

# European Students' Union (ESU)

## Fighting for students' rights since 1982

**Mundo-Madou.**

Avenue des Arts 7/8, 1210 Bruxelles

[secretariat@esu-online.org](mailto:secretariat@esu-online.org)

+32 2 893 25 45



## European Union Higher Education package: a first step on a long journey

Across the months of December and January, the Commission presented several policy measures aimed at achieving the European Education Area (EEA) by 2025 and advancing the role that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play in European societies. These documents are the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on individual learning accounts and the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on microcredentials<sup>1</sup>, the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on learning for environmental sustainability<sup>2</sup>, the proposal for a Council recommendation on building bridges for effective European Higher Education cooperation<sup>3</sup> and the Communication on a European Strategy for Universities<sup>4</sup>. The European Students' Union (ESU) welcomes this new focus on Higher Education (HE), as the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis and the rise of authoritarianism make the role of HE and its societal engagement more important than ever.

As outlined in the Student manifesto on the future of HE in Europe<sup>5</sup>, the 'future of HE lies in an integrated European Higher Education Area (EHEA), where fundamental values, 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'. The EEA can play a major role in further implementing the EHEA policies and in allowing policy experimentation while retaining the EHEA as the main policy-setting forum for HE in Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&furtherNews=yes&newsId=10118>

<sup>2</sup> <https://education.ec.europa.eu/document/proposal-for-a-council-recommendation-on-learning-for-environmental-sustainability>

<sup>3</sup> <https://education.ec.europa.eu/document/proposal-for-a-council-recommendation-on-building-bridges-for-effective-european-higher-education-cooperation>

<sup>4</sup> <https://education.ec.europa.eu/document/commission-communication-on-a-european-strategy-for-universities>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Student-manifesto-on-the-future-of-Higher-Education-in-Europe.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0rEy3pf6T2eOPGuHvZDzOdSoWMErFFAhXAtLqtwx8PGEU\\_vhPnXVRPubk](https://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Student-manifesto-on-the-future-of-Higher-Education-in-Europe.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0rEy3pf6T2eOPGuHvZDzOdSoWMErFFAhXAtLqtwx8PGEU_vhPnXVRPubk)

## **EEA must involve democratic, autonomous, representative stakeholders**

The HE package released by the European Commission envisages deep transformations within the HE sector, from the European to the institutional level. The EEA has the ambition to be the next stepping stone on the integration of European HE systems after the Bologna process. The Bologna process has shown that the involvement of stakeholders from representative, democratic, independent organisations (such as ESU, the European University Association - EUA, European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education - ENQA, and the European Trade Union Committee for Education - ETUCE) has been crucial to shaping successful policies in HE: the thorough design and implementation of EEA policies cannot be achieved if democratic, autonomous, stakeholder representation is set aside at the different levels, and cherry-picked, unrepresentative actors, are empowered as a tokenised version of 'stakeholders involvement', as it risks to happen if the Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European HE cooperation does not clearly stipulate the importance to democratise and foster a democratic culture in European Universities and within the EEA governance.

As the Communication on the Strategy for Universities points out: "Fundamental academic and democratic values are under pressure". Recurring threats pointed out by national student unions to ESU on the autonomy of student representation in the governance of HE have primarily concerned the external interference and pressure on student representatives, by both state and non-state actors<sup>6</sup>. It is essential that student representatives are able to autonomously represent the views and defend the rights of their constituency, and the best model that this can only be done by protecting, recognising and supporting democratic, independent student unions as well as fostering a democratic culture in European universities.

