



BM83 - Prague

Resolution/Internal Motion

Internal motion

Resolution

Title	ESU Resolution on student poverty - 'Education is freezing'
Point of the agenda	7.c
Proposed by	EC
Seconded by	-
Expiration (only for IM) (max. 8 BMs)	-

Text:

1. Introduction

Inflation rates of 10% have become the norm in Europe, with some countries reaching more than 20% price increases. Energy prices are booming, with increases of more than 40%. These figures and crises have not been seen or felt across Europe for decades. However, when discussing relief measures, students are again forgotten.

When students voice their economic and social deprivations, they are usually not heard or taken seriously. Yet student poverty, which has been growing in many European countries for years, is a bitter reality. The Covid 19 pandemic and the impact of Russia's war on Ukraine have massively increased the risk of poverty and social exclusion among students. And yet, it seems that

policymakers are simply ignoring students and the higher education sector when it comes to mitigating the impact of inflation on the population this coming winter, as well as forgetting about the specific impact the energy crisis has on students and higher education institutions.

Several documents and ratified treaties, such as the [United Nations Declaration of Human Rights](#), the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) and the [Sustainable Development Goals](#), refer to the right of every human being to live in dignity. Furthermore, the [Europe 2020 Strategy](#) which includes the target to eradicate poverty and social exclusion even interlinks poverty and education, since higher educational attainment generally decreases the risk of poverty. Despite this, students remain a societal group that is most often ignored when it comes to anti-poverty measures, even though they have the fundamental human right to live in dignity. Additionally, investments into their education reduces future risk of poverty which benefits society as a whole.

Poverty among students is as unacceptable as poverty in any other part of society and has wider effects on the society as a whole. In face of the effects of the current crisis and the hardships that will follow due to the rising cost of living during the next winter months, we therefore need effective and lasting measures against student poverty.

Against this backdrop, ESU launched the campaign “Education is freezing”, which aims to raise awareness about the issue of student poverty linked to the current two-fold crises of inflation and rise in energy costs. Through this resolution, student representatives across Europe call on specific measures to be adopted by relevant authorities, within their competencies, at European and national levels as well as higher education institutions.

2. Student poverty and the current crisis

Similar to the generally widening education gap, student poverty in Europe has been on the rise, with no significant actions taken by European and national policymakers alike to reverse this dangerous trend. In addition, another trend of underfunding the higher education sector has fed into the worsening of student living conditions.

Students, due to inflation and rising costs of living, are facing the decision to choose between heating, eating, or dropping out of higher education altogether. In many student cities it has become almost impossible to find affordable student accommodation due to the neglect regarding demographic changes and needs of investments in the housing market, both generally and for student accommodation specifically, by public authorities. In some cities the situation is so bad that higher education institutions and local public authorities are advising students and especially international students to not start their studies if they cannot obtain housing in time. Homelessness among students also exists, with students crashing on friends’ sofas or in need of emergency/homeless shelters. But even those who have accommodations are in fear of not being able to pay the bills during the winter months due to rising energy prices and opt to freeze instead. Additionally, the rising food prices are affecting students’ consumer habits with many resorting to buying low quality products or taking the conscious decision to simply eat less, both posing a significant threat to students’ health. Food banks in student cities report that they observe a stark increase of students using their services. For students with disabilities and other health related issues and students with children additional problems occur regarding the financing of health services, medicine and care

related costs, especially in those countries where health and care services are not provided for free and/or in a sufficient manner.

Though many countries, if not all, do provide monetary and non-monetary aid to students, these aids are not sufficient anywhere. Neither the total or maximum amount that can be received have been sufficient in years, nor have policy makers sufficiently adapted the aids to the rising costs if not at all, due to the currently extremely increasing inflation rates. In many countries aids are based on parental income, making adult learners dependent on relatives, and/or aids are granted as loans, resulting in high students' debts and therefore pushing the risk of poverty of young learners from the time of their studies simply towards the time after completing higher education. Additionally, due to the special status as full-time students, students usually cannot obtain any social security aids for persons in need nor for persons who are outside the workforce, not forgetting that in many cases international students in Europe do not have access to aids at all. All in all, students usually fall through the cracks of social safety systems.

This winter, the slogan of many students is "eating or heating", with many more facing the realities of having to take on student debts or even to pause or drop out of higher education. All of this also affects student mental health and well-being with the rates of depression among students being at an all-time high.

3. Measures taken by competent authorities so far

Several decisions have been made at European level to mitigate the effects of the energy crisis:

- The Commission presented a [toolbox](#) on guidelines for member states to reduce energy consumption.
- A [Council Regulation](#) was adopted to set a voluntary overall reduction target of 10% of gross electricity consumption and a mandatory reduction target of 5% of the electricity consumption in peak hours.
- A mandatory temporary solidarity contribution on the profits of businesses active in the crude petroleum, natural gas, coal, and refinery sectors was introduced, with an aim to collect and redirect the surplus revenues towards supporting and protecting final electricity customers.
- The Commission adopted a [Temporary Crisis framework](#) including possibilities of state aid to alleviate the energy crisis.
- The member states agreed to a voluntary reduction of natural gas demand by 15 % this winter.
- The EU launched REPowerEU, a programme to support investments in making energy more secure and sustainable, which at national level technically will represent a new chapter of measures in the National Recovery and Resilience Plans.

