



Students' Europe

**SYL's vision for EU engagement
2026–2028**

SYL

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Introduction

Wars in our neighbourhood, climate change, digitalisation, the transformation of working life and the challenges of democracy are affecting the prospects of younger generations, increasing uncertainty across Europe. At the same time, the European Union's role in building stability has become even more important. In the coming years, the EU will seek to find solutions, in particular to develop European security and competitiveness, which will contribute to making education policy a more strategic policy area for the EU. Solutions are also needed to the biggest challenge of our time, climate change, and the EU is also expected to be a strong values-based leader in a tightening global political context where anti-democratic forces are gaining strength.

In education and training policy, the EU has a mandate to support and promote cooperation between member states, which it has increasingly done, notably through the European Education Area (EEA) and, in recent years, through the European Universities Initiative. The European Universities alliances that have developed as a result of the initiative are trying to contribute to increase student mobility and improve the quality of education. The EEA initiatives on the European degree and the European Student Card are also important reforms in education policy. The European Commission has published the Union of Skills initiative in spring 2025 and has contributed to shifting the focus from higher education towards skills. In particular, the Union of Skills responds to the challenges of EU competitiveness by making higher education and research the means to deliver talent to the labour



market and innovation to enterprises. The further development of the Union of Skills and the EEA shows that the EU's ambition in terms of competences in education policy is growing.

For the National Union of University Students in Finland (SYL), the core principle of education policy at EU level is the principle of subsidiarity: the decision must be made as close to the 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 for the most part 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 paper 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 SYL's previous vision of EU engagement, Higher Education Students' European Election Programme 2024 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. Recognition of Qualifications

Within the European Higher Education Area, students can move flexibly from one higher education institution to another. The EU promotes the values of education and academic freedom, supports effective mobility, and strengthens academic cooperation across borders. Mobility is supported by higher education institutions that offer degrees corresponding to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

For SYL, it is important that:

- Students are able to transfer between higher education institutions in all of Finland and all of Europe.
- The recognition of qualifications needs to be done transparently in accordance to the learning outcomes mentioned and fairly to the students' prior learning in other institutions.

2. Bologna process

The student movement's main advocacy efforts are carried through the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG), of which the European Students' Union umbrella organisation is a consultative member. 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. As a result, bachelor's and master's degrees are treated as representing first and second cycles in the higher



education system before a doctorate level in Finland. Moreover, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is used to quantify the workload and learning outcomes of each course and degree.

For SYL, the most important Bologna goals are:

- Student and staff mobility between countries.
- Support the inclusivity of higher education.
- Higher education should be a more attractive and competitive option for young people.
- Frameworks of cooperation should be used to promote development instead of building overlapping structures.

3. 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 degree-programmes and international campuses. Currently 12 universities and 11 universities of applied sciences from Finland are members of European universities -networks. 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 and advocates for a thorough student representation in decision-making.

From SYL's point of view, a number of steps must be



taken to further improve the European higher education networks:

- Higher education leading to a degree should be free of charge for students from Finland 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 at all levels of decision-making.
 - Student representatives in the networks should be involved in planning the joint studies of the networks and in the quality monitoring.
 - 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 be primarily funded by their own instrument in the EU budget.
 - The primary focus on further development of the university networks should be on developing interoperability between existing 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 between students.
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4. Micro-credentials for continuous learning

An emerging major theme of EU education and training policy has been the use of competency-based assessments of an educator's areas of expertise and micro-credentials as flexible learning solutions.

According to the European Commission's definition, a micro-credential 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 learning packages 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.
- Continuous learning should be accessible regardless of one's background or socioeconomic status.

5. European Student Card

The aim of the European Student Card project is to digitalise student mobility by various means, such as bringing more possibilities for validation of student status. In order to have the European Student Card in a wider use in Europe and also in Finland, the technical implementation of the card must be reliable.

SYL wants to emphasise that only the student unions in Finland have the right to hand out the student cards. The European Student Card must not replace the current student card system. It can only serve as an addition to the current system and it should be determined by the student unions how the European Student card could be incorporated into the current system. Regarding services that could come within the scope of the European Student Card, it is relevant to consider 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. Due to these factors, SYL views that the steps taken towards the direction of adopting the use of European Student Card must be taken after careful consideration. With the already adequately functioning student card system in Finnish universities, it's in our interests to wait out and see how the European Student Card system operates in the near future.



6. Erasmus+ programme

Mobility volumes in Finland started to decrease after education cuts in 2016 and the coronavirus pandemic worsened the situation. The mobility volumes have not reached the level prior to the coronavirus pandemic and for the past years the development has been almost at a standstill. 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, problems related to students' income and degree structures, pressure on students to graduate within a tight deadline and difficulties in including a mobility period as part of a degree. 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:

- Funding of Erasmus+ must continue to grow, including doubling the programme's budget for the

period 2028–2033.

