

European Students' Union (ESU)

Fighting for students' rights since 1982

Mundo-Madou.

Avenue des Arts 7/8, 1210 Bruxelles

secretariat@esu-online.org

+32 2 893 25 45



ESU's vision on European Higher Education Policies

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction to Higher Education policies | 3 |
| 1. What is higher education? | 3 |
| 2. Who is higher education for? | 4 |
| 3. What are the interactions between Higher Education and communities? | 4 |
| 4. What is the outcome? | 6 |
| 5. Who is affected? | 7 |
| 6. Who is responsible? | 8 |
| The Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area | 9 |
| 1. Introduction | 9 |
| 2. From the Bologna Process to the consolidation of the European Higher Education Area | 10 |
| 3. Policy scope of the Bologna process | 12 |
| 4. Structures and governance of the EHEA and the Bologna process | 12 |
| 5. Stakeholders' involvement in developing and implementing the Bologna Process | 13 |
| 6. Follow-up and monitoring of the Bologna Process | 13 |
| 7. Bologna implementation at the national level | 14 |
| The European Union and the European Education Area | 14 |
| 1. Introduction | 14 |
| 2. Concentration of power within European institutions | 16 |
| 3. Economic and social perspectives | 17 |
| 4. Democracy and transparency | 19 |
| 5. The use of research | 20 |
| Involvement with the Council of Europe | 21 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| The interrelation between the different higher education cooperation frameworks | 21 |
| 1. The European Higher Education Area and the European Education Area | 21 |
| 2. Bologna in the global dimension | 22 |

Introduction to Higher Education policies

1. What is higher education?

Education has become a core institution of our society and one of the main pillars of modern civilisation. It plays a central role in social and economic development, democratic empowerment and the advancement of the general well-being of societies.

Higher education is and has always been a human institution for advancing and passing on cultural and intellectual heritage and is a human right guaranteed in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. It is a public good, public responsibility, and therefore should be publicly steered and supported and not become a subject to economic speculation and prey to the ideologies of privatisation and the shrinking of the state.

Taking into account the diversity of the population and the different needs of the individuals, higher education must be able to serve different needs and targets at the same time. It is of utmost importance that the multifunctional idea of higher education is implemented, strengthened and focused on by those responsible for policy-making.

Higher Education should not be directed towards short-term goals of the labour market but should create a chance for acquiring competence and understanding. Democratic values and skills as well as language competencies are needed in the globalised world and a key for sustainable development of a society where everyone can live together peacefully. Solidarity, responsibility, diversity, societal impact, and cooperation should be the main concerns in the development of higher education institutions, shaping the multicultural future we will be living in. This can be seen as part of the long-term transformation of higher education away from being a tool for the elite toward a tool for the whole of society and all individuals.

2. Who is higher education for?

Higher education is an inalienable and fundamental human right. As such it must be open to all parts of the society, independent of the background, age or any other factor. Access must be free, not only economically free but also without barriers. Access should not be considered solely as admission to higher education, but more holistic as the means, structures and mechanisms by which students are supported during their studies. However, access should be always accompanied with acquiring the necessary tools to succeed when leaving higher education.

Educational systems must be designed in such a way that the choices made during primary and secondary education do not hinder access to higher education. Educational systems' built-in mechanisms maintaining socioeconomic divides must be identified and tackled accordingly.

Ways of enabling wider access to higher education to marginalised groups must be implemented, in order to create an inclusive environment mirroring society and all its diversity. The access to higher education should not be subject to discrimination. Any kind of unequal treatment is condemned by ESU.

3. What are the interactions between Higher Education and communities?

Higher education is neither a separate entity nor does it have its own sphere of reality separate from the rest of society. It is an important part of society, although its role is too often ignored or misunderstood. Higher education plays a crucial role in the development of the society as a whole and for the growth of the local communities that each Institution belongs to.

