

European Students' Union (ESU)

Fighting for students' rights since 1982

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Membership Strategy

Introduction

European Students' Union is an umbrella organisation for student representatives in Europe. The members of ESU are National Unions of Students (NUS) in Europe. Through its members, ESU represents almost 20 million students in Europe. Its possible expansion strongly corresponds with Europe's institutional, geographical and cultural borders. A common denominator is that all NUS strive for better systems of higher education across Europe.

ESU's strength is defined by its members. Only organisations which are stable, independent and represent students at national levels should be members of ESU. Because ESU members are very different from each other and do not have unified structures, it is crucial to individually evaluate their current work, the actual level of representation of students in the country, the scope of independence and procedures of electing their representatives.

ESU, as a diverse and democratic organisation, should have a clear overview of the organisational situation and structures of its members; at the same time organisations coming from different European states have diverse conditions and origins. Because of the organisational expansion, there is a need to have useful tools for following members' activities, which can be used to assist them to meet, and ensure their constant fulfilment of the membership criteria.

The Membership strategy outlines the main political priorities within the broader meaning of membership issues, mainly tackling the understanding of membership criteria, standards for study visits, reassessment procedures, and support to NUS.

Membership criteria

ESU membership criteria are a critical issue for ESU membership policies, as these criteria guarantee that all the members, despite their organizational and structural differences, share a common core of beliefs and values and adhere to the same fundamental principles of student organizations and representation. In order for an NUS to meet the membership criteria, it has to ensure that:

- **It is controlled and run by students.** Students should have decisive power and control over the organisation. This does not preclude students on academic leave or recent graduates from taking part in the organisation, but the major power distribution should lay with currently enrolled students and other groups if they are represented by the organization.
- **It holds democratic elections and runs on a democratic basis.** Transparent, frequent, cyclical and non-corrupted democratic elections should be an essential part of every NUS. Student voters should have access to all the information necessary to run or to cast their votes in a meaningful manner. Democratic decision-making on day-to-day issues must be assured.
- **It is representative.** NUS is built on solid ground with legitimacy coming from students, NUS should represent a large number of students and at the same time have at least an ambition to influence national higher education policies. In its advocacy work and projects, the organisation equally takes into account the needs and interests of different students and student groups which it represents.
- **It is autonomous and independent in decision-making.** NUSes must be financially and politically independent in decision making from any political parties, governments, and financial donors, whilst still being able to have relations to those actors. In their advocacy work, NUS's must be sufficiently independent of external factors, decision-making bodies do not depend on external authorization when participating in this process.
- **Its objectives are in accordance with ESU objectives and values, stated in the Statutes.** The organization's formal documents and its work and operations demonstrate that the organization's main objectives correspond with core ESU objectives - representing students' needs and interests and fighting for a more quality system of higher

education as well as heightened accessibility and the broader availability of higher education for all members of the society.

ESU as a diverse organisation understands and accepts NUSes representing specific higher education systems within their country's frameworks, and bears in mind the country's specifications whilst assessing a NUS

Study visit

The purpose of study visits is to determine whether a NUS fulfils the ESU membership criteria and, consequently, to provide the Board with a recommendation about NUS membership. In order to do this, the study visit team should use all opportunities at their disposal to check how the member in question operates. The burden of study visit preparations must be borne by a candidate member or a reassessed NUS. However, we must also be aware that some candidate NUSes are not able to cover all the costs of the visit. As it follows from the Standing Orders, all study visit team members must be aware that some costs might have to be covered by their respective organizations.

The study visit must be carried out in accordance with the highest professional and ethical standards, respecting the confidentiality of information received. It is crucial that the study visit team is created in line with the principles of regional and gender balance. **The members elected to do the study visit must nominate their representatives no later than 30 days after the BM they've been elected.** Before this deadline, unions should communicate as early as possible their proposed nomination, so that to have time to holistically assess the gender balance within the study visit team and propose alternative nominations, if necessary. Should a nominated representative be no longer able to participate in the study visit, it has to communicate it to the Membership Coordinator at the earliest convenience, and its nominating NUS must propose an alternative nomination by 10 days after the communication of the inability by its former nomination. The new nominee should not alter the gender balance of the study visit team.

During the study visit, the study visit team must be familiar with, and constantly comply with, the ESU Statutes and Standing Orders, which are the documents according to which the whole procedure is conducted. The study visit team must evaluate the organisation being assessed in accordance with

ESU membership criteria as stated in the Statutes and developed in the Membership Strategy.