- The relative share of mobility-focused funding in the Erasmus+ programme's budget should be maintained. New mobility options must act as complementing measures while the primary focus on Erasmus-funding focuses on physical mobility of degree-students.
- The amount of Erasmus+ grant must be increased to more accurately reflect the price levels of target countries.
- The Erasmus+ programme and student mobility more broadly must invest in the accessibility of mobility. Erasmus-grants need to be developed by taking into account students with fewer opportunities and members of underrepresented groups in student mobility and to support eco-friendly methods of travel and sustainable development goals.
- Recognition of learning during mobility programs needs to be harmonised and better incorporated into the degree structures to encourage students to participate in mobility programs.

7. EU skills policy and the EU labour market

There is a significant interconnection in the EU between the labour market, skills policy and education policy. This has been exemplified by the Commission's plan to improve high quality education, training, and lifelong learning in the Union of Skills -framework. However, 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 degree education and academic research as clearly separate areas from the initiatives of vocational training and adult education. 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 of young adults.
- Develop an EU-wide ban on unpaid traineeships.
- Harmonise traineeship practices and regulate traineeship practices that are exploitative towards students, such as jobs disguised as traineeships.
- Protect pension funds so that they are not used unsustainably.

8. Students at Risk scholarship system

SYL advocates 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 local conditions.



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 and further strengthening the use of existing models, such as implementing the European Youth Goals laid out in the EU Youth Strategy, while also supporting democratisation. 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 further development of the European Education Area (EEA) in particular, the presence of students in decision-making processes must be ensured.

SYL believes that collaboration between the EU and European student organisations must be strengthened by increasing regular consultations and discussions with European and national institutions.

2. Free and accessible education

SYL is striving to help ensure that free education can become a reality throughout the EU. Inclusion must be improved at every level of the education system, from early childhood education and care to higher education. The EU should also take into account the equality 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. Furthermore, have the



skills to influence decision making, and have a comprehensive understanding of their rights as EU citizens.

3. Climate and the environment

At the European level, environmental policy and combating the climate crisis must remain a priority in the EU's policy making. The EU must invest more resources in research, innovation and education to combat these crises. The European educational system must equip the students with the tools to understand and tackle the causes and consequences of the climate and environmental crisis. Furthermore, European universities must ensure that students are heard and involved in the decision-making processes related to the topic.

At the national level, SYL believes that Finland must pursue a more ambitious climate policy within the EU and that sustainable change must be carried out equitably among the member states. The transition to ecological sustainability must be socially and globally just.

At the local level, students must be guaranteed opportunities to present their views, whether in their universities, municipalities or national forums. SYL's positions in advocacy related to EU climate policy are guided by a student climate network consisting of representatives from the local student unions.

SYL calls for a multi-level and inclusive dialogue between civil society, business community, local authorities, political decision-makers and other relevant stakeholders, in accordance with Article 11 of the EU





Climate Law. The expertise of universities, student research and the views of young people must be taken into account more strongly to support decision-making.

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. The EU must seek to ensure that its partners respect its values. Agreements and cooperation that go against EU values have to be reviewed with concrete actions taken further.

SYL is active in the Finnish Youth, Peace and Security 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 and to tackle the dangers posed by the climate crisis in foreign and security policy. It is important 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.

SYL aims that Finland and the other EU countries honour their commitment to increase the amount of development cooperation funds to 0.7 per cent of GNI in each member state.

5. Digitalisation and AI

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 (AI) throughout the EU. The increasing demand for further digital skills in the labor market highlights needs for skills in responsible AI-usage and digital literacy. While the importance of AI in everyday life must be recognised, the social, environmental and economical impacts must be closely monitored alongside. Under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), students retain rights to transparency of how their data is collected and monitored even regarding the usage of AI tools.

SYL believes that:

- The EU must promote freedom for scientific research on various digital platforms.
- Digitalisation must be student-focused and based on respect for students' rights to the data and other information they own.
- The EU must regulate the development of AI in a way that doesn't hinder students' rights to data privacy or allow automated decisions be made without transparency.



6. Internationalisation and immigration

The EU should promote the ability for international students to study and build a career and a life in Europe by breaking down bureaucratic and regulatory barriers. The EU should improve the coherence of its immigration policy, facilitate work- and study-based immigration and provide persons who have been granted asylum with the opportunity to get an education and have their competence recognised.

SYL advocates for:

- The EU to have a unified framework for international students transitioning from study-based residence permit to a permanent residence permit.
- The application fees for residence permits should be unified and kept at low level throughout EU countries.



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. 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 local Finnish student unions and other actors in education policy regarding EU-level higher education policy, and holds EU-themed events in Finland.





SUOMEN YLIOPILOKASKUNTIEN LIITTO

FINLANDS STUDENTKÅRERS FÖRBUND

NATIONAL UNION OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN FINLAND

The National Union of University Students in Finland (SYL), is a student organisation which represents approximately 150,000 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.

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