Higher education provides society with a fundamental basis, which allows for constant social development and improvement in living standards of the whole community.

Higher education has multiple purposes; it ensures the existence and the well-being of democratic principles, such as critical thinking, active participation, active citizenship, freedom of speech, freedom of thought, and fight against authoritarian ideologies. In this sense, Higher Education works not only for those who are enrolled in it but also for the rest of the community, especially through the continuous creation of knowledge and the ability to address the challenges faced by the local communities. This is linked to the role of research, done by Higher Education Institutions, which also needs to be free, accessible for everyone and needs to get more funds, to ensure its autonomy and availability. Conducting research and publishing scientific results also fulfil academia's duty to serve the community with knowledge and technology.

Therefore, all outcomes of scientific activities should be publicly available and free for use. Furthermore, HEIs should participate in the green and sustainable transformation of their communities and society at large.

Higher education dialogue with local communities is embodied in the Third Mission of higher education, where constant dialogue with the social, cultural, economic and civil society enriches both the institutional policies of the single higher education institutions (HEIs) and the social fabric of the territories where HEIs are located. The green and digital transitions require future-proofing education, research and innovation, in close cooperation with the related industries and stakeholders. Students, staff and local communities need to be equipped with the green and digital skills for the future. It is important that the Third Mission of HE is enacted within a framework of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public responsibility, avoiding any commodification tendencies as well as any dependencies on the private sector.

Higher education relations with the community are also embodied by the work-based learning possibilities offered through internships. It is of paramount importance that students have the choice of the learning path, that are subject to an agreement through which students accessing said internships have the sufficient legal provisions with all the workers' social security provisions and that are sufficiently paid. Internships must be a way for students to enrich their experience, and not a less expensive substitute for paid labour.

There is an obligation for all members of the higher education community to work as a community, with each other's needs and best interests at heart. This demands innovation and excellence in the process of teaching and learning, administration, staff-student relations, quality assurance and both institutional and student self-governance. While digitalisation has become a prominent feature of higher education due to the covid-19 pandemic, it is important on the one hand to underline the new opportunities, risks and inequalities that this process entails; on the other hand, the European Students' Union reaffirms the importance of the social experience that in-presence learning has in shaping the student experience and the sense of belonging and agency within an academic community.

4. What is the outcome?

The goal of higher education should be to provide the potential for as many different outcomes and outcome combinations as possible. As education is a lifelong process, it is vital that these outcomes are accessible at all times. The pace of change in the course of just the last decades makes a very clear illustration that not only it is impossible, but even more so inadvisable to attempt to predict what skills, competencies and knowledge will be needed in the future.

The key capacity for participants in higher education that must be provided is the capacity to think critically. Knowledge is a value in itself, and the capacity to effectively and usefully analyse and evaluate information, while also developing a satisfactory way of life, is the key to this. To ensure this, the process of teaching and learning must be student-centred. Higher education must provide the students with interdisciplinary knowledge relevant for but not limited to the working environment and skills oriented to the needs and satisfaction of society, and enable the student to apply them. Higher education must have a meaning in a person's life and prepare it qualitatively to apply the acquired knowledge in society.

Knowledge and preparation for employment are just two out of many outcomes that can be delivered by higher education. Higher education has the potential to dramatically improve life quality for both the participant and for all of society – social and financial status,

improvement in general health conditions, acknowledgement of and attempts to tear down inequalities. These skills are necessary for democratic and sustainable development and participation, and a society where these competencies exist among more of the population is more likely to be able to handle the challenges posed by an increasingly globalised, multicultural and ecologically fragile world. In short, higher education equips people with the tools to make more informed choices.

5. Who is affected?

Everyone is affected. In times of economic hardship, the popular debate tends to focus entirely on student employment and the economy. However, the effects of higher education are wide-reaching and not only for those who have the opportunity to study. Higher education should enable critical thinking and self-reflection and not only be about learning pre-determined skills. Individual and collective advantages of education are therefore closely linked. Education should not only enable individuals to take their living conditions into their own hands but also to collectively work for a better future for society. Higher education is of general interest to all people, as it contributes to the common good by increasing the general level of education, societal development, democracy and well-being.