Although all these developments are to be welcomed, a common denominator is that both the discussions and the general policy measures agreed upon at the European level on the energy crises and inflation have not translated into specific measures aimed at higher education and students.

In several countries, there is alarming news that higher education institutions face the possibility of being forced to close their buildings during the winter and move classes online because of rising

energy costs. Students across Europe face enormous pressure on their living and housing costs, with structural issues being severely aggravated by the current inflation and energy crisis. Moreover, where higher education institutions won't close, the alternative is the drastic diminishment of the indoor temperature of buildings, which is poised to have an effect on the study conditions and the well-being of students and staff.

Despite this, national authorities in all parts of Europe are not putting in place any response to aid students, and for EU countries there is no discussion of using EU funds to support this endeavour. REPowerEU chapters are already being discussed at national level, with little to no stakeholder involvement, even though, for example for the higher education sector, REPowerEU could be a great source of funding for investing in the sustainability of educational infrastructure, for instance in the field of renovation and energy efficiency.

4. ESU's vision

ESU reaffirms its belief that higher education is an inalienable and fundamental human right. As such it must be open for all parts of the society, independent from background, age or any other factor. Access must be free, not only economically free but also free in terms of without barriers. Access should not be considered solely as admission to higher education, but more holistically as also the means, structures and mechanisms by which students are supported during their studies. Therefore, with view to the upcoming winter and the general problem of student poverty, ESU reaffirms its vision for the social dimension of higher education to be strengthened through sufficient short-, mid- and long-term mechanisms, mitigating the effects of the pandemic and the war on Ukraine, especially the inflation and energy crises, as well as structural problems causing student poverty and thus affecting student well-being. Accordingly, financial and non-financial measures need to be taken on the European, national and institutional level to support students. While ESU believes that the EU has many possibilities to put measures in place, it needs to be remarked that the main solutions are nevertheless within the national competences, which is why European efforts and national measures need to be interlinked and complementing each other.

Therefore, based on the competencies of each decision-maker, ESU calls upon the following measures:

Measures at the European Union level:

- For the European Commission to mention and emphasise in its guidelines on energy saving that (higher) education is part of the 'critical infrastructure' that should not be affected by cuts in energy consumption which would affect the quality of education or closure of buildings.
- For the European Commission to promote a Council recommendation on the need to address and support students and higher education institutions against the challenges in facing the inflation and energy crises.
- Promoting the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the REPowerEU programme as tools for investments in educational infrastructure on national level, including stakeholder consultations in the drafting and implementation phase as a binding requirement.
- Alleviating the inflation crisis by channelling the de-commitments from the previous Multiannual Financial Framework towards relevant sectors, including (higher) education.

- Adjusting the Erasmus+ grants to balance out the risen costs of living for mobile students.
- Encouraging, issuing guidelines and providing technical assistance to Member States in order to finance student subsistence costs, as well as emergency funding for higher education institutions to alleviate the inflation and energy crisis through cohesion funds, especially European Social Fund+.
- For the European Commission to create a report on the living conditions of students within the European Education Area (EEA) including steps forwards for a more socially inclusive EEA.
- Creating a special EU funding instrument for investing in education, similarly to the SURE instrument for employment.
- Allocating funding for student public transport costs and investment in renewable infrastructure of HEIs to become more sustainable, as well as issuing guidelines for member states on boosting the HEI's role in the sustainable agenda, as part of the Fit for 55 package.
- Creating a European campaign, in collaboration with the member states, on raising awareness regarding energy saving measures targeting civil society and industries.
- Including specific provisions in the future Council Recommendation on minimum income so that no age-restrictions should be in place and students as a social category should be eligible.

II. Measures on the national/regional level:

- Allocating national funds to ensure that Higher Education Institutions can function during the winter to ensure the quality of education and prevent any extra costs from being passed on to students.
- Creating National Action Plans to tackle student poverty in the current inflation and energy crisis, as well as a structural phenomenon. Where similar action plans are in place, they should be revised based on the current crises, with a strong engagement of stakeholders, especially national unions of students.
- Using the National Recovery and Resilience Plans, including the upcoming REPowerEU chapters, and other EU programs to supplement national funds, especially for financing the construction of student dorms, improving the energy efficiency of HEIs infrastructure, and lowering HEIs carbon-print.
- Dedicated measures regarding the cost of studying, including:
 - Where study fees still exist, capping the fees.
 - Indexation of student grants and other lump sums linked to inflation, including the possibility to use cohesion funds to support students.
 - Extending the accessibility of student grants until all students in need can access them and increasing their amounts until they are sufficient to finance full-time studying.
 - Where student loans exist, eliminating any interest rates and freezing the repayment of the debt.
 - Automate the assignment of grants to eligible students, including through the exchange of data between public administrations and reduce the remaining bureaucracy.
 - Benefits for study supplies such as books, electronic devices (including to repair them) etc.
 - Introduction of policies and benefits to alleviate transportation costs for students living and/or studying in rural areas, on islands or abroad.
- Dedicated measures to support students regarding general costs of living, including:

