

Student-led Community

Terms of Reference

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I. Objectives

At the outset, the topical group seeks to create a bottom-up community for student representatives. It will aid students in implementing sustainable and transparent representation, and support European Universities Alliances (EUAs) that do not yet have democratic structures in place in implementing them. These processes will reinforce the legitimacy and strength of the student voice within the European Universities Initiative. The group does not aim to compete with other established organisations like the European Students' Union's (ESU) Conference of the Alliances (ESU) or Erasmus Student Network's (ESN) international community, but to complement them by working towards shared objectives and reinforcing collaboration across student-led structures.

This FOREU4ALL topical group's main purpose is to ensure sustainable, democratic student participation and engagement, and to strengthen the student voice within the European University initiative. This goal will be achieved by using a two-tiered approach: engaging with individual EUAs and leveraging FOREU4ALL's collective potential.

At EUA level, the group aims to:

- Strengthen the role of student representatives in EUAs through transfer of knowledge and mutual support.
- Promote systems and practices through which EUAs can directly establish democratic student representation and integrate it into their core governance structures and decision-making processes.
- Collect data on student participation in EUAs' governance through a survey during the first year and in 2028, in collaboration with other international student organisations.
- Document, showcase and discuss common challenges and solutions, fostering mutual learning and collaboration.

At FOREU4ALL level, the group aims to:

- Establish a space for peer-to-peer exchange that allows for straightforward connections and ensures engagement of student representatives.
- Reach out to all EUAs at least twice a year, in order to guarantee the involvement of students from all alliances.
- Maintain a dialogue with other related topical groups to jointly identify synergies and opportunities for collaboration.
- Work together with international student organisations to communicate the needs and opinions of EUA students towards other European institutions and initiatives.
- Actively participate in all relevant FOREU4ALL workshops, both as participants and contributors.
- Recognize students as experts of their own university experience and ensure their feedback from the EUA level is shared with other groups and governance bodies.

For the duration of the project, the topical group will work on equipping students with skills to actively contribute to shaping their alliances' policies and decisions. Additionally, it will establish partnerships that benefit all students by collaborating with other topical groups and external organisations, assist in bringing staff and students closer, and overall foster a culture of mutual support at a European level.

Beyond the project's scope, the group aspires to strengthen democracy by promoting a culture of active participation and positioning universities, regardless of their participation in the European Universities initiative, as centres for learning on governance and co-creation.

Target group and expected outcomes

The topical group is open to student representatives of all EUAs and their member institutions. The group is run by, focused on and aimed towards students. It will function as a space for exchange and peer support, while striving to build strong democratic foundations at all EUAs.

At the same time, this group, represented by its co-chairs, will serve as spokespersons for students of all EUAs. Together with its associated student organisations, it will provide feedback and expertise for other topical groups within FOREU4ALL and external stakeholders.

Concretely, this translates to two key results the group expects to achieve:

1. Capacity-building and knowledge sharing:

- Cultivating an EUA student community that will ensure student-relevant topics are represented in FOREU4ALL internal practices and external dissemination.
- Active participation in capacity-building workshops among students and alongside staff.
- Collection of data on student participation in the EUAs through a survey with publicly available results.
- Organisation of different peer-learning discussions on the role and struggles of student representation within the alliances.
- Developing shared guidelines for democratic student representation, co-created by students from different EUAs to support alliances at various stages of maturity.

2. A collection of joint reports:

- A handbook documenting good practices, challenges, and student involvement.
- Statements and recommendations, alongside other European initiatives, specifically contributing the EUA student perspective.
- Development of research-based guidelines for sustainable and democratic student participation in the EUAs, in cooperation with other student organisations.
- Collaborate with other actors working on similar topics, e.g., ESU and ESN.

II. Background

Strategic Relevance

Student participation in governance and decision-making is one of the fundamental values of European higher education. European universities are also expected to be student-centred institutions that actively contribute to solving contemporary societal challenges.

Universities' internal governance itself reflects a model of representative democracy; they can serve as key spaces for fostering democratic societies and developing critical minds. Strong university self-governance is closely linked to academic freedom. Given the current political climate, universities are of high importance for practicing and promoting democracy.

At the same time, European universities are undergoing transformations driven by neoliberalism, standardization, and commodification. These developments have redefined the relations of the university members, increasingly positioning students as customers.

The Council of Europe and the Ministerial EHEA Conference have explicitly encouraged EUAs to enhance student and staff involvement. While many alliances have established student representation mechanisms, the democratic legitimacy and effectiveness of these structures remain inconsistent.