In line with the Council's conclusions on the European Universities Initiative<sup>7</sup> and with the proposed Council Recommendation on 'building bridges', ESU reiterates that student involvement must be democratic and representative at all levels, including the transnational one. Therefore, ESU further calls each alliance of HEIs to establish a democratically elected, representative student council, with a solid, direct representation in the highest decision making body of the alliance. The same degree of stakeholders' involvement is needed also at the EEA level. However, as we previously denounced<sup>8</sup>, limited space is given to stakeholders in the EEA governance, limiting their role to the technical bodies and excluding them from the High-Level Group on Education and Training: this risks hindering the success of the EEA.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.esu-online.org/publications/bologna-student-eyes-2018-2/> and <https://www.esu-online.org/?news=bologna-student-eyes-2018-ministers-urged-ensure-proper-implementation-education-accessible> and <https://www.esu-online.org/?publication=bologna-with-student-eyes-2015>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/49659/st08658-en21.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/EEA-governance-the-triumph-of-intergovernmentalism-very-little-space-for-stakeholders.pdf>

ESU believes that the EHEA is the benchmark for stakeholders involvement at the European level, and calls for a revision of the EEA governance system: HE stakeholders, including students, must be represented within the High-Level Group, and the democratisation of the involvement of students and stakeholders students must be involved at the national level in shaping the governments' positions on EEA issues and in designing and implementing HE reforms.

## **Assessing the transnational dimension of European Higher Education**

The European Strategy for Universities and the proposed Council Recommendation on building bridges outline the establishment, by mid-2024, of a series of tools to foster the integration of the HEIs members of transnational alliances, with the encouragement to experiment on them in the years leading to that deadline. These instruments are a legal statute for the alliances, allowing them to pool human, digital, administrative and financial resources as well as to find long-term, sustainable ways of funding; a European Degree, to be delivered at a national level, based on common criteria and recognised across the European Union (EU), preceded by the creation of a 'European degree label' to be assigned to the joint degrees delivered by alliances of HEIs; and the development of joint educational activities, including joint student admission and enrolment. This would be accompanied by Recommendations to further develop a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System. We welcome that the measures proposed in the Council recommendation are available for all the alliances of HEIs, not limited to the European Universities, with the goal to make them available for all the HEIs. The third call of the European Universities allows HEIs from the EHEA to be part of an alliance as associate partners: it must be clarified how these HEIs will design and agree upon the legal statute, the European Degree and the other tools envisaged in the two documents. No differences in conditions and participation in governance must occur between academic partners, be they full or associate members. However, problems for the rollout of the alliances of HEIs, such as tuition fees, *numerus clausus* and different levels of student support would still be present - an upward convergence of student rights and conditions within the alliances is needed. In order to do so, the alliances should evaluate the condition of student rights and conditions according to common criteria, find an HEI benchmark for each criterion and identify the obstacles to upward convergence towards those benchmarks. Such work would enlighten the systemic hurdles to such convergence, thus triggering the convergence of the European HE systems as a whole. In order to do that, the involvement of students, their unions and their representative at the alliance level is paramount; ESU is ready to give support in defining the common indicators and in supporting and empowering the students of the alliance to accomplish such work. For HE stakeholders, the functioning systems, such as External and Internal Quality Assurance based on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes or recognition structures, remain the key for systemic involvement of stakeholders on all levels, being the basis for building trust across the EHEA and ensuring the

high quality of education. For learners as a stakeholder, according to the ESG's these processes are playing a crucial role to institutionalise the participation of learners.

The Council recommendation and the Strategy envisage the European Student Card and the unique European Student Identifier to be available to all mobile students in 2022 and to all the other students by mid-2024. The Card must enhance, but not substitute, the current ones issued by HEIs and student unions, and must give mobile students access to the same services as those of the at-home students. Privacy and data security challenges must be addressed in creating a unique identifier.

The financial sustainability of the alliances must be addressed: the announced development of an investment pathway combining local, national and European funds as part of the mid-term review of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) is important. ESU, however, underlines how many national HE systems are underfunded<sup>9</sup>. On the one hand, without strong public investments, the alliances could resort to increasing tuition fees or acquiring substantial private investments to support their work, which would be a failure of the public responsibility on HE and would further commodification tendencies, as well as widen the gap between the alliances and all the other HEIs. ESU calls the Member States to fulfil their commitment to public responsibility of HE by closing the funding gap and investing in education (and in particular in HE) the amount of funds needed for HEIs to be up to the challenges of a changing world and the requirements society and public authorities demand of them.

