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Students and Quality in Higher Education: Challenges, Expectations, and Guidelines for the Future

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President of ESU**

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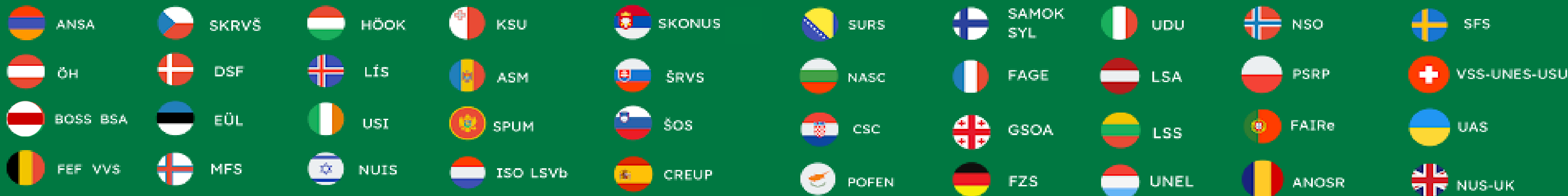


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What is ESU?



- **43** National Unions of Students (NUS) from **40** countries
- **20** million students across Europe
- Representing & promoting educational, social, economic and cultural interests
- Towards the European Union, the Bologna Follow-Up Group, the Council of Europe and UNESCO



Quality

- From ESU's perspective, quality must not be defined by institutional "performance", but by the lived, everyday experience of those at the heart of higher education – the students themselves.
- Quality is also inseparable from the public responsibility of higher education. It must reinforce the fundamental values of EHEA, while ensuring accountability and continuous enhancement. A high-quality higher education is one that is inclusive, student-centered and participatory, which ensures that all students and learners, regardless of their background can access, progress and succeed.
- True quality lies in a higher education system that delivers meaningful learning outcomes, promotes democratic values and upholds the principle that education is a public good – serving both the individual and society.

**Quality assurance should never be a top-down,
bureaucratic exercise.**

It should be a *living culture* - a culture of reflection,
improvement, and shared responsibility.

And students are absolutely **central** to that culture.



Quality Assurance (QA)

= an ongoing, continuous process of monitoring, evaluating, maintaining and enhancing the quality of an education system, institution or programme

It covers:



**What are the
expectations?**

Students as Partners in Quality

Students are not the objects of quality assurance – they are its co-authors.



