

# European Students' Union (ESU)

## Fighting for students' rights since 1982

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# Student manifesto on the future of Higher Education in Europe

The European landscape of Higher Education is at an important turning point of its political cycle. A new Bologna cycle for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is starting, whose goal will be to operationalise the commitments taken by the Higher Education Ministers<sup>1</sup>, namely on academic freedom<sup>2</sup> and fundamental values of the EHEA, on social dimension<sup>3</sup> and on learning and teaching<sup>4</sup>. Within the European Union, the new cycle of the Erasmus+ Programme started, between high political expectations and worrying faux pas in the implementation of its first year<sup>5</sup>. The cycle of the first cohort of the European Universities is ending, paving the way to a broader general reflection on the structures of these alliances, their goals and their sources of funding. In order to establish the European Education Area (EEA) by 2025 and to support higher education in adapting to climate change, technology, demographic change and the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Commission is working on a European Strategy for Universities<sup>6</sup> and on overcoming the obstacles to deeper integration of EU Higher Education systems<sup>7</sup>. The Next Generation EU and the National Recovery and Resilience Plans promise massive investments to re-start the EU post-pandemic economy, but the scant involvement of civil society in the design and implementation of the national plans, despite the requirements by the EU law<sup>8</sup>, casts doubts on the commitments of the governments, in terms of investments

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<sup>1</sup> [Rome Ministerial Communiqué.](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Rome Ministerial Communiqué, Annex I - Statement on Academic Freedom.](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Rome Ministerial Communiqué, Annex II - Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA.](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Rome Ministerial Communiqué, Annex III - Recommendations to National Authorities for the Enhancement of Higher Education Learning and Teaching in the EHEA.](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Funding bottleneck casts a dark cloud over the start of Erasmus+ 2021/2027](#), European University Foundation, 3rd November 2021.

<sup>6</sup> [Higher education: A European Strategy for Universities](#), Consultation from the European Commission.

<sup>7</sup> [Building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation](#), Consultation from the European Commission.

<sup>8</sup> [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council on establishing the](#)

and reforms, including in Higher Education<sup>9</sup>. In light of this, the Conference on the Future of Europe and the European Year of Youth 2022 must be a turning point in the public discourse on Higher Education and on student involvement in the decision-making processes and in public life.

The European Students' Union (ESU) believes that the future of education in Europe lies in an integrated European Higher Education Area, where fundamental values<sup>10</sup>, automatic recognition of degrees, upward convergence of student rights and democratic and effective student representation on all levels (from local to European and transnational) are practised. To this end, the European Education Area can help in enabling the processes to remove the obstacles to further integration, but the measures to achieve that need to be designed and implemented with the thorough involvement of all the stakeholders - including students - and need to be available for all the Higher Education Institutions operating in the Area. ESU believes that Higher Education Institutions and national Higher Education systems must maintain the right and the ability to adapt their offer to the needs and specificity of their communities and societies. In order to achieve this, the European Education Area governance body should represent all the EU institutions, European stakeholders and the Member States delegations, within which at least 25% shall be democratically elected student representatives<sup>11</sup>. The EU Council must commit to official recognition of the democratic student representation on all levels of decision making, including within the governance framework of the European Universities while respecting the different traditions of student organising and self-governance<sup>12</sup>. The European added value to education would be visible also in promoting topics insufficiently explored at the national level, such as academic integrity for the benefit of the students<sup>13</sup>, and in promoting ambitious initiatives in the digital transformation of Higher Education. For instance, ESU proposes an initiative involving establishing a European Digital Higher Education platform, open to accredited Higher Education Institutions of the EU Member States and partner countries, which would facilitate the access to courses, credentials and materials for the whole European academic community, as well as serve as the single repository for MOOCs, digital credentials, open access scientific

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[Recovery and Resilience Facility](#), Art. 18.4(q).

<sup>9</sup> [NextGenerationEU must involve all stakeholders! So far, it has not](#), European Students' Union, Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions, Lifelong Learning Platform, Civil Society Europe.