- Recognition of students affected by financial hardships as victims as any other at-poverty-risk group and therefore consider them in vulnerable consumer subsidies or other related policies (e.g., dynamic price policies).
- Including students in already existing national support policies for low-income individuals or families being affected by energy poverty and expansion of energy benefits.
- Introduction or increase of subsidies for student canteens to ensure affordability and price stability of meals.
- Introduction of nutrition assistance programs (i.e., food stamp programs) or inclusion of students as beneficiaries of existing programs.
- Dedicated measures to support student housing, including:
 - Adding student housing into new or already existing national/regional housing strategies, both in view of the current crises and in terms of medium-term planning to alleviate the housing crisis (e.g. through investments to build more student dorms).
 - Putting in place subsidies for student accommodation or adjusting them to the inflation and the rise in energy costs.
 - Introduction or rise of housing benefits and housing assistance programmes aimed at students.
- Dedicated measures for students with dependents in need of care, including:
 - Care bonus for students taking care of others.
 - Introduction or increase of child benefits for students, linked to the inflation crisis, as well as introduction or increase of affordable childcare programs for students with children.
- Dedicated health and well-being related measures, including:
 - Free access to health care (including online services), psychosocial support and medicine.
 - Benefits for students with disabilities, impairments and/or neurodivergency.
- Additional programs for students from social groups with enhanced poverty-risk, including:
 - Benefits for students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds, including income supplements for affected students.
 - Programmes to support students who come from families with lower educational attainment / first-generation-students.
 - Measures to counteract period poverty and the cost of period products.
 - Implementation of financial aids for and inclusion of third-country nationals in existing programmes to alleviate effects of the ongoing crises.
- Dedicated measures regarding student employment, including:
 - Application of minimum wage policies on student jobs as well.
 - Regulations on student employment to end precarious working conditions (including fixed-term and chain contracts),
 - Banning unpaid internships and curricular traineeships.

III. Measures at Higher Education Institutions level:

- Measures on sustainability and energy related measures, including:
 - Implementation of measures to cut energy spendings without closing buildings in order to prevent negative impact on the quality of education and other potential harm for students.

- Adopting policies to support the green transition of HEIs.
- Measures by HEIs to alleviate students from financial hardships, including:
 - Moratorium on any fees or other costs usually imposed on students.
 - Extension of the standard period of study by at least one semester (the winter semester), especially in countries where social benefits such as study grants or price reduced health insurance are linked to the standard period of study.
 - Services to provide students with free (rental) electronic devices, software and other needed supplies, especially in case of online classes.
- Measures to support student mental health and well-being, including:
 - Freedom from deadlines regarding standard period of study, exams and financial matters, including regulations to alleviate pressure in case of failed exams and possibility to withdraw from participation in exams up to the day of the exam without any consequences.
 - Establishment or strengthening of HEI socio-psychological help services and programs that specifically aim at supporting students from at-risk of poverty groups.
 - Abolition of compulsory attendance (on site/online) and introduction of self-help and other activities/programs to foster social inclusion (especially in case of a shift to online classes).
- Revising European and national/regional recommendations and measures to ensure their applicability at HEI level.
- Other measures to alleviate the current inflation crisis, including:
 - Combating period poverty through provision of free hygiene products on campus.
 - Provision of childcare services through HEIs for students.
 - Establishment or strengthening of social counselling services that inform and support students about existing HEI and national related rights, services, programmes etc.

5. Conclusion

Students from across Europe demand action now to mitigate the effects of the inflation and energy crises. Investments in education and student conditions do not mean only supporting the current generation or overcoming temporary extraordinary times, but also lowering poverty risks for future generations, as education is the single most important strategy to combat structural poverty.

We support the initiatives of investing in renewable energies and clean energy supply, as well as digitalisation and electrification of heating systems as enablers. Higher education must play its part by both becoming itself carbon-neutral and generally more sustainable and conducting research on topics such as renewables. In addition, sustainability measures have other impacts as well. For example, investing in student dormitories would not only make the housing infrastructure more sustainable but also alleviate the acute housing shortage in student cities and lower energy consumption and thus have an impact in terms of social policy.

At European level, the current crisis should drive the agenda to consolidate the EU's social pillar, including through the reform of the European Semester or, in the long run, through the establishment of a pact to prioritise the socio-ecological well-being of European societies, including in fiscal and economic policies.

This winter, it will become even clearer why strong and solid social support measures for students are so important. ESU and the National Unions of Students expect that by winter all relevant decision-makers at European, national/regional and higher education institutional level will have already started this long overdue process.

Motivation:

Students across Europe are suffering from a cost-of-living crises. As the energy prices surge and inflation is rampant, there are little to no specific measures for students. As a result, ESU launched the campaign 'Education is freezing', coordinating efforts to ensure that student needs are addressed at all levels – European, national and higher education institution levels. Within the campaign, ESU proposes this resolution that summarizes ESU's vision on the subject and the concrete demands to decision-makers.

Passed: **YES** **NO**
(for use of board meeting chair only!)