FECH
Forum for Educational Change

Development Strategy Plan 2021-2025
Forum for Educational Change - FECH

Background:

The new strategic priorities outline the objectives within FECH's work areas for the four years of 2021 to 2025. Six specific objectives have been identified based on the cross-policy Clusters and focus groups with students of public universities. This document outlines the long-term goals of how FECH as an organization will work and develop in different fields. The Development Strategy 2021-2025 has been created by the Membership, Gov. Board, and Advisory Board of FECH, with the strong vision and mission stated in the statutes of the organization. The Development Strategy - **#DEVSTRA2025** is meant to be a steering tool of the organization and is adapted to the changes in the organization and the climate it works in. The **six strategic priorities**, on which FECH will focus for the next four years are:

1. **Transparency and Public Responsibility in higher education**
2. **Digitalization of higher education**
3. **Mobility and Internationalization**
4. **Academic integrity and combating the plagiarism**
5. **Quality of Higher Education**
6. **Empowering the authority of students bodies within the universities in North Macedonia**

FECH adopts a strategic priorities framework with long-term objectives to ensure the organization is moving towards well-defined goals. FECH wants to work on necessary reforms for increased access, inclusivity, and modernization in Higher Education, supported by an active role of students and equal participation in governance. FECH strives for an innovative learning environment in universities, where education is not only a means for employability but most importantly a public good for the whole society. FECH strives to be an inclusive environment, where equity in participation and contribution is of utmost importance. FECH has set its strategic priorities as a cohesive vision, which is further detailed by the annual plans of work until the completion of these priorities. Each plan of work establishes a clear link between its actions and strategic priorities. With the help of international experts, we're striving to bring a new vision for the universities in North Macedonia which will change the higher education landscape for the better.

1. **Transparency and Public Responsibility in higher education** - **Higher education as a public responsibility**

FECH firmly believes that the core public responsibility of higher education institutions is to pursue variety and to produce and transfer knowledge, both for the long-term improvement of society and to promote the self-creation of individual students in realizing their full potential as

human beings. This cannot be fulfilled in the absence of institutional autonomy. On the other hand, HEIs can never be totally autonomous, whether publically funded by the state (government and public authorities) or otherwise, as public authorities set policy expectations or performance indicators in order to ensure education systems and structures are accountable and meet the needs of their communities. Within the broader policies set by public authorities, it is important that institutions develop their own policies and strategies following democratic principles. Thus, FECH demands:

- A balance between accountability and autonomy should ensure a respectable degree of independence from external interference required by HE and research institutions. The latter should have the capacity to steer themselves in respect of their internal organization and governance, the internal distribution of financial resources, and the design and implementation of learning, teaching, and research.
- Continuous trust-based dialogue between state and non-state HEI stakeholders must be established in order to safeguard the institutional autonomy of higher education and research institutions in order to protect academic freedom.

Financing the HE

Education is a public good, a public responsibility, and should be publicly funded. Higher education is a general interest of all people, as it contributes to the common good, however, it is still too often portrayed as an expense. Higher education is a value that should not become subject to economic speculation or prey to the ideologies of privatization and the shrinking of the state. FECH, therefore, calls for all stakeholders to commit to this as a leading principle to be taken into consideration in all their decisions. In this respect, funds allocated to the higher education sector should not merely be considered as an expense, but a provision of public good and public responsibility. It is important that education institutions are financed sufficiently to fulfill their multiple missions and that this funding is given in a way that ensures the independence of the institution so they can focus on performing their activities with integrity and high quality. The public funding allocation must ensure that:

- The development of education and research is based on wider goals and not on short-sighted financial benefits. Resources to support reforms that open institutions to mobile students must be provided. This includes the services and facilities necessary to enable mobile students to study successfully. The resources should be provided to ensure that every student has the possibility to be mobile.
- Necessary financial and legislative frameworks to foster cooperation between higher education institutions must also be provided. This should focus particularly on accessibility to the benefits that emerge from international cooperation (e.g. access to joint degrees, affordable international mobility, etc.). Sufficient funds should be ensured in order to foster lifelong learning. Government should legislate the prohibition of tuition fees and at the same time guarantee free access to higher education;
- An adequate amount of money should always be available for improving the quality of programs and developing new approaches to teaching and learning;

● Tuition fees and student debt are not to be considered as an option for HE funding.

