

Student Manifesto – 24 proposals for the 2024 European Elections

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The Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the rising energy prices and the climate crisis are all transnational challenges impacting higher education across the continent. In all these instances, the European Union plays a major role; however, the educational dimension of these challenges is overlooked, to the detriment of European students.

In light of these challenges and the objective of building the European Education Area by 2025, the organised European student movement calls on the European political parties to make students and higher education central topics of the 2024 European elections. In fact, even though the EU has only supportive competence in education, there are several concrete measures that European decision-makers can commit themselves to and be held accountable for.

Therefore, the European Students' Union and its members put forward 24 proposals for the 2024 European elections. We call on the European political parties to support our objectives and demands horizontally at all levels, including through the members of the European Commission and the Council, which are members of the party. Crucially, we call on the parties to support these demands during the negotiations for the next European Commission and to be included in the Commission's 2024-2029 Strategy. The student demands to revolve around: a European social dialogue on higher education; a student-social Europe; a European Education Area for all the students; a future-proof higher education.

A European social dialogue on higher education

- Support the creation of a systemic social dialogue in higher education within the European Union, using the well-established good practices of the Bologna process.
- Support student engagement in the decision-making processes of the European Parliament in all areas that affect students, especially the work of the CULT, ITRE, and EMPL committees, by inviting European democratically elected student representatives to the meetings and taking into account their positions.

Meaningful stakeholder participation has been confirmed as a core value of higher education policy-making since the emergence of the Bologna Process, where ESU has been involved since the beginning. However, in many European countries, and at the European level, we increasingly see politicians and public authorities replacing legitimate student representatives with tokenistically selected students or student groups. This exclusion from social dialogue and exercising representation rights as legitimate student representatives violates basic democratic principles. As the European Commission is a member of the EHEA and thus adopted the Bologna Process values on behalf of the EU, we call for the European Union to establish a systemic form of social dialogue involving ESU as the legitimate student representational organisation at the European level. This should include all the stages of policy formulation, adoption, implementation and evaluation, as well as in relation to other formal and informal policy and dialogue processes related to higher education.

A student-social Europe

- Support the adoption of ESU's Student Rights Charter at the European Union level.
- Promote a Council recommendation on the upward convergence of student rights within the EU: promote setting targets based on the EHEA Principles and Guidelines for the Social Dimension, including in the European Semester country-specific recommendations to achieve

them and mobilise national funding within the framework of the Learning Lab.

- Promote a Council recommendation on student support services for the well-being in Higher Education, establishing minimum standards for the investments in student grants, healthcare, mental health support, housing, transport and other services, in line with the values of the European Pillar of Social Rights, and guiding the Member States to adopt measures to enhance students' well-being within higher education through strategies and concrete actions.
- Promote the approach of seeing the mental health and mental well-being of students, academic staff and support staff, as a priority when discussing higher education matters. More specifically, including youth mental health as a priority in the EU Health strategy while boosting funding for this objective through the annual action plans.
- Ensure equal rights for all genders by promoting sexual and reproductive health rights, including education, free menstrual products, contraception, and abortion.
- Support a Directive based on the Quality Framework of Traineeships to ban all unpaid internships, including traineeships that are part of study programmes, while respecting national collective bargaining models.
- Ensure that European non-governmental organisations benefit from sufficient, sustainable funding that can assure autonomous and democratic running of the administrative and advocacy operations that are less reliant on project funding.

While the European Pillar of Social Rights has allowed some first elements of a social Europe to be initiated, they have not touched the higher education dimension yet. However, the recent crises have shown how the lack of a coordinated response at the European level is detrimental to advancing our higher education systems.

A student-social Europe means adequate protection and convergence of student rights at the European level. While the basic rights of pupils are (at least partially) protected by the Declaration of the Rights of the Child and

similar national and international provisions, there are no universal or European legal provisions that guarantee a minimum set of rights for higher education students. In light of recent and ongoing violations of students' rights across Europe, adopting a European Student Rights Charter is the most efficient legal measure that can fully ensure the protection, monitoring, and observance of students' rights. This should be accompanied by a range of council recommendations to guarantee that the European dimension of student rights is ambitious and does not result in a downside compromise. It also recognises the gender dimension and promotes specific actions to ensure gender equality at all levels, including sexual and reproductive health and rights.