In this context, students' role and governance models vary significantly across European universities and alliances. However, it is the responsibility of all alliances and their student communities to proactively ensure meaningful, democratic and robust student participation on a European and local level. This process can be supported by staff but needs to be mainly led and owned by students, collaborating with locally established student representation structures and taking advantage of the expertise and support of European actors, such as the ESU.

This is exactly what this group aims for. It seeks to establish a student-led community of practice dedicated to bringing students' perspectives together across alliances. This will allow to collect and share expertise, and more globally, to build sustainable democratic student representation structures at the European level.

Past Activities

This topical group traces its origins back to the student-led community that emerged within FOREU2. It served as an informal platform where student representatives from alliances of the second EUI call met to discuss developments, exchange achievements and find solutions to common challenges. It sought to build a body that represents students' voices in EUAs' governance structures.

Through the years, the subgroup grew beyond its original members and established a community of student representatives. With the launch of FOREU4ALL, the group expanded to include student representatives from all alliances and successfully applied for topical group status within the project.

Since its founding in April 2025, the FOREU4ALL topical group on democratic and sustainable student representation has secured broad student involvement. Its original leadership has met with WP2 – Community of Practice, other Group Chairing Teams, and held its first elections.

III. Work plan and working modalities

Work Plan and Provisional Timeline

Timeline

- Q3 2025: Definition and set-up of subcommittees, prepare and share first survey, meet with other topical groups
- Q3 2025 - Q1 2026: Participation in first series of FOREU4ALL workshops
- Q2 2026: First written report to WP2
- Q2 2027: Second written report to WP2
- Q4 2027: Finalise and present a handbook with best practices
- Q2 2028: Third written report to WP2
- Q4 2028: Finalise and present guidelines for sustainable student participation.

Meeting Plan and Working Modalities

The topical group shall meet on a bimonthly basis. Meetings will be held in the late afternoon or early evening, so as not to collide with members' academic schedules. For better plannability, dates and times

will be fixed at the beginning of each quarter after consultation with the group's members. They will be communicated electronically at the earliest convenience and announced on FOREU4ALL's channels for transparency.

Co-chairs are responsible for planning, preparing and leading meetings. They are accountable for informing topical group members about relevant updates from FOREU4ALL and the European Universities Initiative, and reporting developments within the topical group to project staff.

Group meetings will serve an informative, deliberative and decision-making purpose. All student representatives are encouraged to contribute ideas, to take active roles in shaping engagement strategies, and to submit discussion topics. Adoption of policies and guidelines require a vote by the topical group.

Official announcements and meetings will be conducted in European English, which will serve as the group's working language. However, members are expected to be respectful of different communication styles and considerate of difficulties inherent to multilingualism.

The group's main communication channel is e-mail. Group leadership may create additional, more accessible channels on other platforms to ensure a constant flow of information to and from student representatives, after consultation with group members.

Subject to available funding, topical group leadership may plan in-person events. In case a majority of the group's members are expected to participate in an event hosted by a partner organisation, group leadership may request to organise sessions. No decisions may be taken at a physical event without ensuring student representatives from all alliances are able to contribute to discussions and cast a vote.

Considerations on Equality & Diversity in organisational modalities

Democratisation implies removing structural barriers that may hinder participation for all members of a community. Thus, building on policies and practices by ESU and ESN, this topical group seeks to promote equity, diversity and inclusion through bottom-up mutual support, outside university hierarchies.

Simultaneously, the topical group will work towards ensuring that students from all universities participating in EUAs have equal opportunity to engage in and benefit from their offerings, regardless of their socioeconomic or migratory status, their mental or physical conditions, or their gender or sexual identity.

Group members are expected to lead productive discussions, respect differing perspectives, and actively work towards reaching consensus. They are encouraged to use simple and inclusive language, and practice cultural and linguistic awareness, e.g., as endorsed by ESN's Inclusive Communication Strategy.

Group leadership will ensure that all communication is designed for accessibility and take a clear stance against any form of discrimination. They will seek to align their work with and contribute to ESU's Equity, Diversity and Inclusion strategy.

In-person events shall ensure appointment of confidential contact persons and the designation of safe spaces for students of vulnerable groups. When selecting panellists for discussions and session speakers, group leadership will take intersectionality and geographical balance into consideration. Topical group members are encouraged to assess candidates to leadership positions based on these values, in addition to competences and skills.