A public higher education system also affects society in a much broader way than a privatised system. The benefits to society of a highly educated population, outside of purely education-specific metrics vary from keeping down the costs of healthcare and public school systems to much higher levels of social trust. Social trust is paramount if a society is to build up functioning support systems and keep corruption as well as crime down.

Perhaps the most challenging to measure, but the most valuable effect of higher education is the proliferation of harnessed creativity. A graduate who has the capacity to react to and develop their own innate creativity feeds into a global pattern of unprecedented advances and innovations. This benefits everybody, not solely employers, NGOs or political systems: it increases equality, develops healthcare, devises and improves new technologies, explores and understands our lives and our universe, extends and improves human life, educates

future generations to embrace and excel to their own potential and advances the fundamental goal of human equality.

6. Who is responsible?

Higher education is a public responsibility. The greatest benefit of a multi-functional higher education system accrues to society overall. Therefore, a huge part of the responsibility is going back to society. This responsibility consists of two parts. On the one hand, it includes challenging higher education and addressing clear needs towards higher education. On the other hand, the overall society is the fundamental funding source of higher education to a sustainable level, which should not impact admissions or accessibility within the sector, or equality of participation. Although other groups are responsible towards higher education, these others are not related to the funding.

As education is a fundamental human right, access to education at any level should be ensured by the overall society through their taxation systems and governments. All people involved in higher education must share responsibility for the design and development of higher education: students, researchers, teachers, institutional leadership, and academic and non-academic staff. Their involvement should be based on the principle of modern collegiality, where all the formal and informal decision-making bodies of higher education, at all levels, are collegiate and have democratically elected representatives of the different components of higher education, which in turn must be treated equally and be in constant dialogue with their constituency. Student representatives have a special role within these bodies, as they represent the category which is most directly impacted by the decisions taken. Furthermore, effective quality assurance and efficient governance and financing of higher education are inseparable.

Higher education needs constant development and the groups inside higher education must ensure that this occurs. This should be done with constant internal and external feedback from the local communities, the social, cultural and civil society as well as employers in both the public and private sector while safeguarding the independence, academic freedom and institutional autonomy of the HEIs.

The Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area

1. Introduction

ESU acknowledges that the Bologna process has a great influence on higher education in Europe, as many European countries are reforming or have reformed their higher education systems in light of the Bologna declaration and following communiqués. However, we believe that we are still far from achieving a fully functioning European Higher Education Area.

The main challenges of the current process from the students' perspective have been: inconsistency or lack of implementation at the national level; pushing of national reforms under the pretext of the Bologna Process; subjective interpretations of certain European targets and guidelines, poor follow-up on previous commitments, scant involvement of higher education stakeholders in the implementation of Bologna commitments and lack of independent reporting on its progress.

Nevertheless, ESU is committed to a European Higher Education Area that promotes and delivers high quality, accessible and student-centred education; social justice, participative equity, opportunities for mobility and serves as the foremost way to fix a broken social ladder; and autonomous, academically free and democratically led higher education institutions, which create critical thinkers and active citizens in democratic societies.

ESU recognises that these are all equally relevant and interlinked goals. Autonomy of the academic sector is a tool to protect the right to freedom of expression, diversity of methods and content of education and research. Therefore, autonomy must not be used as a way of putting universities in a competition based development or as a means to evade student rights or quality standards. Democratic higher education institutions cannot exist without social justice and participative equity. Participative equity is a stimulating factor for high-quality education because it is enrichment for the educational environment. By ensuring the participation of a diverse student body in the higher education decision-making

process, a student-centred approach can be fostered. Therefore, these goals are mutually reinforcing.

