



## STATEMENT ON THE MODERNISATION AGENDA

### **Renew the priorities to meet the greatest challenges in higher education**

The European Students' Union (ESU) supports the strong role given to higher education in realising the Europe 2020 Strategy and the vital importance of education in European societies. ESU thus expecting stronger ambitions and refocusing on the greatest challenges European Higher Education will face in the next decade when trying to widen access for diversity of learners. Thus we call on the European institutions to revise the current priorities in order to meet emerging challenges with by taking more concrete actions towards implementing Social Dimension prioritising progressing towards the 40% attainment benchmark, promoting Student-Centred Learning, and encouraging Member States to increase their investments to the higher education. To achieve this ESU is calling for replacing the focus of the Agenda for the Modernisation of Europe's higher education and construct a strengthened new "Erasmus For All" Programme with significant increase in recourses for student mobility.

**Broad purpose and mission of higher education:** European Higher Education is both broad and diverse, representing more than 4000 Higher Education Institutions and millions of academics, staff and students. It is therefore crucial that the actions on European level are not only designed for a fraction of the universities, but address all kinds of higher education institutions, while refraining from promoting narrow approaches such as old and new ranking systems. While more important and meaningful priorities should be addressed more forcefully, the range of purposes of higher education should also be underscored in addition to supporting growth and jobs; such enhanced social mobility in society, as well as preparing students for life as active citizens in a democratic society preparing students for their future careers and enabling their personal development; creating and maintaining a broad, advanced knowledge base; and stimulating research and innovation.

**Boost investments in higher education:** ESU is more concerned than ever before that investment in higher education in Europe is too low, and that cuts threaten access to and quality of education. A clear commitment towards a minimum investment of 2% of the country's GDP into higher education should be ensured. At the same time it is important to be mindful of the broader socio-economic context, the demographic challenges and the current austerity in public budgets, and

reaffirm higher education as a public good and public responsibility. A general increase in public investments must constitute the basis of the required measures on financing higher education. Nonetheless, creating incitements for progressive private investments in research and innovation projects and strategies is also desirable. In this context, however it is crucial to stress the fact that ESU support as a common goal to work towards the gradual introduction of the principle of free higher education within the EHEA, through always taking into account current regional differences, strongly rejecting any reference to further introduction or increases in tuition fees.

**Progressive European policy tools:** ESU is anxious to start a debate on the future role of the EU in cooperation with the member states on higher educational issues. The implementation of the Bologna Process has turned out to be inefficient, as well as the carrying out of the Lisbon Strategy so far has been unsuccessful. Therefore there is an urgent need of a constructive discussion on how and which policy tools on a European level is to be created.

## **Key issues for member states and for higher education institutions**

The main share of initiating policies, defining details and implementing reforms in higher education must obviously be done at the level of member states and of higher education institutions. Nevertheless, the committed targets in the Europe 2020 Strategy need to be followed-up and implemented. So far setting of national targets, planning and mounting necessary national resources for reaching the 40 % attainment benchmark has been unsatisfactory. ESU see a real need for countries to step up to their commitments and involve stakeholders to produce real strategies to increase access and success in higher education. At the same time, it is absolutely necessary to widely improve quality of education and deepen the coherence to the Bologna Process reforms. With this in mind we would like to encourage member states **to prioritise:**

**Increase access and success in higher education:** While efforts to increase higher education attainment levels needs to be increased in order to achieve the Europe 2020 target of 40% by 2020, this should be done while paying special attention to the Social Dimension of higher education. Stronger efforts should be done to reduce barriers to access, progression and completion, including reaching out to non-traditional learners and reinforcing affordability of higher education and provision of student support services. Simple solutions, such as redefining vocational education to tertiary education to boost statistics, that some member states appear to go for, are not satisfactory. While increasing availability of higher education is important, reports such as Eurostudent IV in 2011 show that the providing of sufficient and progressive student support, especially targeting students from lower economic backgrounds, is essential to ensure success. ESU also calls on member states to follow-up on the commitment made in the Bologna Process to adopt measurable targets for improving the Social Dimension<sup>1</sup> and to support the proposal of a European Observatory on Social Dimension currently being discussed.