ESU welcomes the focus on academic freedom, academic integrity and institutional autonomy, by embedding them within the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education, Erasmus Student Charter and as a prerequisite for setting up common governance structures of the alliances of HEIs. The Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) is working on common definitions and indicators for EHEA fundamental values, to be approved at the next Ministerial Conference in 2024. Thus, the Commission's commitment to propose in 2024 guiding principles on protecting fundamental academic values should enforce within the EU those EHEA definitions and indicators. The announced guidelines for hosting researchers at risk and the encouragement to set up national programmes for refugee students are a welcomed development towards the establishment of a European Scholars and Students At Risk scholarship scheme<sup>10</sup>, based on a common framework for national programmes and co-funded by the EU.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://eua.eu/downloads/content/eua%20pfo%202019%20report.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> [https://futureu.europa.eu/processes/Education/f/36/proposals/129163?component\\_id=36&filter%5Bdecidim\\_scope\\_id%5D=&filter%5Bresource\\_type%5D=Decidim%3A%3AProposals%3A%3AProposal&filter%5Bterm%5D=esperanto&=&order=most\\_endorsed&page=3&participatory\\_process\\_slug=Educatori&per\\_page=50&locale=en](https://futureu.europa.eu/processes/Education/f/36/proposals/129163?component_id=36&filter%5Bdecidim_scope_id%5D=&filter%5Bresource_type%5D=Decidim%3A%3AProposals%3A%3AProposal&filter%5Bterm%5D=esperanto&=&order=most_endorsed&page=3&participatory_process_slug=Educatori&per_page=50&locale=en)

## **Lighthouses need also captains and instruments to steer ships from danger**

At a critical time when the pandemic has exacerbated social inequality, and the financial and educational background of students' parents remains affirmed as the predominant factor for enrolment in many European education systems<sup>11</sup>, ESU found that the four joint key objectives for the EEA to achieve by 2024 could have more holistically integrated diversity, equity and inclusion.

ESU played a key role in the creation and adoption of the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA<sup>12</sup> and continues to co-chair the 2021-2024 BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension supporting the implementation and monitoring of the Principles and Guidelines. Whether the Commission's proposed "European framework for diversity and inclusion" will complement and support the further implementation of the Principles and Guidelines is an important question and the answer should not only rest assured that the framework will not lead to any contradictions between both policies, it should also stipulate meaningful involvement of the BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension in the development of the European framework. This would be in line with the commitment to promote synergies between the EHEA, EEA and European Research Area (ERA).

Still, from a student view, ESU feels there could have been a lot more thought and creative initiatives to prevent students from marginalised, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups from being left behind in our education systems and society.

Without exceptional and immediate investments in education, it will take us decades to make up for the learning losses caused by the pandemic. Investing in education means, above all, investing in teachers, paying them adequately while providing adequate training, resources and tools for building digital competencies to all students and to teaching and administrative staff. While the Strategy checks the box in identifying the need to improve working conditions, it needed to also recognise that teaching and administrative staff are more and more needing to respond and accommodate to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

It is very alarming that the mention of student support services (scholarships/grants, counselling and guidance, linguistic support, food and housing) is sorely missing and receives no mention in the entire Strategy. In a Europe-wide student survey ESU carried out together with the University of Zadar and the Institute for the Development of Education in

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[https://www.eurostudent.eu/download\\_files/documents/EUROSTUDENT\\_VII\\_Synopsis\\_of\\_Indicators.pdf](https://www.eurostudent.eu/download_files/documents/EUROSTUDENT_VII_Synopsis_of_Indicators.pdf)

