are providing insufficient grants and loans; limiting support to a minority of students or basing support only on academic achievements. Therefore, ESU is advocating that while countries in Europe should target a minimum of 2% of GDP investments in higher education; funding reforms in the future should especially emphasize and improve student support schemes for all students and that this should be part of national policy regarding social dimension.

Proliferation in tuition fees and student contributions is alarming as cost-sharing significantly increases the risk of deterring access to education for students with socially or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Taking into account that the current grants and loans system is primarily recognising academic achievements in many countries, not the socio-economical situation of learners, ESU finds this approach unbalanced as it leads to greater inequality in distribution of skills and competences. At the same time, when facing the ageing of population in Europe and growing demand for highly skilled and educated labour force, it is important to take full advantage of the current potential and open higher education systems to everyone who is capable. This will lead to lower private financial returns from a degree compared to the public interest, thus should also justify higher investment into higher education.

ESU – The European Students' Union - is the umbrella organisation of 45 national unions of students from 38 countries, and through these members represents over 11 million students. The aim of ESU is to articulate and promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at a European level towards all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, Bologna Follow-Up Group, Council of Europe and UNESCO.

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To conclude, ESU stresses, that in order for to realise the vision of Europe 2020 of a smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, joint efforts on all levels are needed. Therefore the Education Europe Programme and the Education & Training 2020 Framework should elaborate concrete steps for widening participation in higher education while taking into account diversity in existing national and regional contexts and promote and propose establishing sufficient financial support in reaching these goals. In relation to learning mobility support programmes like Erasmus, where currently students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are disadvantaged, the European Commission should also have a policy of widening access in place.

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