2. Digitalization of higher education

Digital transformation has transformed society and the economy with an ever-deepening impact on everyday life. However, until the COVID-19 pandemic, its impact on education and training was much more limited. The pandemic has demonstrated that having an education and training system which is fit for the digital age is essential. While COVID-19 demonstrated the need for higher levels of digital capacity in education and training, it also led to the amplification of a number of existing challenges and inequalities between those who have access to digital technologies and those who do not, including individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. Most of the administrative work in the universities can be done digitally. **Therefore, FECH demands**:

- The process of digitization of HE is performed in a way that leads to improved quality of education and a more student-centered learning and teaching process. Furthermore, digitalization should not be used as a tool to reduce funding for education. On the contrary, implementing digitalization in a quality-enhancing way requires increased investment.
- FECH's advocating for ***the students' index to be abolished*** as soon as possible and to be replaced with an application accessible both for phones and laptops.
- Introducing TV in the hall of faculties with the schedule of the courses.
- Digitalization of education should not be used as a reason to cut funding of higher education, especially the funding allocated to teaching and learning environments. Instead, it should be used for the improvement of teaching and learning experiences. Higher education institutions should be provided with additional funding in order to provide successful implementation of digitalization, including needed training on digital tools, skills, and learning environments for the students and teaching staff.

2.2. Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027
As part of the Transformative Agenda for Higher Education, the Digital Education Action Plan will support the digital transformation plans at all levels of education and training. ***FECH will look for project opportunities concerning the developments in the area of digital education***, its quality, and acquiring digital skills. Along with that FECH will monitor the developments of the Digital Education Action Plan and analyze the possibility of joining the Digital Education Hub.

3. Mobility and Internationalization of the public universities

Internationalization and mobility can be a tool for achieving higher quality education, personal development and intercultural competencies of students, social cohesion and peaceful coexistence of people, as well as national and global sustainable development. It is important to keep in mind that internationalization is a tool for the increased added value of education, not an end in itself. Internationalization defines the self-determined process of strengthening cultural and social diversity to establish cohesion as well as respectful and peaceful coexistence and collaboration, and to contribute to global sustainable development. FECH is committed to working closely with institutions of higher education and the National Erasmus+ Agency in North Macedonia on creating a strategy to internationalize public universities where more students can spend a semester in European universities. Hence, North Macedonia should open doors for European students to come and spend a semester in our country. **Thus, FECH demands**:

- Strategies for balanced mobility and widened participation in the renewed Erasmus+ program 2021-2027.
- Higher education institutions must hire international teaching and research staff in order to provide a wider perspective on the subjects taught. This includes both recruiting permanent staff from abroad and staff exchanges between institutions.
- Programs providing funding for the international exchange of staff should be strengthened, and barriers such as bureaucracy and restrictive migration policies should be removed.
- Knowledge and experiences acquired abroad by students and staff must be integrated upon return to the home institution, and their learning outcomes must be valued.
- Establishment of transnational education, franchises, offshore campuses, university networks, and joint degree programs between more universities.

4. Academic integrity & combating plagiarism

FECH strongly believes that a lack of academic integrity is a threat to quality education and endangers academia as a whole. Combating academic fraud needs to be a mission carried out by students, teachers, researchers, administrative personnel, and policymakers together. Academic integrity implies fraud-free education and thus ensures trust in education in general. The academic community as a whole shares a responsibility to confront corruption, plagiarism, contract cheating, nepotism, abuse of power, and any other form of fraud. In case of abuse of power by academic staff members, higher education institutions need to take immediate and decisive action. **Therefore, FECH demands**:

- If Academic integrity is endangered or infringed by a non-academic institution (i.e. private-owned businesses that offer professional help in writing students` theses etc.), then the HEI in collaboration with the state should take further legal steps to ensure the sustainability of academic integrity.

- Taking into account the persisting power relations between teachers and students we advocate for **zero-tolerance policies** towards lecturers and professors that abuse their power. Especially when it comes to cases of sexual harassment or bullying. Higher education institutions need to stand in solidarity with the witnesses and deliver transparent and timely investigations into the matter, leading to concrete outcomes and measures.
- FECH will monitor all the professors and lecturers who got academic advancement in a shady and suspicious way.
- HEIs need to foster academic integrity through effective prevention measures such as diverse teaching methods, student-centered learning, appropriate forms of assessment, and clear sanctions for unfair behavior.
- FECH will apply to be part of international bodies addressing academic integrity and an effort will be put in to address the relevance of the topic and the importance of students' participation in the preservation of academic integrity values.