Thus, the European Higher Education Area must embed a quality culture whilst enshrining academic freedom; recognise that higher education is a human right, public good and public responsibility; work on the principle of cooperation, not a competition; include students as co-creators and partners in the delivery and governance of the learning experience and recognise its own responsibility to society itself as a social good, and as such, be publicly funded.

2. From the Bologna Process to the consolidation of the European Higher Education Area

Due to the nature of the Bologna Process, the goals are often formulated in an abstract way in order to make it possible for every member state to agree to such a goal and for it to be acceptable in the national context. This created a problem for implementation on the ground, as the Bologna goals are rather disconnected from the reality at the institutional and national levels. ESU believes that such problems need to be addressed through a monitoring system with common definitions and common indicators, and through the use of national action plans that specify the action lines in more detail for each national context. National-specific objectives should be clearly formulated, which will increase its relevance and state clearer goals for the institutions, teaching and institutional staff, students and other stakeholders.

Nonetheless, ESU warns that the Bologna Process' aims cannot be reached as long as member states are approaching the implementation in an "à la carte" manner. National governments shall not handpick the reforms and action lines they want to work on and must make an effort to achieve more fundamental changes or address those areas that are of lower priority for governments. The action lines of the Bologna declaration and the subsequent communiqués are all interconnected and interdependent, so the reforms must be done in a comprehensive way. Countries need to make an express commitment to implement

all the Bologna action lines equally. A fully functioning European Higher Education Area cannot be achieved without reaching minimum standards of commitment and integration.

ESU believes that there should be a control mechanism that would verify that governments and institutions are not misusing the name of the Bologna process to justify policies that are unrelated to the Bologna implementation. The Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) should find a way to ensure this.

Moreover, ESU believes that Bologna signatory countries should commit to implement commonly agreed pan-European benchmarks stated in the Bologna process action lines. The Bologna Process needs to be rebuilt on an approach based on targets for minimum expected standards of implementation. Ignoring minimum standards risks affecting the coherency of the European Higher Education Area.

While the structure of higher education systems is being reformed, little is being done to make it understandable, clear and comprehensible to the wider public, especially prospective students. ESU thinks that it is crucial to enhance the communication and outreach of the European Higher Education Area, putting in place adequate and accessible transparency and information tools about the European Higher Education Area. Ministers should commit to establish credible and easy-to-use guidance systems and communicate to everyone what the academic opportunities in the European Higher Education Area are about. The European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) would be a suitable institution for providing if supported adequately. A true shift to a European area will not happen without these information support structures.

Students should also easily have access to information concerning universities, courses and student support available in every country through the creation of a set of European guidelines on the description of study programmes.

3. Policy scope of the Bologna process

While the structural reforms for ensuring comparability and compatibility of the national systems of education have been at the core of the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area, ESU believes that the scope of the Bologna process needs to be expanded if the process is to remain relevant to all the signatory countries and ESU member unions. Therefore, ESU encourages more discussion on overarching issues such as the social dimension, mobility, recognition, funding, e-learning, student-centred learning, governance or research in the European Higher Education Area.

4. Structures and governance of the EHEA and the Bologna process

More attention needs to be put on the governance of the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area. ESU believes that the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) should be given an even stronger voice during the entire process. The working groups should discuss the issues in-depth, prepare the background information and propose the issues to be discussed in the Bologna Follow-Up Group.

Furthermore, ESU encourages the Bologna Follow-Up Group to explore possibilities for a permanent Bologna/EHEA Secretariat that would be responsible for supporting other structures of the Bologna process and the European Higher Education Area. ESU believes that the Bologna Secretariat should not be handed to any European institution, but should rather rely on the collective support of the Bologna participating countries and organisations.

ESU believes that a fund should be created to support the permanent structures and common projects and events on relevant topics, allowing a more diverse group of countries to participate and take the lead in the follow-up activities.

