

European Students' Union (ESU)

Fighting for students' rights since 1982

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PRESS RELEASE

Declaration on the European Universities Community and the 'European Student Assembly' inaugural session, 3rd - 4th March 2022

On the 3rd and 4th March 2022, the 'European Universities Community' (EUC) is being held in the premises of the European Parliament in Strasbourg, which has been named by the organisers as the 'inaugural session of the European Student Assembly'.

According to the communicated scope of the project, '[t]he EUC is a grassroots initiative gathering students and academic staff from European Universities'¹, in order to 'be the voice of European students in the Conference for the Future of Europe'². The 'inaugural session of the European Student Assembly [...] will be the first of a series of gatherings that will give students a public voice in the European Union'³. A first result of the project was the drafting of a 'Manifesto on the Future of Universities in Europe'⁴, written by 16 students 'with the assistance and under the supervision' of staff from the participating universities, owing 'much to discussions and exchanges with dozens of other European students'. The Manifesto was presented to the European Union's (EU) Higher Education Ministers and the Commissioner for Education at the Forum of Universities for the Future of Europe, organised under the French EU Council Presidency.

The European Students' Union, as the autonomous, democratic, representative organisation of the students across the European Higher Education Area through its 45 member unions in 40 countries⁵, welcomes any projects that allow students to meet and discuss transnationally

¹ <https://eucinitiative.wordpress.com/about/partners/>

² <https://eucinitiative.wordpress.com/about/>

³ <https://eucinitiative.wordpress.com/actions-for-europe/action-2/>

⁴ <https://eucinitiative.files.wordpress.com/2022/02/action-3-manifesto-on-the-future-of-universities-in-europe.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.esu-online.org/about/full-member-directory/>

on common challenges and perspectives, especially under the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe. That is why we published the ‘Student manifesto on the future of Higher Education in Europe’⁶, approved by Europe’s national unions of students as the result of several months of consultations involving our members, of an event with the student councils of the European Universities alliances, and a public event open to all students in Europe, involving hundreds of students in the representation of 20 million of their peers.

The basic understanding of stakeholder representation in Europe is that it needs to be democratic, autonomous, representative. That is why we find problematic the claim that an ‘initiative gathering students and staff from European Universities’ can be defined as ‘the voice of European students’ to give them ‘a public voice in the European Union’. A student organisation that is ‘supported and supervised’ by the university staff, whose selection criteria are unclear and seemingly not based on a democratic mandate from students, and whose internal proceedings ostensibly do not meet democratic criteria can hardly claim to be autonomous, democratic or representative. Furthermore, the initiative per se is open only to students from the European Universities, which make up only 5% of European Higher Education Institutions and only up to 20% of European students, which makes a claim to be defined as generally ‘the voice of European students’ factually untrue. As per what regards ‘giving students a public voice in the European Union’, the European Students Union not only gives the opportunity to students to voice their interests and defend their rights publicly, but it has punched above its weight in organising and democratising a diversity of student voices and movements in order to establish more sustainable mechanisms of influence towards the European Union. The impact that ESU has had in its 40 years of existence on the European and, through its national student unions, the national levels can be glanced by ESU’s number of collaborations with the European Higher Education policymakers and stakeholders, by its involvement in all the significant policy discussions on Higher Education (from Erasmus+ to the future of Higher Education in Europe). In more notable cases, ESU proved itself a key leader in European Higher Education policy development, most recently by its role in the creation and adoption of the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA, as well as by holding the first seat in the history of the Bologna Process given to consultative members (thereby putting ESU in parity with the countries chairing the BFUG) in the drafting committee of the 2020 Rome Ministerial Communique of the European Higher Education Area. We, therefore, welcome this renewed

⁶https://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Student-manifesto-on-the-future-of-Higher-Education-in-Europe.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0rEy3pf6T2eOPGuHvZDzOdSoWMErFFAhXAtLqtwx8PGEU_vhPnXVRPubk

focus in giving student voices a place within the discussions of the EU Council: we expect that space to be provided according to the democratic legitimacy, autonomy and representativeness of the organisations.

The emerging reality of the European Universities and their student councils add a new framework to student representation. While ESU underlines the role of National Unions of Students in representing all students, we understand that this new, transnational layer has its specificities and even interests. That is why we propose a path of mutual acquaintance and collaboration between ESU and the student representatives of the alliances:

- ESU will organise and promote thematic events of discussions between alliances' student councils and national unions of students, starting from the discussion of a legal statute for the alliances and the proposed European degree;
- ESU will support and collaborate with the alliances' student councils in their advocacy efforts on common goals vis-a-vis EU policy-makers and even other academic components of the alliances;
- ESU will work together on a project under Erasmus+ to map out student rights and conditions within the alliances, analysing the possibilities and the obstacles towards the bottom-up improvement of student rights and conditions within them, which will be submitted for approval⁷.

The European Universities Community and its Actions are a commendable project to connect students to discuss common visions, hopes and challenges to contribute to the discussions of the Conference on the Future of Europe, and we wish the participants of the Strasbourg event an enriching, interesting and fruitful experience. For what regards the representation of the interests of the students from European Universities, the European Students' Union stands ready to that task, both through its National Unions of Students and through the aforementioned collaboration avenues with the student councils of the alliances, as well as others that can be discovered together.

⁷ Should your alliance's student council be interested in be part of the project, please contact matteo.vespa@esu-online.org and fiziana.fantucchio@esu-online.org by 13th March 2022.