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<sup>1</sup> Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué 2009.

**Improve quality of excellence of teaching and provision:** ESU encourages that the on-going curricular reform advances the development of the comprehensive implementation and usage of learning outcomes and Student-Centred Learning. Member States should also encourage and support teachers to invest their time in innovative teaching methods through building rewarding and career progression systems more broadly on teaching excellence and ensure a transparent system of monitoring both for teaching and learning.

**Implement a sound system of lifelong learning:** Lifelong learning systems must widen possibilities to participate in higher education, thus the Modernisation Agenda needs to review how EU financing can contribute more effectively to the policies of member states in this area. EU and member states should outline policies and reforms necessary to the implementation of a comprehensive lifelong learning system that is built on flexible learning paths and strong linkages to recognition of prior learning.

**Bringing down barriers to study mobility:** ESU praises the continued focus on the importance and clear targets for learning mobility and the return to making already existing Bologna Process tools effective (ECTS, Diploma Supplement and Qualification Frameworks). At the same time financing of mobility for students is the greatest barrier to mobility existing today, and Member States can clearly do more in ensuring portability of grants and loans that are accessible and sufficient for a larger proportion of students, in accordance with their commitments to the Bologna Process.

## **EU actions in the Modernisation Agenda – making the right priorities!**

The Modernisation Agenda needs to refocus and make the right priorities for higher education in Europe for the situation we are in and for the rest of the decade. More concrete actions should be taken towards implementing Social Dimension, promoting Student-Centred Learning and improving cooperation with stakeholders.

ESU calls for the following priorities to be made for EU actions in higher education:

**Supporting Member States in increasing access and success in higher education:** In order to progress towards the 40% attainment benchmark, the EU should facilitate process of sharing best practices and develop concrete guidance for policy makers on European level for increasing participation and especially including underrepresented groups. This should be supported by financial incentives through ESF and ERDF. The Observatory on Social Dimension in Higher Education being developed in the Bologna Process is an important step in improving comparable data and monitoring the progress made on the Social Dimension, and should be financially supported.

**Improve data on graduate employability:** The Commission's proposal for a new graduate employability benchmark unfortunately has a complete lack of comprehensiveness and is useless to track and improve the contribution of higher education institutions to graduate employability. ESU suggests that the EU instead launch a European wide graduate survey, which would give much deeper insights into employability and mobility outcomes.

**Improved transparency and information tools:** ESU is a supporter of improving transparency of higher education and improving guidance for students on higher education institutions. However, despite good intentions, the proposed U-Multirank project fails to improve significantly over existing rankings and still propagates a narrow understanding of the missions and content of higher education. ESU therefore calls on the EU institutions to explore complementing and new solutions to improving transparency and information tools that are more useful for students, focusing on quality of provision and study environment. Particularly tools that accelerate the user friendliness of quality assurance, qualification frameworks and study programme opportunities abroad should be developed. User-driven tools presenting information provided by students themselves can also be worth looking into. A general principle of stakeholder participation is very important for the development of transparency tools. U-Multirank and other possible new tools should therefore include student representatives directly in the development and governance of the projects.

**Student-Centred Learning and Quality Assurance:** ESU supports the Commissions plans to provide specific guidance and recommendations on raising basic and transversal skills and overcoming skill mismatches, but also encourage that guidance on Student-Centred Learning is developed in cooperation with stakeholders. With regard to European Quality Assurance, is ESU's view it should be further developed through improvement of the European Standards and Guidelines. ESU also supports the development of a quality framework for traineeships.

**New strategy for internationalisation:** ESU supports increasingly open Europe for students from other parts of the world; in particular barriers should be reduced for Non-EU students from EHEA. ESU is worried by the increasing trend of discrimination of Non-EU students, examples of which are charging higher levels of tuition fees and limiting access to student financing and student support. At the same time, the EU should pay attention to balanced mobility, which today is mainly limited due to the very low level and lack of support for European students going abroad to other parts of the world. The first step to be made should be to open the Erasmus programme for study mobility to any destination in the world.