A student-social Europe recognises the importance of mental health in all its policies: following the proposal of the Conference on the Future of Europe on developing an EU Action Plan on mental health, the European Parliament's letter of intent for a comprehensive approach to mental health and the 2022 State of the European Union speech by the president of the Commission in which the need for appropriate, accessible and affordable support was mentioned, it is high time for concrete actions at the European level to support student and young people mental health. A coordinated approach and specific funds need to be channelled to this end.

A student-social Europe cannot accept internships, and traineeships remain unpaid. Such a form of exploitation of what is an integral part of higher education curriculum design which offers opportunities to get insights into different fields of work, furthers the socio-economic disparities within students, to the detriment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

A student-social Europe promotes and supports the work of independent European organisations with public funding. The logic of project-related third-party funding has increased in recent years. Due to project-based funding, these funds can only be used for particular projects. For NGOs to maintain their structures and, thus, their existence, operational grants are essential to their existence. NGOs and youth organisations are important

pillars of a democratic European civil society and must therefore have access to funds that secure their existence.

A European Education Area for all the students

- Ensure student participation in European university alliances with democratically elected student representatives at all levels of the governance of alliances.
- Ensure the involvement of representative stakeholder organisations in the governance of the European Education Area (High-Level Group).
- Ensure that automatic recognition of qualification and study periods, as well as recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning, are a reality for all EU students by 2025. This should also include revising the Council Recommendation on validating non-formal and informal learning (2012) and adding specific adapted provisions for HE.
- Ensure the accountability of the measures taken by the European Commission and the EU Member States within the EEA framework (including fundamental values, micro-credentials, inclusivity framework based on the principles and guidelines for the social dimension etc.) within the monitoring of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).
- Ensure financially sustainable, long-term funding for the European Universities while reinforcing Erasmus+.
- Ensure dedicated scholarships for the EU-funded joint degree programmes to promote access to their advantages for all students.
- To promote the reliability and comparability of the data on Higher Education, the European Union should commit to gathering information on its Higher Education systems, for instance, through Eurydice or a public, trustworthy, non-prescriptive Higher Education Observatory.
- Ensure financially and environmentally sustainable, sufficient and linear funding for Erasmus+ credit mobility students that is reviewed and adjusted accordingly to the increase of living costs in the destination city and promotes green methods of transport while widening access

for students from marginalised groups, including through setting European targets and creating concrete EU-level policies.

The commitment to establishing the European Education Area by 2025 is bold and requires bold measures to put it in place. In order to be a real game-changer in higher education, the European Education Area must serve all European students.

A European Education Area that serves all students cannot compromise on student participation. With the European Universities initiative, new structures are being established at the institutional level. Like every new institution, all the rules need to be defined. However, in the rolling out and development of the European Universities, we have seen that the tendency is to establish, at the alliance level, a system of student rights and student participation equivalent to the lowest common denominator of the member higher education institutions. On the contrary, student representatives in the alliances must have real powers and be elected by their peers or appointed by the student body from their university of origin. On a more general level, the governance of the European Education Area cannot be the copy of the Education Council configuration: strong involvement of all relevant stakeholders and, in the case of higher education, of the representatives of the members of the higher education community (academic and administrative staff and students) is paramount.

With the creation of the European Education Area, we run the risk of the EU implementing its own higher education policies apart from the Bologna Process. With 27 EU members, it is obvious that non-EU members of the EHEA will be forced to adopt policies and tools that have already been implemented by many other EU countries. This contradicts the basic idea of Bologna, which aims to harmonise higher education across the whole European continent based on the principle of all EHEA members being on equal footing in the decision-making process. Moreover, the Commission has committed to Bologna and must therefore fulfil its commitments made in various declarations, communiqués, and other agreements not to undermine

the EHEA: on the contrary, the actions under the EEA framework must be held accountable within the monitoring system of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that will be established with the Tirana Ministerial Communiqué of 2024.