Sit on QA committees

Join accreditation panels

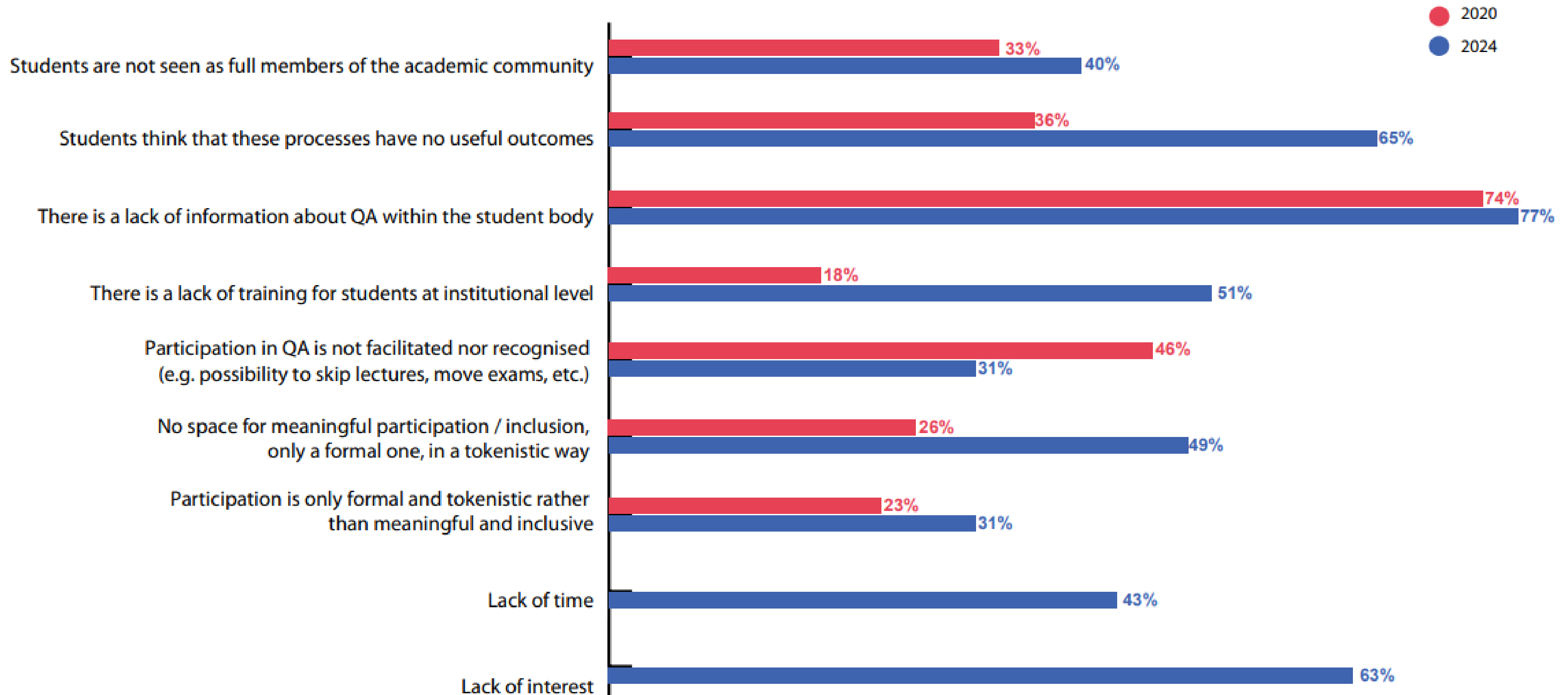
Shape programme reviews

Design feedback systems

In your institution, do students have a say in quality processes? And if they do - are they being heard, or just listened to?

**What are the
barriers?**

8.5. Main barriers for students regarding their involvement in internal QA

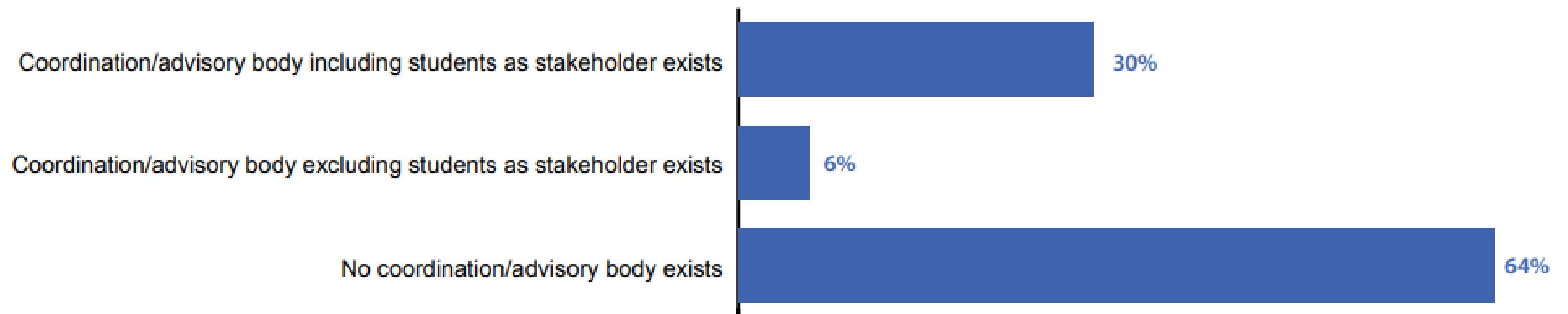


Growing barriers to access to HE

- **Socio-economic inequalities**
- **Housing crisis**
- **Alternative provision?**

