



European Universities: It Is About the Students

Introduction

European Students' Union (ESU) is thoroughly following the developments of the European Universities Initiative by regularly being involved in possible discussions and meetings that address the topic. We believe that due to our cooperation established with different stakeholders of this initiative, including with local student representatives, University Alliances, stakeholder representative organisations, as well as with the European Commission, ESU has accrued a wide perspective about the initiative, has taken actions to address our critical position with the stakeholders and created a ground for influencing the further developments of the European Universities Initiative.

Below we present crucial aspects which should be in the focus of the stakeholders and interested organisations while developing and monitoring the further actions of this initiative, especially within the Working Group of the third call for the alliances.

Student participation

Currently, there are many forms of student representation within the alliances. Even though the Commission has put more emphasis on student participation in the second call, ESU is still not convinced of the way the existing alliances are filling it in. By far not all university alliances have student representatives in the different alliances, not all student representatives for the alliances come from democratically elected positions of the local student unions, and not all student representatives are democratically appointed to be the representative within the alliance.

ESU strongly advocates for a democratically elected student body with representatives from all the different universities that come from local student unions. It is important to stress that the student representatives need to be elected by the students or appointed by the student body. These student bodies need to have the right of consent on important decisions within the alliances, need to meet regularly and be part of the highest decision making body.



The universities preparing their application for the call should include students in the establishment and design of the network and this should be a requirement in the calls. This should be proved by a report of the students' representatives on how they were involved in the process.

ESU is always willing to independently advise the alliances on student participation and support the students accordingly.

Student centred learning and mobility

Student centredness of the programs offered by the alliances is another extremely important element. The alliances should foster and encourage innovative didactic concepts for student centred learning and pay sufficient attention to sustainability in the programs and the conditions under which they operate. Alliances should share best practices and encourage each other to spread the innovative methods from the alliances throughout the universities in order to make student centred learning a reality within the European Higher Education Area. Another element which contributes to the student centredness of the alliances is mobility. The Commission decided to have a quota of 50% mobility for the alliances, which we highly support. Alliances should be established in order to simplify mobility possibilities for students and to encourage mobility without study delays. ESU wants to stress that this mobility should include only physical mobility and that virtual mobility can only be used to support physical mobility or enable it for students that don't have the possibility to go on physical mobility, but this can never be for financial reasons. Virtual mobility can however not be counted as part of the 50%. Broader mobility within the Erasmus program should always still be a possibility and also be promoted by the universities part of an alliance. The Erasmus program should stay the main mobility program in terms of quantity and funds throughout the EHEA.



Quality Assurance and recognition

Quality assurance within the European Universities alliances comes both with a lot of challenges as well as opportunities. Different stakeholders should be involved in the initiative, but we stress that private partners could never be part of the decision making bodies. Currently, ESU is partnering in an Erasmus+ project focused on the creation of a quality assurance framework for the European Universities - EUniQ. ESU will strive for an enhancement led overarching quality assurance framework that focuses on the student participation in the alliances, the application of student centred learning and the possibilities for physical mobility. ESU will advocate for the review committee to consist of at least 2 students that come from the ESU student' expert pool.

Students within the alliance should be able to rely on the fact that they can obtain a degree from any of the universities under the same rules and conditions (tuition fee, housing possibilities, support systems, etc.), that the same application and admission procedures will apply and that there will be no differences in recognition of the diploma given by the universities within the alliance. In order to do so, for each of these parameters the minimum benchmark is set by the institution that has the highest standard. Institutions must set out a clear roadmap for this upward convergence on students' rights. European funds for this convergence might be assigned. It is extremely important that the recognition process is closely monitored and that recognition will be also an important part of the quality assurance assessment.

The future of the alliances

There is still a lot of questions open and unanswered. This however also allows ESU to influence the future of the alliances in the best interest of students as much as possible. It is important that the funds for the alliances are diversified and not only coming from the Erasmus budget. ESU will strive for alliances to be as balanced as possible in terms of region, size and focus of the universities. ESU will explicitly advocate for more Universities of applied



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sciences and smaller Higher Education Institutions to also become part of the alliances. We should strive to incorporate as many universities as possible and to closely cooperate between the alliances. It is important to share best practices and to learn from each other. Even universities that are not directly related to an alliance should be able to profit from what is learned in the alliances, no university should be left behind. This also means that universities outside the direct scope of the European Union should be able to participate in this initiative at least as associated partners. The initiative and meetings between alliances should boost cooperation and facilitate sharing best practices between the different universities. The cooperation within the university alliances should also be used to boost the implementation of the Bologna Agreements. The regular meetings of university alliances organized by the Commission should always include a students meeting. The stakeholder organizations, ESU, EURASHE and EUA also have to be invited to share their expertise.

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The European Students' Union (ESU) is the umbrella organisation of 46 National Unions of Students (NUS) from 40 countries. The aim of ESU is to represent and promote the interests of students at the European level towards all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, Bologna Follow Up Group, Council of Europe and UNESCO.