In order for the European Education Area to have a valuable impact on students, the learning and teaching dimension is paramount, especially in achieving automatic recognition of degrees and the recognition of prior informal and non-formal learning. To achieve all its objectives, we demand clear, sustainable, consequent funding for the European Education Area from the European Commission while reinforcing the Erasmus+ programme to ensure student mobility remains its core activity. In particular, linear funding for student mobility that covers living costs in the host city is paramount while providing scholarships for European joint degrees and setting targets to widen access to mobility for disadvantaged students.

Future-proof higher education

- Support the creation of an EU investment framework for higher education: exclusion of education financing from EU debt rules, monitoring of education investments and reforms through the European Semester, creation of specific EU instruments or funding streams as macroeconomic policy tools to invest in educational infrastructure, systematic involvement of stakeholders at national and European levels as binding requirements for the application of these measures.
- Support the establishment of a European programme of scholarships for Students at Risk of persecution due to their student, human rights and democratic activism with a single access point for the applicants, coordinating and co-funding with national schemes.
- As part of the green transition, support the creation of funding instruments for Higher Education Institutions in line with the Green deal,

as well as guidelines on how to reach climate neutrality of HE by 2030, both in terms of policies and carbon footprint.

- Support academic freedom to be enshrined in the EU Treaties as the main legal instrument promoting EU values, monitoring academic freedom through the EU report on the Rule of Law, and stand as guarantor for the protection of the rights of any student, academic or staff member of an HEI who are in a situation of persecution, detention or arbitrary trial.
- Support the development of a student-centred approach to digitalisation in education, including EU-level policies to support HE systems have bargaining power in relation to Ed Tech, as well as legally binding rules on using Artificial Intelligence and data privacy in education.
- Support minimising the effects of brain drain within member countries, including through supporting balanced mobility
- Support education mobility between the UK, Switzerland, The Faroe Islands and Europe by decoupling Erasmus+ agreements to any other agreements or political negotiations and promote internationalisation of higher education through mobility at a global level.

The recent crises have shown how the current European higher education systems are not ready to tackle the challenges that the world is facing. European students deserve a future-proof higher education capable of answering the societal challenges of the next decades.

A future-proof education needs a coordinated investment and reform framework at the European level: its axes must be national investment capacity, European additional funding, a monitoring of the common commitments, and the thorough involvement of the educational stakeholders (including students) at all levels.

In recent years the civic space has been shrinking all around the world. Student activists are also affected by it, often facing persecution and human

rights violations due to their engagement in student representation. Furthermore, attacks on academic freedom, as the fundamental preservation of academic rights of all status groups and the academic community, as well as democratic principles in higher education, have also been happening inside the EU. Therefore, EU member countries violating academic freedom cannot effectively be monitored and, if necessary, corrected through respective measures. To tackle these tendencies, we need external and internal instruments of action. On the external dimension, we need to establish a European scheme to enable at-risk students to finish their studies and thus secure their future, as some European countries have done at the national level. Such a scheme would serve as an across-countries coordinated mechanism with a single access point for applicants, coordinating and co-financing national schemes on the EU level and giving the EU a powerful tool to enhance student human rights worldwide. On the internal dimension, academic freedom must be enshrined in the EU treaties and have appropriate monitoring processes.

In order to combat the catastrophic effects of the climate crisis, all parts of society need to come together to reach the targets agreed on within the EU Green Deal. Higher Education Institutions, therefore, need appropriate funding and a simplified regulative framework to become climate neutral. At the same time, investments into higher education are important as well to enable research and developments in line with the green transition and to foster the next generation of students to be educated on the topic to be able to combat-related challenges in the future.

A future-proof education needs to take into consideration also the mobility perspective, both in an internal and external dimension. Brain drain needs to be effectively countered as an internal dimension: mobility should be a choice, not a necessity. On the external dimension, it is crucial to promote mobility between Europe and the rest of the world without forgetting the immediate neighbourhood: that is why establishing a framework of mobility cooperation with the UK, Switzerland, and the Faroe Islands (the only countries in the world not having a cooperation agreement with the EU on the field of



Erasmus+) is paramount, and that needs to be decoupled from non-related political negotiations: students cannot be used as bargaining chips.

Student rights is a battle that never ends. The organised European student movement calls upon the European political parties and decision-makers to be up to the challenges faced by our continent and provide students with concrete answers and measures: the time to act is now!