<sup>10</sup> [Academic freedom must be ensured throughout the EU](#), ESU proposal on the platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

<sup>11</sup> [A democratic framework for the European Education Area](#), ESU proposal on the platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

<sup>12</sup> [Democratic student representation should be the norm across the EU](#), ESU proposal on the platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

<sup>13</sup> [Academic integrity as a fundamental value of research, development and innovation](#), ESU proposal on the platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

papers and other research and educational material for the broader society, in the spirit of Open Science<sup>14</sup>. The European added value is also present in the issue of mobility, both in ensuring broad access to inclusive physical mobility and in tackling structural inequalities within Europe and its Higher Education systems that lead to brain drain.

ESU believes that the Conference on the Future of Europe needs to be used to make new ideas on the future of education to emerge. That is why ESU, together with the National Alliance of Student Organisations in Romania (ANOSR), organised the event ‘The future of the EU and the future of Education – what’s in for students?’<sup>15</sup>, which brought together student activists from different countries, as well as from ESU’s associate membership (European sectoral student federations) to share their vision on education in Europe. From the discussions, some conclusions emerge:

- The development of the European Education Area makes the approval of a European Student Rights Charter<sup>16</sup> necessary. It should lay out students as key stakeholders at all the levels of governance, and it should be implemented at the national and institutional levels. Its implementation should be a prerequisite for accessing the European funds for education - for that, the role of the student unions to co-design its implementation and raise the case of breaches to the provisions of the Charter is fundamental.
- Investments in education need to be prioritised to match the growth of the student population and the increased need for an educated society. Funding inequalities due to HEIs pursuing prestige and high-ranking positions, as well as the access to private fundings should be reduced: HEIs need to have enough funds to guarantee students’ access to support services for all those who need them, with a particular focus on disadvantaged students.
- The Social Dimension of Higher Education needs to be mainstreamed and adopted by all the decision-makers and stakeholders. In the implementation of the EHEA Principles and Guidelines for the Social Dimension, national strategies need to be designed and implemented together with the students and their representatives, together with sufficient financial resources for their implementation, e.g. by budgeting a specific amount of the GDP on the social dimension of education and by assigning further funds to those HEIs implementing policies to strengthen the social dimension of their institutions.

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<sup>14</sup> [A European digital Higher Education platform](#), ESU proposal on the platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

<sup>15</sup> [The future of the EU and the future of Education – what’s in for students?’](#), event on the platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

<sup>16</sup> [Student Rights Charter](#), European Students Union; [A European Student Rights Charter](#), ESU proposal on the platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

On this, the EU should have a role in promoting minimum standards on investments, e.g. on mental health support services and housing, in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights, for instance by reformulating the European Semester in order to strengthen its social part and by adding there specific indicators based on the Principles and Guidelines on the Social Dimension.

- Europe must equip itself with a Students At Risk scheme<sup>17</sup>, which should serve as a unified gateway of several national scholarship schemes in order for applicants to find their match in terms of study field and language of learning. The scheme should take a two-folded approach: a ‘student’ approach, in issuing student visas, and a ‘refugee’ approach, in collaboration with international organisations like the UNHCR, in order to guarantee the right to education also to those students who do not hold the conditions to obtain a visa (e.g. not holding a passport). Its implementation requires a breaking down of political and administrative barriers for these procedures, a commitment to facilitate visa issuing for students and to uphold international standards on asylum-seeking applications without political instrumentalisation, as well as the involvement of the civil society organisations, including student ones, in the design and implementation of these schemes, in respect to the evolving nature of what risks would qualify students for such schemes.
- Academic freedom is a fundamental value that must be enjoyed by all students: limiting the possibility of students to choose their course of study (e.g. by limiting the number of places available or underfunding branches of learning and research due to political priorities) is a violation of the academic freedom. Academic freedom should also encompass the possibility of students and researchers from different backgrounds to engage in learning and research.
- Automatic recognition of degrees<sup>18</sup> is a goal that needs to be reached through the implementation of the Bologna tools, as well as with a stable, clear and transparent legal framework for such recognition - adaptation measures for the recognition of foreign degrees (e.g. linked to the language the degree was issued) need to be made available. In terms of automatic recognition, better communication and support needs to be established between all bodies involved in recognition processes, particularly in a national context, but in the international as well.
- It is high time for innovative forms of learning and teaching, a redesign of the curricula and the establishment of support systems in order not to overburden

