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Reaction to Agenda for the Modernisation of Europe's higher education systems

Renew the priorities to meet the greatest challenges in higher education

The European Students' Union is calling for replacing the focus of the Agenda for the Modernisation of Europe's higher education systems that has been proposed by the Commission. ESU supports the strong role given to higher education in realising the Europe 2020 Strategy and the vital importance of education in European societies, thus expects stronger ambitions and refocus on the greatest challenges European Higher Education will face in the next decade by calling on the European institutions to the revise the current priorities to meet emerging challenges with taking more concrete actions towards implementing Social Dimension, promoting Student-Centred Learning and encouraging Member States to increase their investments to the 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 aimed at a fraction of the universities, but address all kinds of higher education, 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 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.

ESU shares the concern that investment in higher education in Europe is too low, and that an investment of 2% of the country's GDP into higher education should be seen as a minimum requirement to achieve the Europe 2020 targets¹. It is regrettable that a concrete proposal for a benchmark on this has been left out of the Communication. 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

¹ Annual Growth and Employment Survey 2011 and the Report from the European Parliament on Youth on the Move.

responsibility. While both public and private investments should be increased, ESU strongly rejects any references to further introduction or increases of tuition fees.

Key issues for member states and for higher education institutions

ESU shares the view that one of the most significant challenges for European higher education today is to ensure greater levels of attainment through increasing access and success in higher education. However, while we also agree that improving quality and relevance of higher education are the main priorities for countries to achieve in Europe today, member states should be encouraged to work with quality and relevance of higher education in a broader sense than what is outlined in the Communication. Especially progressing reforms to improve the quality in all higher education institutions and programmes (not only for excellence and specific disciplines); promote curricula reform based on learning outcomes and Student-Centred Learning; and emphasise that including stakeholder participation in the governance is crucial to improve quality.

ESU would also encourage reflection to be made on the role of the European actions in higher education policies, taking into consideration that it is a national competence and that Member States have invested into the Bologna Process as the main driver for coherence and cooperation for higher education reform in Europe.

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. While increasing availability of higher education is important, reports such as Eurostudent IV in 2011 show that the providing 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 Dimension² and to support the proposal of a European Observatory on Social Dimension currently being prepared.

Improve quality of excellence of teaching and provision: ESU encourages that the on-going curricular reform advances the development of the proper usage of learning outcomes and Student-Centred Learning. This requires empowering individual learners, new and innovative approaches to teaching and learning, effective support and guidance structures and a curriculum focused more clearly on the learner in all three cycles. Curricular reform must lead to high quality, flexible and more individually tailored education paths. To both increase relevance and improved quality of provision through curricula reform, all stakeholders should be strongly included in the process, including students, teachers and employers.

² Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué 2009.

Member States should also encourage teachers to invest their time in teaching innovation and Student-Centred Learning 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 praise the continued focus on the importance and clear targets for study 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 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 commitments in the Bologna Process.

Increasing funding and more inclusive governance: Although the Communication stresses the need to increase funding, the clear reference of a minimum target of 2% of GDP investments into higher education in Europe should be maintained. ESU sees higher education as a public good and public responsibility, thus despite that we see the need for diversified funding sources, insist that majority of increased investments into higher education must come from public sources. ESU also strongly rejects any references to further introduction or increases of tuition fees.

Introduction and development of performance based funding should be done with strong involvement of higher education stakeholders. Furthermore, the performance emphasised should be based on a broad set of indicators, such as the Social Dimension. At the same time, ESU is sceptical to introducing employability as an indicator due to the nature of employability not necessarily being in the control of the higher education institution.

The Bologna Process: the Agenda for Modernising of higher education must be seen as a supplement to the Bologna Process, which should still remain the main priority and European reference for reform and cooperation of higher education in Europe.

EU support for higher education – making the right priorities!

ESU welcomes the proposed increase within the Multiannual Financial Framework for the Education Europe Programme and Horizon 2020. The Erasmus programme is a clear success and important contribution to study mobility and cooperation in higher education in Europe.

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, EU should develop best practices and guidance

on European level for increasing participation and especially including underrepresented groups. This should be supported by financial incentives through ESF and ERDF.

Improve data on higher education and graduate employability: 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. 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.

Complement the U-Multirank with other 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 U-Multirank project fails to improve significantly over existing rankings and still propagates a narrow understanding of the missions and content of higher education. This often comes down to fundamental issues like asking is what we can measure what counts. ESU refers to the European Parliament³ and the European Economic and Social Committee⁴, and shares the position that better transparency instruments should be explored in addition while U-Multirank is being developed.

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. European Quality Assurance should be further developed through improvement of the European Standards and Guidelines. ESU also supports the development of a quality framework for traineeships.

Strengthen the Education Europe 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. Today Erasmus students are on average given a monthly grant of €250 to cover their costs, which is by far insufficient, succeeding to only cover a fraction of the necessary financing for living, travel costs and fees. Erasmus appropriations should be made sufficient to cover raising the average to €400 per month in the next programme.

Put on hold the Student Loan Guarantee Facility: ESU has taken note of the attempts to explore the feasibility of a mobility loans scheme, however ESU is sure that a loan scheme is unlikely to be attractive and effective as there is a high risk the loans will be very expensive for students, especially for students coming from low earning EU countries. So far plans are uncertain and thus we believe the decision on calling this to life should be frozen until a concrete proposal emerges from the European Commission. As crucial issues, the ability to deliver sufficient subsidy of interests' rates and ensure socially progressive models of the loans, such as income contingent repayment, needs to be elaborated on to a satisfying level. Studies also underscore that the

³ Report from the European Parliament on Youth on the Move.

⁴ Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Youth on the Move.

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 mobility⁵.

The suggested bank guarantee model for loan distribution also leaves a sensitive higher education policy question out of the hands of governments, EUs political institutions and stakeholders. Because of the abovementioned reasons ESU recommends that the European Parliament and the Council put on hold the loan scheme idea and re-allocate the available funding currently proposed in Education Europe to improving the Erasmus programme. Once a clearer proposal from the Commission emerges, we propose that additional funds should be then found if the proposal merits the support of stakeholders and governments.

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 me 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.

⁵ Study to the CULT-committee in the European Parliament 2010, Improving the Participation in Erasmus

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.