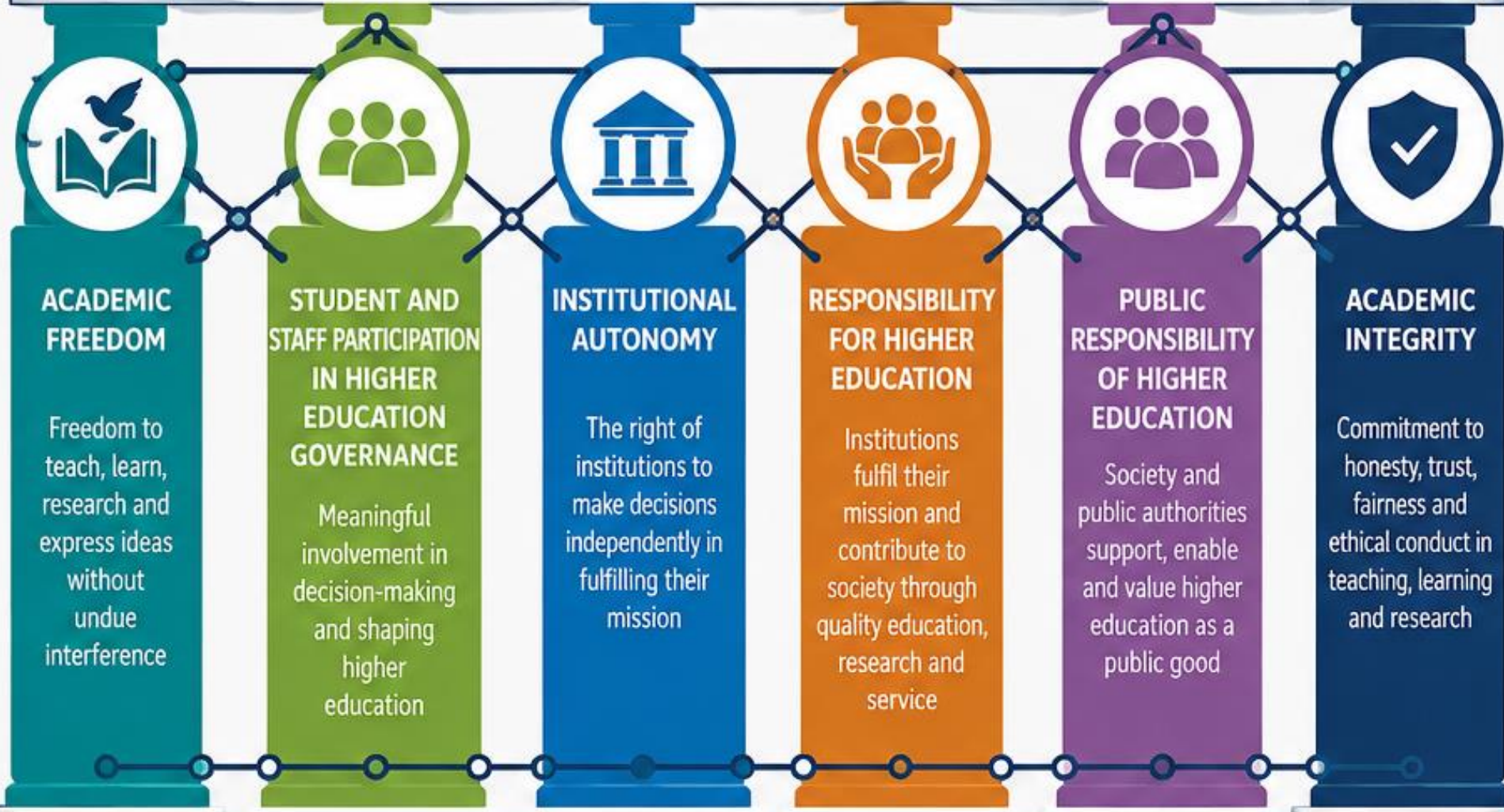
→ **Questioning the trust and value of HE?**

7.8. Existence of coordination of social dimension policies across different education levels



A STRONG, DEMOCRATIC HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

Contributing to the future of our society as a whole



BUILT ON A CLEAR COMMITMENT TO HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY

Respect for the dignity of every person, equality, freedom of expression, participation, rule of law and democratic values are the essential foundation that sustains all values of the Bologna Process.

IF ONE FALLS, ALL COLLAPSE



A weak link undermines the whole system.

All values are interconnected and dependent on each other.

These values, accompanied by a clear commitment to human rights and democracy are a prerequisite for an educational system that aims at contributing to the future of our society as a whole.