5. Stakeholders' involvement in developing and implementing the Bologna Process

One of the distinctive features of the Bologna Process has been the involvement of stakeholders, especially students, in the process since its early stages. ESU recognises that the stakeholders, through being consultative members of the process since its initial stages, have contributed significantly to the discussions and the developments of the different action lines. ESU stresses that trust, participation and ownership from the stakeholders have led to a better implementation of the reforms. A clear example is the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, one of the most successful Bologna tools, which were developed by the E4 group (ESU, ENQA, EUA and EURASHE) and have also been revised by them in cooperation with the social stakeholders. The recent involvement of stakeholders in the drafting of the Ministerial Communiqué is a welcomed development that needs to be pursued throughout the Bologna cycles. However, the situation on national level in many countries is fundamentally different, with student stakeholders involved in a tokenist manner or not involved at all in implementing Bologna reforms. It is of utmost importance that the path taken regarding student participation in the development and implementation of the Bologna Process is continued and enhanced on all levels.

6. Follow-up and monitoring of the Bologna Process

While the current implementation and progress reports have contributed to accelerating the reform by exposing the countries' evolution, ESU sees the need for an independent monitoring and reporting mechanism. Objective indicators, based on the above-mentioned student values of the Bologna Process, should be developed. Together with improved data gathering and analysis, this would present the basis for further discussion and actions; however, these indicators should not be used as a tool for incentive management of students or institutions.

Furthermore, ESU encourages the Bologna Follow-Up Group to develop the methodology to

complement the current reports. This should be done with better data gathering from different sources of information at the national level, especially from students and student representatives, as the ones directly impacted, and not just ministerial officials. Additionally, the possibility of organising on-site visits by experts from other countries should be considered, which would allow for proper evaluation of the implementation of the Bologna reforms as well as the effect that they had on the higher education system of the country.

7. Bologna implementation at the national level

In order to achieve proper implementation on the national level, all member countries should establish (or continue) a structure with decision-making power that would include all stakeholders (akin to the Bologna Follow-Up Group) and would be responsible for the implementation and follow-up of the reforms while respecting the autonomy of higher education institutions. ESU is absolutely certain that consistent consultation and involvement of stakeholders at national levels are essential for a successful implementation of the Bologna reforms. Students, academic staff, institutional leadership and management as well as other stakeholders are the ones bearing the brunt of any change and thus should be part of any discussion and decision.

Governments need to establish special incentives and provide a significant level of financial and regulatory support for institutions that are trying to implement various elements of the Bologna Process. There should be a system of scrutiny for the implementation of Bologna while focusing on improvement rather than penalisation. There should be tools developed for encouraging institutions to implement the Bologna process effectively.

The European Union and the European Education Area

1. Introduction

In the past years, European integration has increasingly proceeded with more discussions on the European level and more competencies being transferred to the EU or shared between

the EU and its member states. The process of redefining basic values and principles in governance needs extensive discussions and strong involvement of affected stakeholders, especially students and higher education institutions. These processes increasingly involve the field of education: not only is higher education the subject of numerous conferences, papers and communications, but it is also affected by other agreements and regulations.

This includes specifically the objective of the creation of a European Education Area by 2025, to which the project of the European Universities, the European Strategy for Universities and the proposed reforms under the collective name of 'EU higher education package' are corollaries. It also includes the investments under NextGenerationEU and the Recovery and Resilience Facility, as most National Recovery and Resilience Plans included investments and reforms in higher education as part of their recovery package. It also includes the proposed reform of the European Semester, its evaluation indicators and the alignment between its country-specific recommendations and the objectives of reforms under the National Recovery and Resilience Plans. The European Pillar of Social Rights, proclaimed by the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission on the 17th of November 2017, is a positive example of unanimous support by the European institutions for education, the role it can play in strengthening society and its importance towards making more inclusive and just European societies.

