

Proposal for EU actions in support of students at risk

Political context

The tense political situation in Belarus - and more recently in Afghanistan - has accentuated the need to support student human rights activists at risk of persecution in their home countries. As Europe is an important safe haven for these students, several European countries respond to this need with **support schemes**. The German Academic Exchange Service ([DAAD](#)) has recently launched a scholarship programme for students at risk (Hilde Domin Programme); the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills ([HK-dir](#)) administers a students at risk-programme since 2013; and the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange ([NAWA](#)) has introduced a programme targeting students at risk from Belarus.

The European Commission has launched a **scholarship programme for Belarusian students** at universities in Lithuania, Latvia, Czechia, and Poland for those who want to study at one of the respective universities in 2021/22 and 2022/23 ([Link](#)). However, there is **need for extended support for students at risk at EU level**. European stakeholders, including the [European University Association](#) and the [European Students' Union](#), have called for action at European level, demanding the defending of academic freedom as a core European value.

Proposed actions to be taken at European level

The DAAD, NAWA and HK-dir propose to focus on three main points of action at European level to set a clear signal and demonstrate the Union's support for academic freedom, fundamental values, civic and human rights:¹

1. Single contact and coordination point within the EU Commission

The topic of students at risk seems to fall under the direct mandate of several Directorate-Generals (DGs) of the EU Commission: DG EAC for higher education (B.1), MSCA (C.2) and international cooperation (C.3); EEAS and DG INTPA; DG NEAR for students at risk from Belarus (D.4); and DG HOME for complementary pathways and student authorisations.

Considering that support for students at risk from various third countries needs to be addressed in a coherent and effective manner, the organising parties call for the establishment of one contact and coordination point within the EU Commission, preferably within the DG Education and Culture – EAC – (which already has the coordinating responsibility for support of students). This would facilitate exchange and future collaboration between the EU Commission, national funding organisations and additional stakeholders, which support students at risk.

¹ The proposal constitutes the basis for the discussion at the joint event “*Defending Academic Freedom by Supporting Students at Risk. Towards a European Approach?*” on 16 November 2021 in Brussels/online ([Link](#)).

2. European coordination mechanism for students at risk

The central contact and coordination point at the European Commission should lead a coordination mechanism for students at risk, bringing together national implementing bodies of scholarship programmes as well as stakeholders representing students and higher education institutions (such as ESU and EUA).

Deliverables

➤ **Strategic dialogue** on students at risk

Strategic dialogue between the aforementioned partners would contribute towards the improvement of national programmes and encourage the establishment of initiatives in other EU member states. Strategic dialogue would enhance coordination between the different programmes and promote the definition of supplementary support measures at European level. It would also encourage policy dialogue between national governments and the European Commission, for instance, on providing legal pathways to Europe for highly qualified individuals at risk.

➤ **Support instruments** for the design of national programmes

Based on the mutual exchange of the respective partners and their experiences gained from implementing programmes for students at risk, the coordination mechanism would produce instruments to support the design of similar programmes, including a **manual** and an **advisory body**.

➤ **Improved support structures** for students at risk by linking national programmes and complementary support measures at EU level

National scholarship programmes could be linked via a single-entry point, thereby providing information to, and facilitating access for students at risk. A potential platform could be integrated into or developed based on the existing **Study in Europe** portal.

A coordination mechanism could then **facilitate the interaction between the different national programmes** at all stages of the student journey: During the selection and placement phase, it could support the matching of qualified students with suitable study programmes, including cross-referral of candidates. Throughout the scholarship period, the portal could facilitate cross-border networking of students and participating HEIs and expand possibilities through Europe-wide trainings (for example advocacy skills, organisational knowledge, career coaching, good governance, civic responsibility). All through the alumni phase, the portal could promote offers created by and for alumni.

3. EU funding for students at risk

The coordination mechanism could explore the additional value of **complementary EU funding**. The allocation of EU funding to national scholarship schemes through a **Matching Fund** would support organisations that are committed to integrating students at risk into their higher education systems and societies.

European Matching Fund

National scholarship schemes demonstrate the willingness of respective governments to cater for students at risk. Likewise, the implementing bodies possess significant institutional experience and have established a well-functioning mode of administration including funding conditions in line with national rules and regulations. Therefore, through additional funds the number of scholarships could be increased at relatively low administrative costs.

It is recommended to establish a European Matching Fund to complement existing national scholarship schemes for students at risk. An efficient administrative procedure could be realised through the Erasmus+ programme. Thus, national implementers could apply for additional funding to increase the number of scholarships, as in the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (COFUND). As an amount of co-funding, a rate of 25 % of EU funding in relation to the amount of national funding is proposed, which would incentivise governments to increase the amount of national funding, thereby stimulating a leverage effect.

4. Timing of activities

The following tentative time schedule is suggested:

- **2022:**
 - Define a **central contact and coordination point** for students at risk within the European Commission.
 - Establish a **working group for students at risk**, that leads the way towards a European coordination mechanism.
- **2023:**
 - Based on the initial work programme and modus operandi developed within the working group, establish a **European coordination mechanism for students at risk**, responsible for strategic dialogue on the topic and support measures complementing national programmes.
- **2024:**
 - Establish a **European Matching Fund for national students at risk programmes** under Erasmus+.