Empowers individuals



Strengthens institutions



Builds inclusive societies



Drives sustainable futures



HIGHER EDUCATION THAT SERVES THE PUBLIC GOOD AND FUTURE GENERATIONS

- **15 out of 36 NUSs** answered that they are not involved in any discussion on academic freedom with public authorities, pointing towards a lack regarding the continuous promotion and protection of academic freedom in the EHEA
- A worrying **14 out of 36 NUSs** report that there have been incidents where students have been subject to threats or consequences due to their student activism in recent years. As responsible for these incidents NUSs reported equally often that public authorities, higher education institutions's leadership and academic and administrative staff were the aggressors

Academic Freedom Monitor

- Academic freedom is not collapsing overnight, but is steadily eroding
- EU members states that declined in the Academic Freedom Index:
 - 15 out of 27, over the past year
 - 24 out of 27, over the past 5 years
 - 25 out of 27, over the past decade



Main challenges, from the perspective of students

- **The commercialization and commodification of higher education**
- **Political pressure, the growth of polarisation and the overall erosion of democracies**
- **Anti-intellectualism and societal pressure**
- **Security policies and foreign interference**
- **Fundamental values of higher education placed at risk**

September – November 2025

- From September to mid November 2025, we tracked 25 distinct student protests across the European Higher Education Area, with some starting even in January 2024.
- They stretch across 13 countries: **Armenia, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Romania, Serbia, Spain, Switzerland and Türkiye.**

November 2025 – January 2026

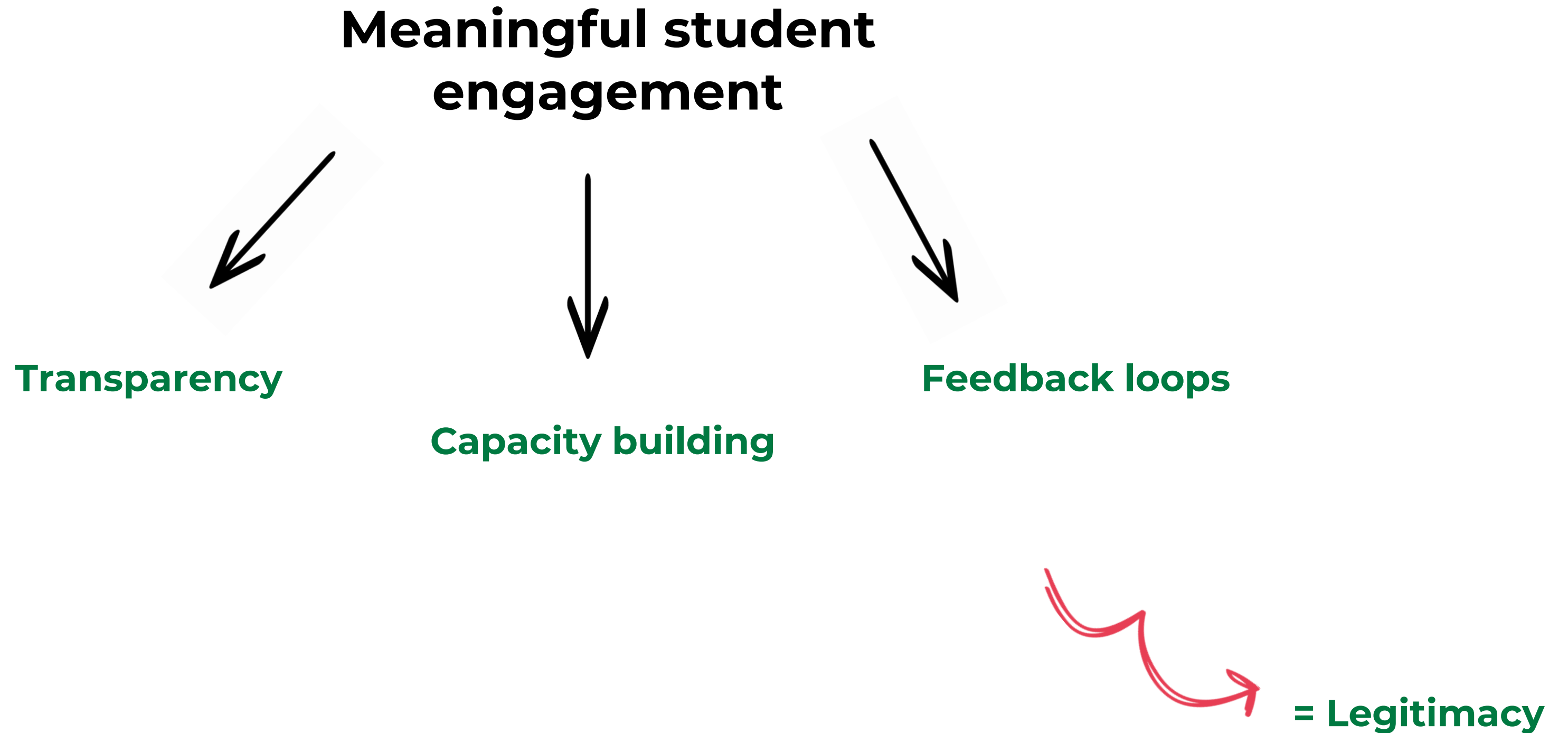
- 7 of 13 protests started during the reporting window, indicating an ongoing “new wave” rather than only continuation of older cycles
- 1 case began already in 2024 and continued into this period
- 3 cases began in early 2026 and fall within the window

