

The Students' perspective on Social Rights in Europe - Establishing European Social Rights' Pillar



Summary of ESU's input

Education plays a crucial role in establishing fair, inclusive and just societies. The Pillar of Social Rights can greatly benefit welfare systems and social securities in Europe and be a driving force for further cohesion.

ESU welcomes the Commission's Initiative to establish European Pillar of Social Rights that would be implemented in all Member States, not only limited to the Monetary union. ESU calls European Commission to include and cover in the European Pillar of Social Rights the following aspects:

1. Ensure fair and free access to Education and Higher Education for all, encouraging all member states to prioritize investments in public Education and the abolishment of tuition fees;
2. Ensure the inclusion of girls from the earliest stages of education to the highest possible levels, emphasizing the benefits of a society that equally represents all genders;
3. Ensure and protect fair access to health care, housing, childcare and other basic services for all students;
4. Ensure fair and equal conditions of participation in education for all students, no matter what their disability or illness, or discomfort are;
5. Define what the conditions for a fair, safe and healthy workplace are including work based learning.

Context

There is no equal and homogenous welfare system in Europe nowadays. Economical and financial crisis, austerity measures, political instability and the lack of a common unitarian vision have led to a weakened social systems in Europe, and to not sufficient ones in countries that have been affected by austerity measures the most.

Students and all those who wish to pursue education but are excluded from the system, mainly for economical reasons, are the ones that are paying the highest price in all areas of their future lives.

Education and Higher Education in particular, is a Human Right, as stated in the article 14 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. But in the reality it is far from being accessible for everyone. The introduction and the rise of tuition fees that are following the cuts in public education budgets are preventing many people to access Higher Education or are forcing them to work besides to their studies, often in precarious and irregular conditions. The lack of student support, from housing to healthcare, is equally striking.

Education is a social right that can enforce society, fight social divisions and insecurity, foster innovation and growth, strike inequalities and ensure inclusion and cohesion. It is a central and crucial right for the well being of our society, and is related to many others in mutual relationships that constantly support each other.

How we see the European Social Rights' Pillar



ESU welcomes the Commission's initiative to establish The European Pillar of Social Rights in order to foster development and incentives for well-functioning and equitable welfare systems and labour conditions. The preliminary outline that has been disseminated addresses many social rights that are crucial for students, including education itself, as a key social right to consequently safeguard all the other rights and wellbeing. ESU believes that The Pillar needs to ensure fair and free access to Education and Higher Education for all with the aim of making social inclusion a reality in Europe, to develop a just and equal society where everyone is entitled to live their life in dignity by accessing all social rights and being able to express themselves in every area they would feel like.

A Higher Education system that is accessible for all is not only a system free from any kind of direct or indirect expenses, but also provides student support, such as accessible housing, healthcare, childcare for those students who are parents, tailored help and support for students with disabilities or chronic illnesses. Such mechanisms are essential to stop inequalities, including gender inequality.

Skills, education and lifelong learning

The Pillar of Social Rights must address the need to invest in Lifelong learning processes recognising its importance in developing cohesive societies and ensuring access to employability and citizenship skills. Therefore, Pillar must enforce accessible and quality education and higher education for all, by encouraging all member states to prioritize investments in public Education and abolishment of tuition fees. Member states must also develop and implement national access plans, tackling the inclusion in education of the locally defined minorities and ensure that all the students during their education path can access all the needed support tools to complete their studies.

Up-skilling pathways implemented by the member states to grant access to basic skills should always be connected to further education and never be a dead-end to one's education pathway.

Gender Equality

Gender Equality is still far from being reached in all European countries. The Pillar should emphasize the benefits for society of equally representing all genders, in addition to the justness of this, and suggest measures, temporary ones or permanent ones, that can be put in place to ensure fair participation of women. Especially when it comes to education, the Pillar of Social Rights must accommodate the inclusion and success of girls from the beginning of the education path, to the highest possible levels, first of all by striving for a change in society and enforcing the idea that everybody can study what they want as long as they want, and there is no such thing as a "male" subject, faculty or career.

Growing inequalities

Society is divided by social insecurity and increasing economic inequalities. A key element that can ensure social justice by giving everyone the opportunity to fully develop themselves and their aspirations, and making the income gap grow smaller, is publicly funded education. To ensure

everyone's participation in all levels of education means to ensure everybody's participation in society as active citizens, avoiding the creation of society that is stratified and the highest level of education and consequently the highest paid jobs are accessible mainly to higher socio-economic groups. It also requires a fair transition to the job market.



Services: health care, housing, childcare

Access to services is crucial to ensure social justice, and this can become even truer in the case of students. Too often students who decided to move from their birthplace, no matter if in the same country or outside, are cut out of the public health system due to restrictive regulations of access.

Availability and quality of student housing in Europe is a growing issue of similar impact: many students abandon the idea of studying, because that would mean paying expensive rents that they cannot afford, or they need to accept to live in terrible conditions affecting health, studies and overall quality of life.

Ensuring accessible child-care, as well as parental leave is essential to students-parents, and limited access to such services and rights are hindering access to education and labour market. Therefore, the Pillar should aim to ensure and protect fair access to health care, housing, childcare and other basic services for all students.

Disability benefits

People with disabilities are largely left behind in our societies, while not openly discriminated. The same happens in education, where students with any kind of disability are made believe that their potential is less than that of the other students and they are put in the conditions of facing so many more and bigger obstacles, that in the end they drop out or do not access education at the first place.

The Pillar must ask all the member states to ensure fair and equal conditions of participation in education for all students, no matter what their disability or illness, or discomfort are.

Work: Health and safety at work, conditions of employment, active support for employment

Regulating the conditions of employment and internship, by ensuring fair, safe and healthy conditions at work, appropriate wages and meaningful tasks, are crucial to fight the inequalities established in our societies.

The European Pillar of Social Rights needs to entail fair conditions of work-based learning, including internships and apprenticeships. Regulations for work based learning must be put in place, granting appropriate status of student and/or worker with all the social securities following it. Employers should be encouraged to recognise experience gained through work based learning and not allowed to replace permanent job positions with work based learning placements. Moreover, all work based learning should be adequately paid or granted with credits that are recognised in one's education. Precarious jobs are putting young people at vulnerable place as they are seeking opportunities that would be additional source of income during their studies, however doing at the price of social securities.

The Pillar must define what the acceptable conditions for a fair, safe and healthy workplace are, including work based learning: all jobs, from internships to entry-level jobs to the top levels, need to be treated equally and workers paid accordingly to their tasks and efforts.