**Improve cooperation with stakeholders:** The follow-up of the Agenda for Modernising higher education must ensure inclusion of all stakeholders, among them students, in drawing up the priorities and details in the Communication and follow-up. This should be done through setting up a European follow-up structure with representatives from higher education stakeholders and include representative stakeholders in the proposed structure.

**Development of legal frameworks:** While the main responsibility for legislation in higher education rest with the member states, there is a need for developing further EU legislation in areas of cooperation and free movement of students, especially in light of the intensified ECJ case law development in recent years. Commitments such as full portability of loans and grants and full recognition of studies abroad could be enforced through the free movement directives. Moreover, specific national cases have shown the need to discuss how to avoid or compensate for adverse consequences for member states because of open mobility. In any case it is important to improve the effectiveness of legal rights of students pursuing studies in any European countries.

## Radical re-allocation of EU funds to increase investments in Higher Education is needed

ESU welcomes the Commission proposal for a new Multiannual Financial Framework for 2014-2020 and sees the increase made in investments in education as a good initiative. However, despite there is a certain progress reflected in the proposals, ESU fears that the overall investment level into higher education is not proportional, and will still be insufficient to cover the expectations and benchmarks for mobility. If the EU wants to succeed with the Europe 2020 strategy, a clear and radical re-allocation of EU funds towards these benchmarks is needed.

**Reinforce the Erasmus programme:** Reinforcing the Erasmus programme is the key to reaching the 20% study mobility benchmark, and should aim at doubling the share of higher education students experiencing an Erasmus exchange by 2020, reaching out to approximately 10% of the graduates and 500 000 students each year. The average Erasmus student grant today is by far insufficient, succeeding to only cover a fraction of the necessary financing for living, travel costs and fees. Education Europe appropriations to Erasmus should be made sufficient to cover an increase of €150 raising the average to €400 by 2020. Moreover, the grants should to a larger degree reflect and be harmonised to the real costs of exchange in a host country.

**More flexibility and expanded scope:** The modes of mobility and scope of Erasmus should be expanded to allow for shorter and longer mobility stays than today. Students from Europe should also be supported to go abroad outside of Europe, which is important in building network and access to quality education all over the world. The largest imbalance of mobility between EU and the rest of the world is the huge deficit of European students studying abroad globally. Erasmus should also be expanded to cover the entire EHEA and Eastern Partnership countries, which will make it a full financial mechanism for the Bologna Process.

**Erasmus Mundus:** The nature of the Erasmus Mundus programme should be reformed to aim at a wider public and give emphasis to the social function of learning mobility. Brain drain lingers in many aspects of these programmes. Therefore ESU proposes to use the positive experiences from the Erasmus programme with mutual exchange in the Erasmus Mundus programme. Furthermore ESU calls for a more reciprocal cooperation within Erasmus Mundus with non-EU countries.

## Student Loan Guarantee Facility

ESU has taken note of the attempts to explore the feasibility of a mobility loans scheme, and so far remained opposed to its principles. ESU is not convinced that a loan scheme will be attractive and effective for several reasons, there is a high risk the loans will be very expensive for students, especially for students coming from low earning EU countries. Studies underscore that the students from lower socio-economic groups are sensitive towards taking up loans and increasing access to loans is not the best way to broaden access to study mobility and guarantee. Furthermore, ESU is worried that trend of promoting loans as a solution to student financing in general is a long-term risk for Europe for which consequences are already known. The current crisis shows that private indebtedness may not be at all considered as a solution for higher education equity. Experience from countries with high student loan burden per student, call for

The European Students' Union – ESU

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

concern that students loans, and particular with high default rates, are causing ripples in overall economic balance. Therefore improving accessibility and size of grants must be the first priority of the Education Europe Programme.

**ESU restates that it stands for a public, quality and free education:** Considering this, ESU strongly stands against the loans. By accepting loans, ESU would accept the higher education system to be financed, sooner or later, by students. In ESU's vision, education is a right and has to be considered as a public good which citizens pay taxes for. Loans are thus not an acceptable way of financing higher education. It is the responsibility of governments to provide quality education to all, not of the students or their parents to pay more than the taxes for their 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.*