

Education, Employability and Student engagement in Europe's Universities: Guild Response to the Agenda for the Modernization of Higher Education

The Guild welcomes the opportunity to respond to a proposed Agenda for the Modernization of Higher Education. European mobility schemes for students around Erasmus Plus have become critical for the connectedness of European Higher Education, and these must be sustained. However, European higher education has evolved very significantly in recent decades, not least through online learning and the expansion of tertiary education, as well as rapidly changing demands for skills. In reflecting on these changes, the Guild makes the following observations on the Commission's aims on the future of higher education:

1. Promoting Excellence in Skills Development

We take issue with an apparent prioritization of 'hard' over 'soft' skills, noting that in today's society critical reasoning, problem-solving as well as (inter-cultural) communication are as crucial to the sustainability of Europe's economies and its civil societies as other skills. It is critical to examine, across a range of professions, supply-side measures that lead to skills shortages (e.g. restrictions on medical places imposed externally). Still, the EU could strengthen skills development in Higher Education in the following ways:

- Strengthen transferrable skills in conjunction with the Open Science Agenda in DG RTD, to ensure that students from any discipline in research-led universities have key transferable skills when they graduate
- Encourage a transferrable skills dimension in Erasmus Mundus collaborations, to enable universities to learn from best practice, provided these include innovative approaches to key skills.
- Enhance career guidance and counselling, through the promotion of transnational networks and exchange of best practice, and by increasing the importance of internships as part of Erasmus.
- Create opportunities for students within Erasmus Plus to participate in shorter exchange periods (4-5 weeks) to enable mobility (and enhance career prospects) for students in professional degrees, including students training for teaching, nursing, or medicine.
- Facilitate mobility for students of the professions. It must be possible to support external hosts of professional placements financially to create more incentives for placements, and a corresponding engagement with the community.

2. Mobility as a key to employability

We urge the Commission to enhance mobility, which has a significant positive effect on employability, through:

- Simplification of Erasmus Plus paperwork, for instance through the use of one learning agreement template throughout the programme period. Making the Mobility portal the tool for all necessary documentation, thus integrating the different databases needed for administration.
- Loosen up the demand for credit transfer, leaving it to the wishes of the student whether they want credits to be transferred or not.
- Enhance Erasmus Plus International Credit Mobility by increasing the overall budget, and enhancing the administrative capacity within the budget. We also support bringing back the European collaborative dimension to the scheme

3. Social Divisions

We recognize the importance of providing equal access to all, irrespective of social or ethnic origin, gender, or age. Universities have an impressive track record in pioneering solutions to overcoming social divisions, ranging from the creation of University-led schools, to the development of strong programmes of life-long learning. Increasing fair access, participation, and completion rates also requires relevant pre-entry and post-entry support and guidance. Still, we must do much more, recognizing the knowledge each university has about the particular challenges it faces within its distinctive national and regional context. For this reason, we propose:

- The award of ECTS schemes for volunteering and social work will work in some systems where this is already recognized for domestic purposes, but it would create disproportionate bureaucracy in others. Instead, one might provide a premium rate (to be received by the student and by the host institution organizing this) for Erasmus Plus activity that included, beyond academic study, particular forms of social engagement

4. Innovation

It is absolutely critical that the role of universities and students in innovation is recognized. Many doctoral candidates pursue industry-funded research with potential for applications; and upon completing their work they go on to occupy key positions in Europe's pharmaceutical, industrial, and tech companies. Some of Europe's major innovations, and innovation festivals, stem from the ideas of our current or former students.¹

- It is critical that the Universities' key role within the innovation eco-systems, which stems in a significant part from the knowledge and entrepreneurship of their students, is recognized by the funding instruments for innovation, as well as the European Innovation Council - beyond the support currently provided by the European Institute for Innovation and Technology.

¹ This includes TransferWise, co-founded by Kristo Käärman of the University of Tartu; Europe's largest entrepreneurship festival, SLUSH, is organised by AaltoEs, alumni of the University of Aalto.

- Universities have a particular role in translating world-leading science and transnational education into regional innovation eco-systems, through their students. To facilitate this mission, a focus needs to be put on internships, project collaboration and job shadowing whenever possible across the Framework Programme.
- More funding through the European Structural and Investment Funds must be made for the strengthening of regional innovation ecosystems, with universities as key drivers.
- We support initiatives to create networks of student entrepreneurship societies across Europe (as part of Erasmus Plus, for instance through summer school study).

5. Supporting effective higher education systems

It is critical to reward and promote good practice in inclusive teaching and learning; this must be done at institutional level, and it is done there: this is already very difficult to do at a supra-institutional level, because any government or agency is so far removed from the students. In the meantime, polls-based assessments of good teaching lack any real comparability across institutions. For this reason we argue that there cannot be any meaningful role or added value for the EU in rewarding good teaching and innovation activities.

6. Prizes and Awards

A critical way to support student innovation and entrepreneurship would be to provide funding for prizes for innovation and entrepreneurship conducted by students (this might be administered through the National Contact Points for Erasmus Plus). The prizes could be awarded at the national level, and subdivided into categories to promote new initiatives in entrepreneurship, social/intergenerational care, student innovation (i.e. the application of new knowledge), etc. The EU could also help in providing support to the implementation of good ideas.

7. Supporting more research in Education and Skills Development

Our universities have expert researchers and institutes that focus on the relationship between education and skills, lifelong learning, and transferable skills development (including measuring its effects). For the EU to capture latest knowledge and develop cutting-edge leadership in education we urge DG EAC and RTD to work together to harness the expertise universities can offer in providing much richer data and suggesting deeper solutions than those captured in the Agenda for Modernization of Higher Education.

8. 'Open Education'

We urge the Commission to support teacher- and student-led projects which enhance the rootedness of teaching within their social and economic setting. Examples of 'Open Education' include the development of Massively Open Online Courses (MOOCs) which change the geographical and social reach of Higher

Education. They include apps developed by students. And they include other forms of social and educational initiatives, including student-driven publications in print, film, music, and social media.