



Students' Europe – SYL's vision for EU engagement 2023–2025



SUOMEN YLIOPIPPILASKUNTIEN LIITTO
FINLANDS STUDENTKÅRERS FÖRBUND
NATIONAL UNION OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN FINLAND





In recent years, international politics, the coronavirus pandemic, the war in Ukraine and climate change have had a severe impact on students' lives. This increasingly worsening global situation has also made the European Union ever more important. The EU is also planning further major changes to European education policy, which requires the student movement to have clear visions of the future.

In education and training policy, the EU has a mandate to support and promote cooperation between member states. And it is doing this, for instance within the framework of the European Education Area (EEA). Through the EEA, the EU has planned major reforms to European education policy, including the European Universities initiative and plans for a European degree and the student card system. One of the most recent developments, in spring 2022, was the European Commission's publication of a higher education package that includes a higher education strategy for the future of European education policy. EU education policy projects have raised the possibility of extending the EU's competences in education and training. For example, this can be seen in the recommendations of the final report of the Conference on the Future of Europe in 2022.

For the National Union of University Students in





Finland (SYL), the core principle of education policy at EU level is the principle of subsidiarity: decisions must be made as close to students as possible in order to serve their interests as well as possible. In accordance with this principle, to safeguard the quality and autonomy of the Finnish higher education system, SYL has taken the view that the power to act on education policy must remain with the member states. At the same time, however, SYL welcomes the promotion of mobility and the coordination of the systems in different countries. The student movement in general is pro-EU in its thinking. In SYL's view, the situation regarding higher education policy is basically the same as with the debate on democracy in the EU more broadly: solutions at European level are welcome, but the EU must also keep decision-making close to all its citizens, including students.

The aim of this vision is to set out SYL's views on key EU policy themes for higher education students and the future of the EU in general. The vision is based on SYL's policy paper, the previous EU strategy, and SYL's generally established positions in its EU advocacy. The vision has two parts: positions on education and training, and positions on the development of the EU at a more general level.





Education

1. The Bologna Process

The purpose of the Bologna Process is to harmonise the higher education systems of European countries and to establish the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). At present, 49 countries are involved in the EHEA, and as a result bachelor's and master's degrees are being done in Finland, and the ECTS credits system is currently in use here also. From SYL's point of view, the most relevant Bologna goals are to improve student and staff mobility between countries, support the inclusivity of higher education, and make higher education a more attractive and competitive option for young people. SYL believes that these frameworks of cooperation should be used to promote development instead of building overlapping structures. The student movement's main advocacy efforts are carried out through the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG), of which the European Students' Union umbrella organisation is a member.

2. European higher education networks

The aim of the European Universities initiative is to create inter-university alliances in which higher education institutions of the same profile from across Europe develop their mutual collaboration, for example by establishing joint master's programmes and international campuses. Nine universities and five universities of applied sciences from Finland are involved. The initiative has been one of the most important ways for the EU to promote its higher education policy objectives. SYL welcomes the opportunities offered by higher education networks, but also recognises the difficulties in creating new structures. A number of steps must be taken to further improve the higher education networks:

- Higher education leading to a degree must remain free of charge for Finnish students if they apply for a degree in the network through a Finnish university.
- Higher education networks must ensure that students can participate democratically in the governance of the networks from the outset.
- The funding of higher education networks under the Erasmus+ programme must not be allowed to lead to a reduction in the relative share of mobility-focused funding in the Erasmus budget. In the future, higher education

networks should also be permanently funded by other EU funding instruments, such as the Horizon Europe programme.

- When developing university networks, the primary focus should be on developing interoperability between the different systems rather than creating new administrative structures.
- When developing the European Degree system, it must be ensured that there are no overlapping qualification structures that would lead to inequalities in qualifications.

3. Micro-credentials for continuous learning

For some time, a major theme of EU education and training policy has been the use of competency-based assessments of an educator's areas of expertise – or micro-credentials, as they are commonly called. According to the European Commission's definition, a micro-cluster is a certificate (usually in digital format) of learning outcomes achieved through small-scale learning, such as a short course or traineeship. SYL's position is that micro-credentials must above all serve as a means of continuous learning and supplementing a person's existing skills. In developing the micro-credentials system, the

following considerations must be taken into account:

- Small-scale courses and other training for which micro-credentials can be granted must not be used as a means of creating fee-based degree programmes or as a new fee-based route to applying for higher education.
- The quality of such courses and other training must be monitored transparently and clearly enough; this is especially important in the case of packages of this kind that are provided by the private and third sectors.
- Courses and other training for which micro-credentials can be granted must be designed with the learner's needs in mind, and students must be involved in their planning and development.

4. European Student Card

The aim of the European Student Card project is to digitalise student mobility by various means, such as facilitating student identity authentication. There has been extensive discussion about the proper format of student cards and the services that they could be used to access. SYL emphasises the role of the European Student Card as an addition to the existing card system that would facilitate user authentication. Regarding

the services that would come within the scope of the European Student Card, SYL has pointed out that many services for Finnish students, such as meal subsidy and health services, are provided by the Finnish social security system and are therefore not directly suited to international use.

5. Erasmus+ programme

Mobility volumes in Finland have been falling since the education cuts in 2016, and this was further worsened by the coronavirus pandemic. SYL wants to see this trend reversed, and mobility must be increased. There are various obstacles to student mobility, among them inadequate access to information and problems related to students' income and degree structures. It is difficult for students to include a period of study abroad in their studies if the degree requirements are inflexible, and if they simply do not have the financial wherewithal to travel and live abroad. SYL's position is that student internationalisation can be significantly advanced by wide-ranging improvements in students' financial situation.