On the other hand, the austerity measures imposed by the European Union on countries in crisis after the Great Recession of 2008 and in the early 2010s have badly affected education, not only by causing the lack of funding for it but also enforcing a general disaffection to the topic of education, making it seem unnecessary in times of crisis when it is actually the best tool to overcome it. This brought also to the impossibility to fulfil previous commitments to be achieved by 2020.

The renewed commitment by the European Union towards higher education through the project of the European Education Area by 2025 and the investments and reforms under the National Recovery and Resilience Plans need careful scrutiny at the different levels. Although some of the principles it should promote are in line with the students' needs, many critical aspects are still unclear and potentially harmful, and their implementation at the different levels might deviate from the initial political will. It is paramount that ESU and its member unions are vigilant and work in synergy at the different levels. This is to ensure that higher

education is not seen just as an economic instrument for competitiveness, but that all of its multiple purposes are acknowledged and equally promoted, as well as to ensure that the reforms do not hinder the hard-won victories of the past and do not create structural imbalances between and within the higher education systems.

2. Concentration of power within European institutions

ESU supports transparent, democratic and academically free conditions in the EU. 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, while the role of the European Union should be to provide a 'European added value' through its framework, in close cooperation and through full consultation with all affected stakeholders, especially students, teachers and institutional staff and their democratically elected representatives, and higher education institutions, at the different levels, from the local to the European and transnational.

The EU, especially through its partnerships, trade agreements and neighbourhood policies affect the higher education systems of many countries outside its borders. Therefore, when touching upon higher education, these policies should reflect commitments made by countries within the Bologna process and partnership countries as well as the fundamental values of the European Higher Education Area.

ESU believes that the EU should be a tool to enhance development and cooperation in Europe and provide concrete, tangible 'European added value' available to and for the development of all HEIs and national higher education systems within the EU. Therefore, the EU should focus on supporting the countries and their multilateral commitments, by financing initiatives and incentivising investments in higher education. ESU firmly believes that the EU should reflect the interests of the countries and the academic community throughout its policies. These policies should not contradict other European agreements or structures; the EU should support the Bologna process and use the European Education Area as a framework of experimentation and stronger implementation of the Bologna commitments. Policies should also be in line with each other throughout the EU. There should

be more cooperation between the DG Education and Culture, DG Research and Innovation and DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion at the European Commission as well as the Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) and the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE) at the European Parliament.

3. Economic and social perspectives

ESU believes that the European Commission should have a supportive role in the processes concerning higher education and should provide a 'European added value' when dealing with higher education.

Clear and open discussions on the diversity of higher education systems are a requirement in order to mutualise the benefits of this diversity. These talks must include representatives of all stakeholders in the decision-making process.

Higher education must never merely be used as a tool for economic goals. The EU must accept that education's broadest primary purpose is for the development of societies, and reflect this in all legislative actions that have an impact on education systems. It is of utmost importance that the European Education Area is not used for the further commodification of higher education in Europe and the EU should not approach education policy solely from the perspective of growth and jobs in the EU economy. This is especially important with the interrelations between the European and the national levels, such as with the National Recovery and Resilience Plans: despite the good intentions to invest in education, there is a stronger trend of using the Recovery funds as a way to promote reforms that had been rejected by stakeholders in the past, especially in the fields of strengthened managerialisation of HE governance, stronger governmental role in steering the economic decisions of HE and reduced student involvement in governance. To counter these trends it is paramount that stakeholder involvement in the design and implementation of reforms is thoroughly pursued, and student coordination between the different levels of decision-making is essential to pursue this outcome.

