



Statement on Institutional Autonomy and Academic Freedom in Italy

20.12.2019 The European Students' Union (ESU) is made aware of Italy's Draft Budget Bill 2020 legislating the establishment of a National Agency for Research, with the aim of steering the research carried out by universities, public bodies and public and private research institutions. ESU, in solidarity with **Unione degli Universitari (UDU)** expresses serious concern over the composition of the Directive Council particularly as most positions on this Council will be nominated by political representatives: the Director of the Council will be chosen by the Prime Minister, while the eight members of the Executive Council will be chosen by the Minister of Education, University and Research (2), by the Minister of Economic Development (2), by the Minister of Health (1), from the Minister for Technological Innovation and Digitization (1), from the Conference of Italian University Rectors (1), from the National University Council (1) and from the Council of Presidents of public research institutions (1)¹.

ESU wishes to remind Member States of the UNESCO Recommendations Concerning the Status of Higher Education Personnel, adopted unanimously in 1997 by the UNESCO General Council², that stipulate that "*Autonomy is the institutional form of academic freedom and a necessary precondition to guarantee the proper fulfillment of the functions entrusted to higher education personnel and institutions.*" (Section 18), that "*Member States are under an obligation to protect higher education institutions from threats to their autonomy coming from any source*" (Section 19) and that "*Self-governance, collegiality and appropriate academic leadership are essential components of meaningful autonomy for institutions of higher education.*" (Section 21).

In accordance with these recommendations, ESU believes that the autonomy of universities, research and other academic institutions is a prerequisite and guarantee for the defence of the academics' freedoms to select research issues, develop methodologies and publish results with the necessary funding to do so. Furthermore, we believe that both academic freedom and institutional autonomy are justified by the good they do in fulfilling the mission required of the universities and institutions towards society: to seek truth for the good of humanity. For this reason, universities and institutions must be independent and critical voices in the development of society.

The adoption of legislation that enables the state direct control over where to direct research funding diminishes the freedom of academics, scholars and scientists to speak truth to power. If the agency can't prevent this from happening, universities, research and other academic institutions can't fulfill their mission and society will and thus, in the long run, will be poorer for it³.

¹Available from:

<https://www.scienzainrete.it/articolo/agenzia-nazionale-ricerca-cosa-c%C3%A8-cosa-manca/luca-carra/2019-11-03> [Accessed 20.12.2019]

² Available from: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000110220> [Accessed 20.12.2019]

³ Casson, A. (2019) A Reasonable Autonomy. Sveriges universitets- och högskoleförbund (SUHF).



ESU firmly believes that the value of research and education cannot be determined nor directed by political ambitions, economic productivity or society's expectations but rather by the aggregated curiosity and criteria of a body of scientists and scholars that has contributed most to the welfare and prosperity of society. Furthermore, the right and freedom of the academic and scientific community to self-define its targets and direct resources for research and teaching is fundamental to upholding institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

In establishing the National Agency for Research, the European Students' Union together with Unione degli Universitari call on Italy's Minister of Education, University and Research and the government to commit to Italy's constitutional principle of freedom of research and autonomy of the Higher Education Institutions and to the values of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). As members of this unique international collaboration on higher education, Italy should continue upholding the standards of university autonomy cherished in the 1988 Magna Charta Universitatum, among other founding values of the EHEA including freedom of expression, independent student unions, academic freedom and the free movement of students and staff. The current composition of the Directive Council the National Agency for Research risks a significant depreciation of Italy's scoring in the report published by the European University Association that addresses the question of university autonomy in organisational, financial, staffing and academic matters in universities and institutions around Europe⁴.

ESU and UDU ask the Minister to take seriously the concerns of the academic world and of students regarding the National Agency for Research, which lead them to call for its abolishment, and therefore to convene the academic world and the National Council of University Students in order to discuss with them the issues and the worries raised by this new institution.

⁴ Pruvot, E.B. and Estermann, T. (2017) University Autonomy in Europe III. European University Association (EUA).

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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.