The study visit team has the right to request any documents related to the operation of the assessed NUS. All the necessary documents must be requested at least 60 days before the date of the study visit, and they must be delivered at least 30 days before the study visit. Further documents can be requested after these deadlines by the study visit team, but the NUS cannot be compelled to comply. Should the study visit team need additional clarifications after the visit, documents can be requested no later than 10 days after the visit, but the NUS cannot be compelled to comply.

The study visit team must study the delivered documents, and prepare notes about available information before the visit itself. Provided documents must be available to the Board while respecting an assessed NUS' request to keep a document or documents confidential.

In order to determine all the necessary information about a NUS, holding meetings with the following stakeholders must be considered:

- NUS presidency and executive committee, NUS board members or equivalent bodies
- Relevant organisations in the country related to student issues
- Partner organisations of the assessed NUS
- Representatives of various local students' unions or individual members, that they find relevant, but preferably not only those recommended by the assessed NUS
- Students who are not members of the NUS, and representatives of other student organisations, if they exist in the country
- State education institutions, such as the ministry responsible for higher education, stakeholders involved in education, quality assurance agency, research institutions
- Representatives of other relevant organisations working in the area of higher education
- Independent NGOs engaged in higher education
- International institutions working for education, such as the local UNESCO or Council of Europe department, foreign embassies.

It is important that the information gathered in these meetings is evaluated holistically in the study visit report.

The schedule for the study visit is to be proposed by the candidate NUS at least 30 days before the study visit, and it should be agreed upon between the study visit team and the candidate NUS at least 14 days before the visit. **The study visit team has the right to request meetings with specific involved parties if they deem it necessary for the assessment of the candidate member organisation.** It is the competence of the Membership Coordination, within the limits of its capacity, to organise the meetings no later than 10 days after the visit with those stakeholders the study visit team deem necessary to meet but the NUS was not able to organise.

The study visit report must be done as an unbiased report, which will be easily comparable with other study visit reports, and it should consist of at least the following elements:

- Overview of the current political situation in the country, in relation to the higher education system, which has to include the overall structure and financing of the higher education system and any recent major changes in the national higher education area
- Summary from all the meetings held during the visit
- Reports on each of the membership criteria, according to the organizational capacities framework
- Constructive feedback to the assessed NUS identifying areas to develop.
- Any additional information that might be worthwhile for a more objective assessment of NUS membership;
- Conclusion and recommendation to the Board, including one on assessed NUS's membership status

In case of dissenting opinions amongst the study visit team, each team member has the right to write a statement that has to be included in the study visit report.

The Study visit report, together with the potential candidate NUS comments, are delivered to the ESU Board.

Handbook for Study Visits

A handbook for conducting study visits should be followed by study visit teams and used by the Board to oversee the minimum standards for the

study visit procedures. The aim of this document is to secure comparable and reliable study visits reports guidelines, a mutual understanding of membership criteria and furthermore standards for study visit procedures, in order to assess whether an organisation meets the necessary conditions for joining the European Students' Union as a full member.

Reassessment

Due to the need to continuously strive for a strong and solid organisation, unions must ensure they embrace the core values of ESU and continue to uphold and preserve these values whilst in membership. Continuous reassessments of unions provide ESU with a good platform to learn from each other, and for discussing democratic values and sustainability within student unions.

As ESU encourages NUSes to be active organisations and working within ESU is not their only responsibility, the assessment of their membership cannot be based only on their presence during official ESU events, but compliance of their activity at the national level with the membership criteria should also be verified.

Reassessment is based on a **seven-year** self-evaluation of every ESU member, with the board having oversight over the fulfilment of membership criteria and overall acting according to ESU values. The reassessment process is based on transparency and open access for full members of ESU to all information given by NUSes.

Every NUS is obliged to deliver a written self-evaluation report, consisting of:

- Native + Original and English version of up-to-date NUS Statutes and Standing Orders
An official English translation might be costly for some unions, so the translation can be done without an official translation agency. These documents should provide information on NUS structure (incl. membership), working patterns, and legitimacy.
- Self-evaluation on each membership criterion
NUS will provide self-assessment on each membership criteria defined in the ESU Statutes, following the methods used in Study visits.
- Activity report

The Activity Report should consist of highlights of the NUS activities for the past 5 years. It should also include an overview of the main present and future activities.

- Financial Statement

The Financial Statement to be delivered for the reassessment procedure differs from the one delivered for the TDI. It has to elaborate only on main sources of income, main expenses and contains a self-evaluation of NUS financial sustainability.

