

European Students' Union (ESU)
Fighting for students' rights since 1982

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Resolution on the legal statute for alliances of Higher Education Institutions and on the European degree

Proposed by: EC

The European Students' Union acknowledges the fact that the European Commission published the Communication on the European Strategy for Universities, and within it, a growing role and engagement of Higher Education Institutions with the European University Initiative. Within the Strategy, the legal statute for alliances of Higher Education Institutions and the European degree are the tools which are being developed in parallel and which found their space in many discussions as well as in the work programme of the European Commission. According to the Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation, the two frameworks are going to be tested as pilot projects, whose outcome will inform the EU Council decision on whether to support their institutionalisation. These frameworks seem to be aimed firstly to the European Universities initiatives, often referred to as the testbeds: in the close future, the alliances will probably be used as the experimental field.

The European Students' Union believes that the implementation of the Bologna commitments remains the best way to achieve an integrated European space of higher education, and that the assessment of the feasibility of a legal statute for the alliances of Higher Education Institutions and of a European degree shall be based on whether they concretely foster the implementation of such commitments, as well as their added value vis a vis current existing frameworks. On this, the pilot projects for both frameworks need to be followed and their results

to be **co-evaluated by the democratic, representative student unions, at the different levels** (institutional, national, European). Should the necessity for a legal statute or a European degree be found, it must be **founded on the fundamental values of the European Higher Education Area**: academic freedom and integrity, institutional autonomy, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, and public responsibility for and of higher education. These possible new cooperation frameworks **shall be available for all the Higher Education Institutions across the European Higher Education Area**, and shall promote an **upward convergence of student rights and conditions** across the higher education systems. Their design and implementation at the national and institutional levels must be **coordinated with the democratically elected, representative student unions at both levels**, and must **involve them in the decision-making structures** in line with the best practices of internal self-governance traditions of Higher Education Institutions.

For what regards the European degree, which should be issued by the current providers in the different countries, it needs to be clear the added value of such a provision vis a vis the 'alliance-tailored' degrees that several European Universities are developing, which seem to be a valid competitor to a future European degree 'label'. ESU believes that the criteria for the European degree label must be ambitious, and include:

- Applying and of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESGs) for Quality Assurance, and the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes;
- Development of multilingualism, possibly beyond the knowledge of the current widely used international language of communication;
- A high quality physical mobility period during the studies;
- Financial provisions to support access to the degree, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- Democratically elected student representation within the monitoring and decision-making bodies of the degree;
- Serving the multiple purposes of Higher Education.

For admission systems and tuition fees, several models can be considered, with the aim of a common procedure within the alliance. **ESU believes that education should be free of charge**: that is why it aims for the European degree to work towards using the best practices and the benchmarks of student conditions from the different members of the alliances. However, in order to avoid any penalising differentiated treatment from the other students, **in each institution the cap for tuition fees must be the same HEIs would apply for their students**.

For what regards the legal statute, the Commission and the Council aim to facilitate the sharing of capacities, data, and exchange of staff, as well as the implementation of joint Programmes (possibly leading to European degrees). **ESU believes that Higher Education Institutions must be free to choose whether to associate in alliances, and within this framework whether to establish a common legal structure, and using what instruments**. On this, the current legal forms that exist at

the national and European levels (such as the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation) and could be used to establish such structures seem to only partially fulfil the role, and are not in line with the involvement of stakeholders that is requested to the alliances. ESU believes that, if **a legal statute** for alliances of Higher Education Institutions is considered necessary, then it **must clearly indicate the involvement of democratically elected representatives of students and staff**, according to the existing democratic elements of academic self-governance, **as a fundamental condition to apply the legal statute**. Local student unions must be involved in the establishment and guarantee of its implementation, while the national unions of students must be put in the condition of monitoring the general state of democratic student involvement in the alliances in their country and address any concerns of non-compliance to their national authorities.

Should the legal statute and the European degree be considered as necessary, the reasoning behind it and the understanding of **the paradigm shift required to implement them have to be understood not only at the institutional level, but also at the national one**. If a legal statute and a European degree will be in place, **they will have to promote changes for the whole system, allowing all the Higher Education Institutions in the country to benefit from the flexibility given by such frameworks of inter-institutional cooperation**. At the same time, **protection of the current framework of the student rights and promotion of a bettering of the student condition within the countries need to be given equal value**: in order to achieve a match between these two demands, the involvement of democratic, representative students unions is paramount.