Higher education plays a primary role in preserving the existence of diversity in unity, as its connection with the local communities, it operates within helps preserve local identities in a context that also encourages them to encounter each other; in fact, giving the different local identities the space to exist, acknowledge and preserve their history and language, gives them the dignity and the strength to cooperate with other ones, understanding and respecting similarities and differences. The maintaining of a diverse, integrated framework of national higher education systems should always be taken into consideration when developing European policies on higher education. This is especially important for the development of European Universities. Legislative tools that would be given to them need to be available to all HEIs in Europe. On the issue of funding, on the one hand, the discussion on the financing of these alliances cannot drain resources from more generalistic programmes of cooperation such as Erasmus+; on the other hand, any possible integrated, multi-level funding agreements for the alliances must avoid creating an internal rift within national higher education systems based on the belonging to an alliance.

Education is not a service that can be bought and sold between countries. Education should never be included in international trade agreements. Higher education institutions should not be considered companies for the purposes of EU legislation dealing with the freedom to compete in second markets. ESU would rather emphasise the essential role of higher education in order to fulfil the targets set in the European Pillar of Social Rights, and urge the European Commission, Parliament and Council to focus on education as a social equaliser and a public good: ESU believes that the current policy developments in the field of European HE must lead to an upward convergence of student rights and conditions between national higher education systems and that European students must have a common set of rights to be shared across the continent, as defined by ESU Student Rights Charter. In this respect, the discussion about the reform of the European Semester and its alignment with NextGenerationEU provide an opportunity to uphold the European Pillar of Social Rights and its educational side: the social pillar of the European Semester must be strengthened to match its macroeconomic imbalance pillar, and an 'higher education scoreboard' should be introduced to assess the policies and the levels of investments of the Member States, with indicators to be co-designed with European representative HE stakeholders.

4. Democracy and transparency

The work that the EU does must become more stakeholder-driven in the spirit of modern collegiality as outlined in ESU's policy paper on public responsibility, governance and financing of higher education. This means that educational initiatives and decisions should be developed with relevant stakeholders. It should be students, teachers and institutional representatives and their organisations that are consulted on education issues. It is important that the EU's internal structures create sustainable and representative stakeholder engagement structures to govern its educational initiatives.

ESU believes that large programmes that profoundly affect students, such as the Erasmus+ programme, should be co-governed by educational stakeholders. Not only for the sake of democracy but to ensure the quality of the programmes. Educational stakeholders have a vested interest in creating the most responsible policies for those they represent. The European Union needs access to the information that stakeholder organisations have at their disposal.

In stakeholders' involvement and inclusion in the Working Groups, the European Commission shall include all the democratic, representative voices, and allow space for constructive dialogue and open criticism.

Being education a supportive competence of the EU, the current activism of the Commission needs and has the consent of the Member States via the EU Council to the point of affirming the Member States 'ownership of the process'. However, this intergovernmental framework needs democratic and stakeholder accountability, both at the national and the European level, which is currently lacking in the EEA governance framework: involvement of national and European Parliaments and of democratic and representative stakeholders, at the national and European level, in the design and implementation of the policies, is essential for their success. As regards stakeholder involvement, the Bologna Process is the benchmark at the European level. In the EEA, however, stakeholder participation is far away from reaching the standards set in the Bologna Process. Adding stakeholders as full members in the High

Level Group on Education and Training would be the minimum threshold for considering EEA a participatory process.

On that, ESU recalls its two decades of representativeness of all HE students within the Bologna Process and expects to play a similar role within the EEA. Similar stakeholder involvement structures must be established at the national level, involving student unions and their democratically elected representatives. Furthermore, EU-sponsored long term HE cooperations, such as the European Universities, must have a governance structure which must comply with the standards of stakeholder democratic representation that are common at the national level, and the EU institutions should have an active role in ensuring that.

5. The use of research

The EU should, in every interaction with research, support, encourage and welcome free, academic and rigorous research and policy debate. The EU and its different institutions must strive for a balanced, comprehensive, and as impartial as possible use of studies, research and reports to reflect the multiple dimensions of policy-making and its effects. Only with academic freedom can research contribute to local communities and society at large. The potential for free and accessible research must always prevail over needs imposed by the market.

