

European Students' Union (ESU)

Fighting for students' rights since 1982

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ESU's Reaction to the EU Council conclusions on the European Universities: let's do it right for students' interest

On the 17th of May, the EU Education Ministers met within the Council of the European Union to adopt their [conclusions](#) on the European Universities Initiative. The findings indicate the way forward in a moment where the first cycle of the initiative is coming to an end, and new ways of looking forward to the project are requested.

The European Students' Union (ESU) has been following the development of the initiative since its inception, regarding it with a critical eye needed to analyse it while having in mind the welfare and interests of the students of the whole European Higher Education Area. In this regard, the Council Conclusions bring significant developments on several issues ESU has been campaigning on:

- On **student representation**, the Council endorses the involvement of students and staff within the governance structures of the alliances. ESU welcomes this decision: to ensure the “success, development and implementation of the initiative”, as requested by the Council, it is the students that need to choose their representatives within the governance structures, either directly or via their elected student representatives and their student unions.
- On **Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes**, ESU welcomes the ambitions of further fostering the developments regarding recognition, accreditation and quality assurance processes. Achieving full trust and removing barriers within the legislation between institutions and agencies operating under national regulations is the cornerstone of achieving automatic mutual recognition and strengthening international cooperation between institutions. Speeding up the

process of achieving the European approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes is especially needed in light of programmes that, in the long term perspective, might broaden the cross-border educational offer for learners.

- On **micro-credentials**, ESU welcomes the understanding of micro-credentials as a broad concept enabling learners at every stage of their lives to obtain new skills and knowledge necessary for entering and remaining in the workforce. Additionally, ESU finds it of utmost importance to stress that not only are micro-credentials a tool for enhancing the entrance to the labour market, but the core idea of micro-credentials has to remain as a focus on enhancing students' capabilities and interests. Therefore, the learners' educational benefit, accessibility to the learning opportunities, and quality must remain at the core of micro-credentials and the implementation process.
- We welcome the Council declaration that **physical mobility is a priority** and cannot be replaced by “virtual” and “blended” mobilities, which must have complementary roles. We reaffirm that “virtual mobility” is not mobility but a learning activity that falls under the measures of the Internationalisation at Home, which need to be supported but cannot be put in financial or political competition with physical mobility.
- The Education Ministers committed to **defend and promote academic freedom**: ESU, therefore, calls the Ministers to uphold these commitments by supporting monitoring mechanisms on academic freedom within the European Higher Education Area, as well as within the annual Rule of Law report by the European Commission, to further support the [Inspireurope](#) project for researchers at risk, as well as to establish its student counterpart, on the model of the Norwegian [Students At Risk](#) and the German [Hilde Domin Programme](#).
- ESU welcomes the vision by the Council that the European Universities should operate within the framework of **open science, open education and open data**, as well as societal engagement that the alliances should have with the communities in which they operate.

As of now, the 41 pilot alliances comprise more than 280 Higher Education Institutions, i.e. 5% of the HEIs and 20% of students in Europe¹. The Council calls for a concerted effort at the regional, national and international level to tackle the

¹ *Council conclusions on the European Universities initiative - Bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: Paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education*, point 19.

obstacles at the legislative level that hinder the further deepening of the alliances, which could benefit the whole higher education systems, as well as build synergies between the European Education Area, the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area, promoting the dissemination of the innovations adopted within the alliances and promoting other forms of international cooperation.

In the interest of all the students in the European continent, both within and outside the EU, ESU calls for a strengthened commitment to the Erasmus+ programme as the main tool of inter-institutional cooperation in Europe, leaving open the possibility for other countries to join the programme. We also call for the possibility that HEIs within the EHEA can join the European Universities as at least associated partners. Furthermore, we think that the process of finding and removing the obstacles for a deeper cooperation should lead to an upward convergence of student rights and conditions within the alliances, whose outcomes should benefit the whole national higher education systems. In order to achieve that, thorough involvement of the educational stakeholders, including students, is paramount at all levels of decision making. This way, the European Universities Initiative will shy away from creating a “two-speed” Higher Education system in Europe, and will instead work for the benefit of all students within the European continent.