<sup>12</sup>[https://eha2020rome.it/storage/uploads/5d29d1cd-4616-4dfe-a2af-29140a02ec09/BFUG\\_Annex-I-I-Communique\\_PaGs\\_SocialDimension.pdf](https://eha2020rome.it/storage/uploads/5d29d1cd-4616-4dfe-a2af-29140a02ec09/BFUG_Annex-I-I-Communique_PaGs_SocialDimension.pdf)

Zagreb at the height of the first wave of the pandemic in 2020, the majority of the respondents reported feeling frequently frustrated, anxious and bored in relation to their academic activities. An, even more, grimmer reality to learn about is that only 5.8% of students would turn to institutional staff if they needed support regarding their studies and 1.5% of students would turn to institutional staff if they needed support to talk about the COVID-19 crisis<sup>13</sup>.

ESU finds it should be common knowledge by now that it is detrimental to the quality of European education if the social dimension is disregarded and, most especially if it is not integrated into the digital and green transformation of our universities. Just as the Commission promises to provide support to transnational cooperation to develop the digital skills and competencies of students of all ages, staff and researchers, it can and should also do the same for social skills and competencies to combat the negative consequences the pandemic has had on the human backbone of our education systems. Similarly, it can and should support Member States' efforts through peer learning and sharing best practices in promoting whole institutional approaches towards the social dimension, along with sustainability, climate and environmental literacy.

An ideal example for a truly holistic and integrated approach would be if the European Commission supports dedicated measures to recognise at the EU level the efforts of universities not only driving the digital and green transformation but doing this while strengthening the social dimension and upholding the fundamental values. While we are setting ambitious targets, ESU reiterates its belief that the EU can and should have a role in promoting minimum standards on investments, e.g. on scholarships/grants, 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<sup>14</sup>.

The focus on investing in digital skills and infrastructure to bridge the current divides is fundamental, and the future of HE will also pass-through access to high quality, shared digital environment: ESU supports<sup>15</sup> the proposed creation of a European platform to promote cooperation between HEIs, compatible with the European Open Science Cloud, as a way to strengthen the Digital Education Action Plan<sup>16</sup>.

It is important to state that the digital skills, for which the Commission's Strategy sets ambitious targets, should not just comprise technical and specialist skills, but also transversal skills and attitudes such as data literacy, ethics etc. The Strategy also emphasises the need for digital infrastructure. The first objective when developing this infrastructure should be to make sure the infrastructure is accessible to all learners, as universal accessibility is a necessary condition for digital education. Any and all digital

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<sup>13</sup> [https://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/0010-ESU-SIderalCovid19\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/0010-ESU-SIderalCovid19_WEB.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.esu-online.org/?policy=bm81-resolution-on-student-manifesto-on-the-future-of-higher-education-in-europe>

<sup>15</sup> <https://futureu.europa.eu/processes/Education/f/36/proposals/129168>

<sup>16</sup> <https://education.ec.europa.eu/document/digital-education-action-plan>

strategies for HEIs should be developed and continuously evaluated with the involvement of students and staff.

ESU stresses the need for a holistic vision in the plans for digital skills, education, and infrastructure, which should include plans for developing the necessary pedagogical skills and vision for how the digital tools should be used in education, as well as the necessary quality assurance procedures to ensure the quality of the digital education<sup>17</sup>. The Council Recommendation on ‘building bridges’ mentions pedagogical training and valuing education in academic staff career assessments, which is a positive development and their implementation is crucial for the successful realisation of any digital education.

The digitalisation plans in the package lack attention for the privacy and ethical aspects of digital education. Digital tools, including those making use of artificial intelligence (AI), offer many possibilities for education, and interoperable platforms and infrastructure can make these tools more usable, accessible, and effective, but the privacy of students must always come first: their data must always remain under their ownership, be stored securely, and be used with respect for ethical principles. The development of European guidelines for the ethical use of digital tools in education could be an enabling factor in this.