Understanding the real challenges that societies face and constantly inspiring, and getting inspired by, the community it belongs to is a key function of research. Free, independent and meaningful research is a core value of democracy. Therefore, it is a public good and its results should belong to the society, making collectively supported research a common good. The EU should always encourage a broad public discussion including different perspectives and be clear about its own political goals and not push a hidden agenda. Especially as a large funder of research on higher education, it is important that the EU appreciates the value of academic, applied and rigorous research and supports the policies of Open Science and open access to research outcomes. It is important that the EU and its Member States recognise the value of academic and artistic freedom and independent research and support their HEIs when engaging with third-country partners, in the spirit of collaboration but with

the goal of avoiding foreign interference or distortions of research or collaboration projects by authoritarian countries. In this sense, valuing academic and artistic freedom also requires drawing effective and reasonable consequences early on when partner countries and institutions attack those values.

Involvement with the Council of Europe

ESU acknowledges the crucial role that the Council of Europe plays in advocating for Human Rights and democratic citizenship, bringing forward the values of social inclusion. The cooperation between ESU and the Council of Europe is of fundamental importance, and should fruitfully continue, not only working together for inclusion and human rights but also enforcing the reality of European cooperation that goes beyond the EU.

The Council of Europe's approach to non-formal learning and European cooperation, among other elements, are in line with ESU's vision and core values. The approaches and visions shared with ESU include protection and promotion of Human Rights, working to ensure social rights and protecting national minorities; this, in turn, promotes quality education for all. Therefore, we highly value the participation of the Council of Europe in multilateral agreements on higher education in Europe.

The interrelation between the different higher education cooperation frameworks

1. The European Higher Education Area and the European Education Area

The European Students' Union believes that the future of education in Europe lies in an integrated European Higher Education Area, 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. 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 the EHEA and the Bologna Process should remain the main policy-making forum for higher education in Europe. While the EEA can experiment with solutions that can be later discussed, adopted and implemented at the EHEA level, the EU shall not pre-empt debates within the EEA nor create an accomplished fact through their decisions and measures, which would lead to the non-EU EHEA states later on being forced into adopting EEA measures in the sense of a 'take it or leave it choice'. This risk is also worth considering because the EEA has defined higher education as part of its soft power geopolitical strategy. In order to avoid any conflicts or overlaps of work, coordination between the two education areas is crucial. To avoid overlaps in policy-making as well as unilateral actions in the decision-taking regarding the European harmonisation of higher education by the EU, debates and decisions of the EEA must be taken to the EHEA level to be ratified there.

2. Bologna in the global dimension

EHEA is facing a continuing economic and social crisis, unemployment, increasing marginalisation of certain groups, demographic changes, obstacles to freedom of movement as well as conflicts within and between countries, resulting in oppression and injustice as well as violation of human rights. On the other hand, greater mobility of students and staff, not only in Europe but also beyond, fosters mutual understanding and pursuing common EHEA goals. While other regions do and can contribute to further EHEA development through their own policy and practice experience, the original vision and structure of the cooperation have to be revised.

ESU believes that the cooperation and policy dialogue between the EHEA and regional higher education networks and cooperations beyond Europe need to be continued and strengthened. It is important that this is done by taking into account that the diverse higher education, as well as political, economic and cultural systems of different regions and countries, require applying diverse tools, including pilot projects and peer learning activities between the Bologna Policy Fora. All the initiatives must involve all stakeholders, especially students from all the regions represented. For the benefit of all, the discussion must not be

Europe driven, but applying the experience- and learning-oriented approach should allow for information exchange that will lead to mutual understanding and cooperation. To this end, student cooperation with continental student unions within the Global Student Forum is paramount for a shared understanding of what such global cooperation could look like. At the same time, it is important to support regional UNESCO recognition conventions as well as the ratification of the UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education to lay the basis of interregional and global higher education cooperation.