By creating student-led forums for dialogue on identity and belonging and implementing inclusive communication standards across institutional activities. The student-led community of FOREU4ALL aims to ensure that visibility, and participation become core pillars of the European University model.

The planned activities

Activities of the topical group include, but are not limited to:

- Monthly communication to topical group members
- Alternating monthly topical group and subcommittee meetings
- Yearly activity report and twice-yearly membership report to WP2
- Yearly election of the leadership positions in the group
- Yearly convocation of a limited number of subcommittees
- Participation in the FOREU4ALL project activities
- Webinars aimed towards staff members and students not yet participating in EUAs
- Co-organisation of a FOREU4ALL workshop at the earliest convenience
- Identification of synergies with existing events
- Guaranteeing of mobility support for student representatives

Subgroups

In consultation with the topical group, the co-chairs will collect topics through a yearly open call. The co-chairs will then put forth a list of proposed working groups, which the topical group will prioritise through a vote. These subcommittees will be supervised by the relevant executive committee members. The supervising executive committee members will have autonomy in deciding group size and structure, and have the responsibility of steering their work towards achieving the outcomes mentioned in this proposal.

In acknowledgement of the limited time and capacity of student representatives, membership in the subcommittees is open to any elected student representative. Participation will not be limited to the three student representatives per alliance officially appointed to the group. Group members must communicate any external appointments to the co-chairs, who will in turn communicate it to the supervising executive committee members.

IV. Inputs to WP3 Policy Dialogue & WP4 Communication and Dissemination

While writing policy recommendations is not the aim of this group, reflection papers might be drafted, in case the group sees a need for it. Topical group leadership will seek to involve all relevant stakeholders from the beginning. The topical group is open and willing to participate in joint position papers with other topical groups. In such cases, the group will involve WP3 to coordinate the procedures.

The topical group aims to regularly publish its meeting dates, as well as the subjects addressed within subcommittees for transparency, e.g., on the FOREU4ALL website, in the FOREU4ALL calendar or on social media.

Communication will be coordinated with WP4. Group leadership will ensure that the progress of all subcommittees is appropriately collected and documented, and that any projects and results are appropriately communicated, both within FOREU4ALL and externally.

In collaboration with WP4, the group aims to identify possibilities for a low-threshold channel to communicate any events (such as webinars), or to broadcast any of the projects and results from the group, especially to students. Alliances and external stakeholders' communication channels will also be harnessed to amplify dissemination.

V. Members

The group maintains a dynamic structure, allowing for evolving priorities based on student needs and interests. The group has different types of members:

- **Official members** of the topical group
 - **Co-chairs** and **executive committee**
- **Additional members** of the topical group
- **Facilitators** and **Consultants**
- **Partners**

Official members: The topical group is open to all students representing EUAs. This includes both democratically elected representatives and students with the intent to develop sustainable democratic student representation who were directly appointed by their alliance.

Each EUA may delegate up to three students to this group. Alliances are explicitly requested to leave the selection to their respective student body's discretion. Once selected, official members are asked to designate a head representative to simplify communication.

Whenever a decision needs to be taken in the topical group, each alliance will have an **equal number of votes**, regardless of the number of appointed representatives.

Co-chairs and **executive committee members:** Leadership positions are elected as stated in section II. Candidates running for election as co-chair or as executive committee member must have official membership in the group.

Additional members: To maintain a grassroots approach, the group and its meetings are open to additional student representatives, interested in participating in shaping the European Universities Initiative.

They are encouraged to join subcommittees according to their interests and capacity. This must be communicated in writing by one of the official group members. They are not entitled to vote but are invited to participate in all topical group discussions and actively steer the direction of our community.

Facilitators: Staff members from EUA can be invited by co-chairs to serve as non-voting facilitators. This will help ensure continuity despite leadership changes throughout the project's duration, and stability during periods where academic performance is a priority for students, such as examination periods. Their main role is to support the group's leadership in carrying out their work.

Co-chairs must inform the topical group of such a selection. They have a responsibility to safeguard the group's agency and to warrant that the group remains student led. Facilitators may be dismissed through a vote by the group's members.

Other staff members may be invited to relevant discussions to share their expertise.

Partners: Leaders of ESU and ESN, who have been involved as partners since the application of the topical group, have a standing invitation to join and participate in any meetings and activities of the topical group. They will contribute their expertise as advisors of the topical group, and the topical group will provide them with feedback on EUAs.

Other student led organisations may be invited to participate in relevant discussions.