According to the Commission’s Strategy, the ‘future [of mobility] should be based on hybrid solutions representing a good balance between physical presence and digital tools’. ESU recalls that the Council’s conclusions on the European Universities Initiative<sup>18</sup> decided that physical mobility must remain the core format, not blended or so-called ‘virtual’ ones, and once more underlines the importance of physical mobility over all other forms. ESU and the Erasmus Student Network published a joint paper<sup>19</sup> on the role that blended mobilities and virtual exchanges should play: they can be useful to promote physical mobilities at a later stage of a student career, but cannot be an obstacle to the increase in the inclusiveness and in the funding of physical mobility. In order to make the Erasmus programme truly inclusive and stable throughout the years, the amount of funds should increase without dramatic drops between two MFF cycles, and the grants should cover the actual costs of living and study in the host city.

The establishment of the European Higher Education Sector Observatory promises to fill the gaps of the current data sources and become the single access point for the information on HE in the EU. The Observatory should take into account relevant data on the students’ situations, experiences and perspectives in their learning environment. In this regard, the significance of the EUROSTUDENT project and its deliverables cannot be stressed enough, providing a reliable source of comparable data on the social dimension of European HE through a strong network of national partners in each participating country and the participation of stakeholders, including ESU, in its Steering Board. The Bologna With Student Eyes publication is a crucial and only source of comparable data on the participation and

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.esu-online.org/?policy=digitalisation-statement>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/49659/st08658-en21.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.esn.org/sites/default/files/news/esn\\_esu\\_policy\\_paper\\_-\\_mobility\\_and\\_virtual\\_blen ded\\_activities.pdf](https://www.esn.org/sites/default/files/news/esn_esu_policy_paper_-_mobility_and_virtual_blen ded_activities.pdf)

involvement of students in the governance of European HE that is collected through the National Unions of Students umbrellaed under ESU and that should be considered one of the data sources for the Observatory. The accompanying European Higher Education Sector Scoreboard, which will also evaluate the investment levels in HE, must be developed in cooperation with all the HE stakeholders and must inform the European Semester's country-specific recommendations.

### **The role of Higher Education Institutions within the green transition**

The Council Recommendation on learning for environmental sustainability arrives at a crucial time. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals are to be completed in this decade, the European Green Deal is to achieve a major milestone towards carbon neutrality as well, while countries around the world are feeling the impact of environmental changes. ESU, therefore, commends this initiative, as it is imperative for putting visions for a better environment into reality. Sustainability-related education presents an opportunity to create more engaging and relevant course content by using practical cases and examples, which learners could relate to. ESU also echoes the importance of life-long learning stated in the document, as people of all ages need to have the chance to learn about the new development or simply complement their current knowledge. Moreover, such activities not only need to be created but also adequately communicated, so that citizens are aware of these opportunities and are able to imagine themselves as students again.

ESU also supports the education on environmental issues for staff of HEIs, as students are best led by example and it is a necessary precursor for the right implementation of these affairs into curricula. Special attention might be required in this matter because academics are already experts in their field and usually require more detailed, thorough materials in comparison to regular learners.

Finally, implementation of these points should be monitored critically with an emphasis on meaningfulness to prevent green-washing. Some allegedly green-related activities might work only on paper and do little good in real life, bypassing the purpose of this Recommendation.

### **The multiple purposes of Higher Education**

Regarding the Council's recommendations on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability, and the Council's recommendations on individual learning paths, ESU agrees that the HE system needs to keep up with the changing times and changing nature of HE, including the rise of lifelong learning as the means to upskill and reskill people. Even though micro-credentials have been the topic of discussion for years now with the prospect of adapting people to the ever-changing workforce more easily, ESU

stresses that micro-credentials must not become means of commodification but rather a voluntary free of charge development tool for the learner.<sup>20</sup> The student, the lifelong learner, must always stay at the centre of the education process.

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.esu-online.org/?policy=bm80-statement-on-micro-credentials>