5. Quality of higher education

FECH is committed to developing or promoting innovative means of transforming the learning and teaching environment to make it truly and comprehensively student Centred and to increase the quality of higher education. This entails fulfilling a role as an advocate and a facilitator of such transformation and this role is to be manifested by achieving the following goals:
- Student-centered learning and accompanying teaching competencies, including language, pedagogical and didactic compete, and constant personal development of teachers, are being treated by the political and expert bodies as the priority, and by higher education institutions as a concrete approach to be implemented at all levels and in all elements of education.
- The importance of independent research and the accompanying funding necessary for carrying it out is recognized in the national-level funding schemes
- Higher education institutions should collect comparable data on academic misconduct to measure progress and regress in order to develop effective policies (taking into account the General Data Protection Regulation). The collected data should be reported to national educational authorities in order to create a structural overview that allows the identification of best practices and enables peer learning between institutions.

FECH constantly will continue to work on improving the HE quality through establishing an *Experts hub* - who will be responsible for co-creating policy papers on QA of HEIs.

5.1. Climate Education
FECH will advocate for and campaign around climate education through Environmental campaigns by supporting and working with organizations such as local organizations and international organizations such as UNESCO. FECH will ensure that in its work, **the response**

to the climate crisis is rooted in changing educational frameworks, and will advocate for the inclusion of climate education in HEIs curricula.

6. **Empowering the authority of students bodies within the universities in North Macedonia**

Students make undoubtedly the largest group within the academic community. They not only hold the right to be part of decision-making processes that determine their educational and social life, but they also add valuable first-hand experience in evaluating and improving academic processes. It is therefore that students need to be involved at all stages of the decision-making process. FECH advocates for a higher education governance system that fosters meaningful students' participation at all levels and that ensures a balance of student representation in a way that reflects the diversity of the student body. Participation of students is only considered meaningful when it creates an impact on the actual outcomes of decision-making processes. Unfortunately, in too many cases the involvement of students in institutional governance arenas remains superficial and based on tokenistic considerations, where students only participate as an observer or with limited voting rights. **Therefore, FECH demands**:

- Introduction of the concept for **modern collegiality**[1]. The basic tenet of this model, is the development of the old idea of collegiality to suit the needs of the 21st century HEIs. Academic collegiality in the 21st century involves recognising that the students and academic staff are united in a common purpose and should partake equally in the management of higher education institutions.[2]
- In order to foster a quality culture when it comes to student participation, it is necessary to recognize student union work as an extracurricular activity and reward it with ECTS points.
- Governments and HEIs need to make sure that student unions are able to work politically and financially independently [3]. This is a prerequisite for having a student union that effectively represents the interests of its membership. In its work, student unions must maintain autonomy and independence in order to successfully fulfil their societal role. Political and financial sovereignty are crucial in this regard.
- FECH conjointly with different NGOs annually will organize the *Congress for Students Activism* to adopt a joint resolution between the Students' Union where it will be advocated towards HE institutions.
- FECH conjointly with the students union of all universities and other stakeholders will introduce and mainstream the **Student Rights Charter.**

---

[1] Klemencic 2015 Student Participation in European Governance
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313414359_Student_Participation_in_European_Governanc e
[2] Modern collegiality requires that elected students are well-read, active participants in the governance and that they maintain a dialogue with the rest of the student body via the student unions.
[3] Financial independence of the student organization is mandatory to provide a self-governing framework that results in achievement of the set goals.

- Launching the *TC Stronger Students Union* - the training course will focus on capacity building for advocacy of student representatives in universities. The TC will gather 20 people, members of student unions, who will test a toolkit for the Students Union.

How is it used?

For the Members, the development of the goals in this document puts the strategic steering into the hands of its Members and gives a clear overview of where the Members have decided to take the organization during the upcoming years. It is also a tool to follow up on progress and keep the Board accountable. The Board, Steering Committee, and other bodies of FECH will use the development strategy to steer strategic decision-making and follow up on progress. For the Board and Steering Committee, the development strategy is a point of reference for decision-making. It outlines the priorities and can be used to guide the strategic steering of the organization.

FOR BETTER AND REIMAGINED EDUCATION.