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<sup>17</sup> [A European ‘Students At Risk’ scholarship scheme](#), ESU proposal on the platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

<sup>18</sup> [Towards automatic recognition of Higher Education degrees within the EU](#), ESU proposal on the platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

students' mental health and give them the possibility for personal development inside Higher Education.

- Student democracy needs to be recognised by all the stakeholders and policymakers. This ranges from the national level, where student involvement in drafting the laws that affect them must be formalised, to the institutional level, where HEIs need to support student unions and promote participation in its activities, its structures and its elections. Student unions should be also involved in the design of participatory mechanisms for the student body at large to influence the decisions of the different levels of HE governance.
- Higher Education Institutions must be at the forefront of tackling the climate crisis, by mainstreaming climate and sustainability issues in the curricula, by promoting research to tackle the climate crisis, by becoming sustainable and carbon-neutral in their activities.

These proposals are valid for all the EHEA countries: the European Union can have a role in achieving them, but it must leave its programmes open for other countries to join these endeavours as well.

ESU will continue promoting its vision for education at the Conference on the Future of Europe through all the channels at its disposal: by sharing its proposals in the Conference platform<sup>19</sup>, by coordinating activities at the national and European level and within the Plenary of the Conference through its membership, and by engaging in the definition of the priorities of the different organisations and coalitions ESU is part of and which hold seats within the Conference Plenary. In this regard, we share the concerns of the Lifelong Learning Platform<sup>20</sup> on the difficulties by civil society organisations to have their voice heard within the process and through the online platform, on the organisational shortcomings of the proceedings of the Conference Plenary and on the uncertainty about the outcomes of the Conference, which risk turning the probably biggest experiment of deliberative democracy at such scale into a failure. ESU underlines how the success of the Conference lies in the mobilisational capacity of movements, associations and organisations, from the local to the European level, and in providing the Conference and its Plenary with adequate instruments fit for the ambition of the purpose.

The level of ambition for the European Year of Youth 2022 needs to be matched with concrete actions and set bold outcomes. Being students a separate but linked constituency to youth, ESU believes that the European Year of Youth should have two

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<sup>19</sup> [ESU has assembled a set of proposals to put education at the centre of Europe's future. Now you can support them!](#), European Students' Union.

<sup>20</sup> [The education and training stakeholders' role in the Future of Europe - Reaching out to citizens deserves serious commitment](#), Lifelong Learning Platform.

purposes: putting the ‘youth social question’ at the centre of next year’s policy proposals; establish once and for all that participatory, democratic, representative mechanisms of coordination and dialogue between youth (including students), policymakers and governance structures. This is the only way forward, abandoning for good any other non-viable practices. That is why ESU supports the European Youth Forum’s demands for the Conference on the Future of Europe<sup>21</sup>, and thinks they are even more relevant within the framework of the European Year of Youth. Within the Higher Education sector, students need to be involved in all the steps of the creation of the European Education Area (including the European Strategy for Universities), in the implementation of the Bologna tools, as well as in the development of new strategies in governance, legislation and implementation.

The European policy cycles in Higher Education, the Conference on the Future of Europe and the European Year of Youth can succeed only if the whole transformational potential of students is harnessed: this means listening to their needs, discussing their proposals and giving them a real say on the future of their continent.

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<sup>21</sup> [Conference on the Future of Europe: European Youth Forum Position Paper.](#)