The Executive Committee will select the order in which the NUSes should be reassessed with regard to regional balance. NUSes also have the opportunity to proactively request being reassessed. The most recently accepted NUSes will be reassessed the last, the same as all newly accepted NUSes. Selected NUSes should be formally informed about being selected for the reassessment process, no later than 120 days before the respective BM, in order to ensure that the self-evaluation report is sent to the ESU Presidency 30 days prior to the respective BM, which will assure its accessibility to the Board. The Board will discuss the report with the respective NUS during the Board Meeting and then vote on the document. The report is adopted by a simple majority.

- a) If the report is accepted, the reassessment procedure is over, and the obligation of delivering a report starts again within the timeframe.
- b) If the report is not delivered, the respective NUS is granted the possibility to deliver the report to the following Board meeting in order to be voted upon again.
- c) If the report is not accepted the respective NUS is granted the opportunity to improve the organisation and deliver a new report at the second Board meeting after the report was rejected.
- d) If the second report is accepted, the reassessment procedure is over and the obligation of delivering a report starts again within the timeframe.
- e) If the second report is not accepted or not delivered, a study visit will take place under the current provisions stated in the ESU Standing Orders. The Study visit team delivers their own report and the Board votes on this report with a simple majority. In consequence, the board will vote about the revoking of membership of the respective union with a $\frac{3}{4}$ majority as foreseen by the Standing Orders.

Associate membership

Associate members are an important link in the chain of making students policies in terms of consultation and cooperation in the field of higher education. The importance of deepening the collaboration with associate members, which can be done through policy-making processes within ESU's structures, is evident. The knowledge which can be gained from the associate members, as well as cultural and representative diversity, are of strategic importance to ESU. It is in ESU's vital interest to be representative for all European student movements, granted that the core values and principles are shared. Associates can attend ESU events, especially those events where they can contribute with their expertise. This cooperation and engagement will bring ESU more different viewpoints on certain issues and will give the organisation an even stronger value and standpoint in the context of representativeness.

Both Associates and ESU should reinforce each other's messages on topics of common interest by promoting and supporting policy papers and statements. The flow of information and communication from both parties should be improved in order to ensure more efficient and effective reaching of mutual goals. ESU should specifically involve its associate members in the formulation of its policies when they deal with the field of expertise and action of ESU's associate members.

The coordinator for membership issues should hold constant communication with all Associates via appropriate means of communication. For purposes of improving the acknowledging of possibilities of collaboration with ESU, they should be introduced to the task division among the hacks team.

With current changes in the higher education landscape on a European level discussions on student representation in newly designed structures are arising. ESU has the responsibility to monitor these changes carefully and deliberate on them with its members to ensure meaningful and democratic representation for as many students as possible. ESU should try to participate in the discourse and lobby for all student representation structures to be democratic and independent. New structures within ESU should be developed, allowing transnational student councils to become more involved in the everyday life of ESU.

Capacity building

An important part of ESU's mission is to support NUSes in developing their capacities, and in gaining skills for stronger and more skilled student movement representation. The Trainers' Pool should be a tool for developing full, candidate and associate members, in order to develop their capacities to strengthen ESU as a result. Capacity-building seminars should regularly take place during ESU events, alongside the projected agenda. ESU will also look for ways of supporting NUSes, which do not require physical meetings, in order to cut the costs of such support, and making it accessible for all NUSes, such as online platforms for delivering trainings to ESU members.

In the upcoming years, ESU should invest in strengthening the Pool of Trainers, promote and use it within ESU events and provide training for member organisations upon request. ESU should find a way for sustainable funding of Pool of Trainers through projects, ESU's budget and contributions of members themselves.

The Pool of Trainers activities should focus on delivering aspects of ESU's core activities, two in particular:

- Bringing together training and informing national student representatives on policy developments in higher education at the European level.
- Organising seminars, training, campaigns and conferences relevant to students

Furthermore, to ensure institutional memory of membership, ESU should build an online depository of policies connected with higher education and student union's reactions, activities and projects in these areas, best practices and student representation framework. The ESU Executive Committee is responsible for the implementation of this depository. Successful implementation should enable the new student representatives and less experienced student unions to easily and quickly access the wealth of experience concerning policies that exist at the European level and also give comparable qualitative information about student representation frameworks across Europe.

In case NUSes do not fulfil the membership criteria, thus have not been granted full membership in ESU, but have expressed their desire to become

full members, the European Students' Union will engage in capacity building in accordance with the current organizational capabilities, in order to contribute to the development of strong and efficient student movement in all of Europe. An advisory partner NUS can be appointed to the said union, as stated in the Standing Orders.

Annexes

1. Organisational capacities framework
2. Membership questionnaire (full membership and associate)
3. Study visit handbook