In recent years, the possibilities for student mobility have been improved by the introduction of virtual, i.e. online mobility and "internationalisation at home" – intercultural interaction

and networking within one's own country. SYL emphasises that the role of new mobility options must at most be as a complement to physical mobility, as they cannot replace the skills and social capital that students can gain by being physically present in a foreign environment. SYL believes that the Erasmus+ programme and student mobility more broadly must invest in the accessibility of mobility, and the amount of funding must be increased.

6. Students at Risk scholarship system

SYL is advocating for the establishment of a Students at Risk grant system in Europe to assist students fleeing war, political persecution and violence. Students who find themselves in such circumstances could receive a scholarship that would cover tuition fees and a grant towards the cost of living. In order to implement the grant criteria, the system should be set up primarily at EU level. This would also make it easier to ensure an integrated and coherent applicant selection process. The system can be based on the model currently used in Norway, with the appropriate modifications to suit Finnish conditions.

7. EU skills policy and the EU labour market

There is an important interconnection in the EU between the labour market, skills policy and education policy. In recent years, there have been signs of a development in which education policy issues are treated as skills issues, with competences being transferred to EU bodies that deal with employment and social affairs. SYL feels it is important to keep education as a clearly separate area – and it will receive especial emphasis in 2023, which has been designated as the “European Year of Skills.” At the same time, it is also important to recognise that the Finnish education system must also respond to the needs of the labour market. In its advocacy, SYL urges decision-makers at EU level to take action to reduce the unemployment rate, harmonise traineeship practices and protect pension funds so that they are not used unsustainably.



The future of the EU for students

1. Inclusion and democracy

SYL believes that there is room for improvement when it comes to the inclusion of young people and students in the EU. This should be done by various means, for example by developing new forms of inclusion (such as a conference on the future), increasing voter turnout in the European Parliament elections, and supporting democratisation in general. In accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, decision-making throughout the EU must be brought as close as possible to young people and students. In the development of the European Education Area (EEA) in particular, the presence of students in decision-making processes must be ensured. Collaboration between the EU and European student organisations must be strengthened by increasing regular consultations and discussions with European and national institutions.



2. Keep education free and accessible!

SYL is striving to help ensure that free education can become a reality throughout the EU, so that every EU citizen has the skills and knowledge they need to influence decision-making. Inclusion must be improved at every level of the education system, from early childhood education and care to higher education. The EU should also be aware of the inequalities and accessibility of international skills and exchange studies. Education and training must ensure that every citizen of the EU has the basic knowledge needed to understand news about the EU, to participate in debates on the EU, and to have a comprehensive understanding of their rights as EU citizens.

3. Climate and the environment

SYL believes that Finland must pursue a more ambitious climate policy in the European Union, and that sustainable change must be carried out fairly among the member states. The education system in Europe, from early childhood education and care to higher education, must provide the means to understand and tackle the causes and consequences of the climate and environmental crises. The EU must invest more resources in research and innovation to combat these crises. Students must be guaranteed op-



opportunities to present their views in a wide range of ways in local, national and international decision-making. In their internal activities related to sustainability and other ethics-related matters, European universities must listen to students and ensure that they can become involved. SYL's positions in advocacy related to EU climate policy are guided by a student climate network consisting of representatives of student unions.

4. Values and safety

The promotion of peace, education, democracy, human rights and the rule of law is at the core of SYL's advocacy efforts related to EU policy. SYL is active in Finland's 2250 network, the aim of which is to support the activities of young people in Finland and abroad and to help ensure that young people can have a key role in foreign policy. From the perspective of EU-wide security, changes must be made to improve the EU's ability to act to counter crises that require resilience, such as pandemics, and to tackle the dangers posed by the climate crisis in foreign and security policy.

SYL also aims for Finland and the other EU countries to honour their commitment to increase the amount of development cooperation funds to 0.7 per cent of GDP in each member state. It is im-



portant that every graduate of a European higher education institution has learned to operate in an international, multicultural environment and to understand global development issues from the perspective of their own field of study.

5. Digitalisation

SYL believes that the opportunities created by digitalisation in the EU must be used to increase students' skills, provide guidance, develop the quality of all forms of instruction, study for some period of time at another higher education institution, and improve opportunities for continuous learning. The EU must strengthen investment in research and development of digital infrastructure and artificial intelligence throughout the EU. The EU must also promote freedom for scientific research on various digital platforms, and digitalisation must be student-focused and based on respect for students' rights to the data and other information they own.





Forms of influence

SYL influences EU affairs by closely representing interests to decision-makers and authorities. In addition, SYL sends an advocacy delegation to Brussels once a year. SYL acts as an advisor on EU education policy, participates in working groups supporting decision-making, and provides expert opinions on key themes related to education policy and concerning higher education students. SYL will also conduct its own campaign for the 2024 European Parliament elections in cooperation with others in the youth field.

The European Students' Union (ESU) plays a particularly important role, and SYL also conducts advocacy in close cooperation with the National Union of Students in Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (SAMOK). SYL works closely with student unions and other actors in education policy regarding EU-level higher education policy, and holds EU-themed events in Finland.

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The National Union of University Students in Finland is a student organisation which represents approximately 130,000 students in Finland. All student unions in Finnish universities are members of SYL. A student union is a public corporation which is governed by the Universities Act.

National Union of University Students in
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