What drove students to act

- **Democracy and governance**
 - 6 cases explicitly reference Political Governance/Democracy
 - Most often paired with Government Transparency, as seen in 6 cases
 - 4 add Corruption & Nepotism as a cause
 - Resignation of Government Officials appears in 3 actions
 - End of Authoritarian Practices is also noted in 2 actions
- **Higher Education Institutions**
 - 2 cases request Higher Education Funding Increase
 - A call for more Transparency in Universities also appears throughout Material conditions and access
 - 3 protests involve Economic & Living Conditions
 - 5 mention Access & Safety in Education
 - 3 reference Security & Policing
 - 6 protests include Human Rights & International Solidarity
 - 3 cases involved Divestment from Conflict States

**What are the
guidelines for
the future?**

Moving from Consultation to Co-Creation



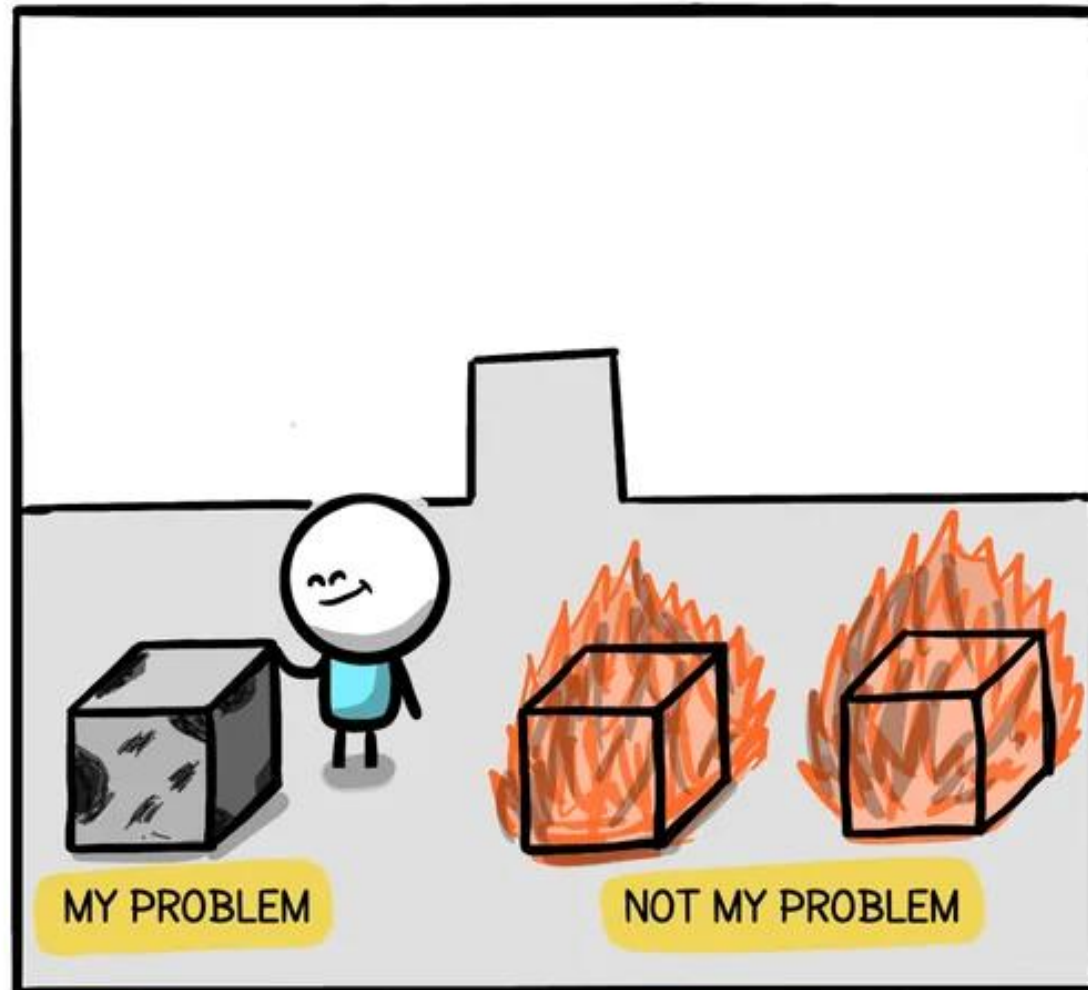
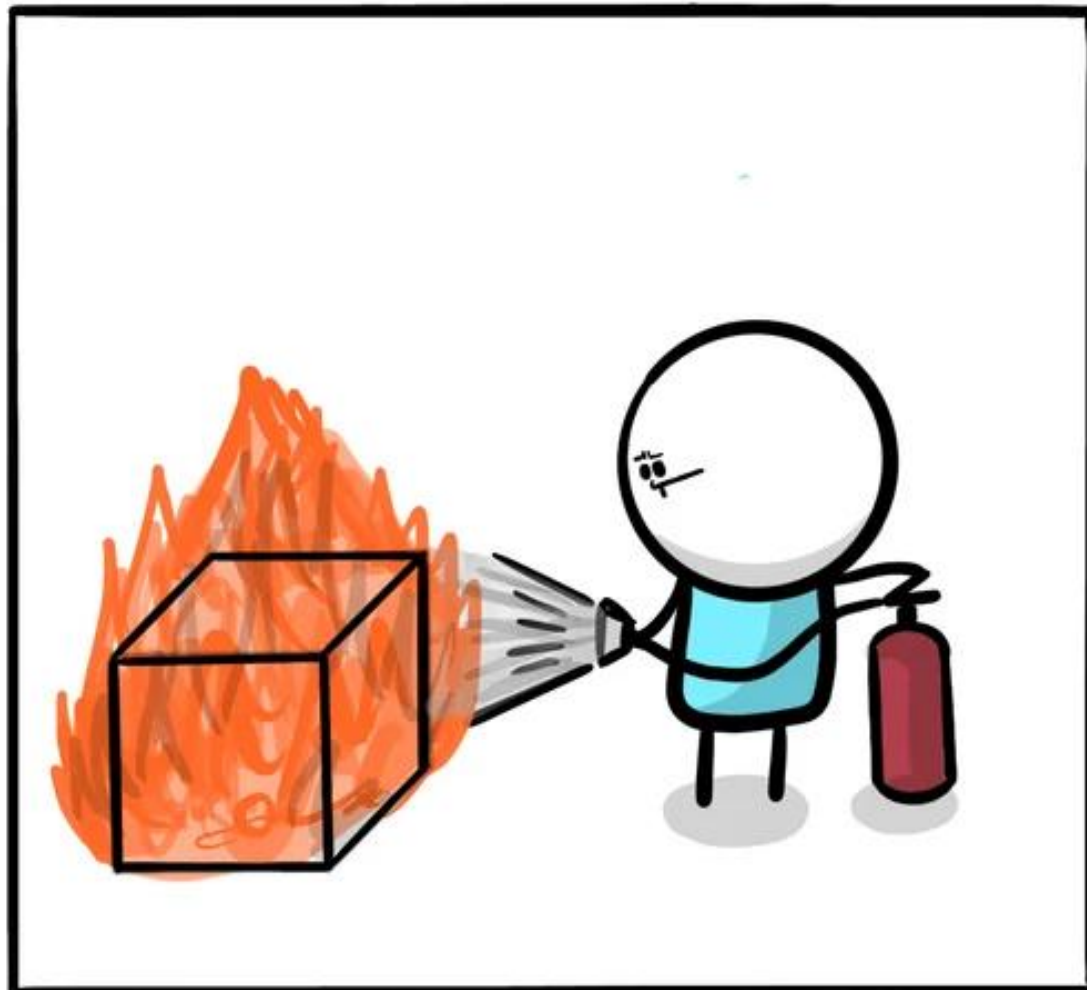
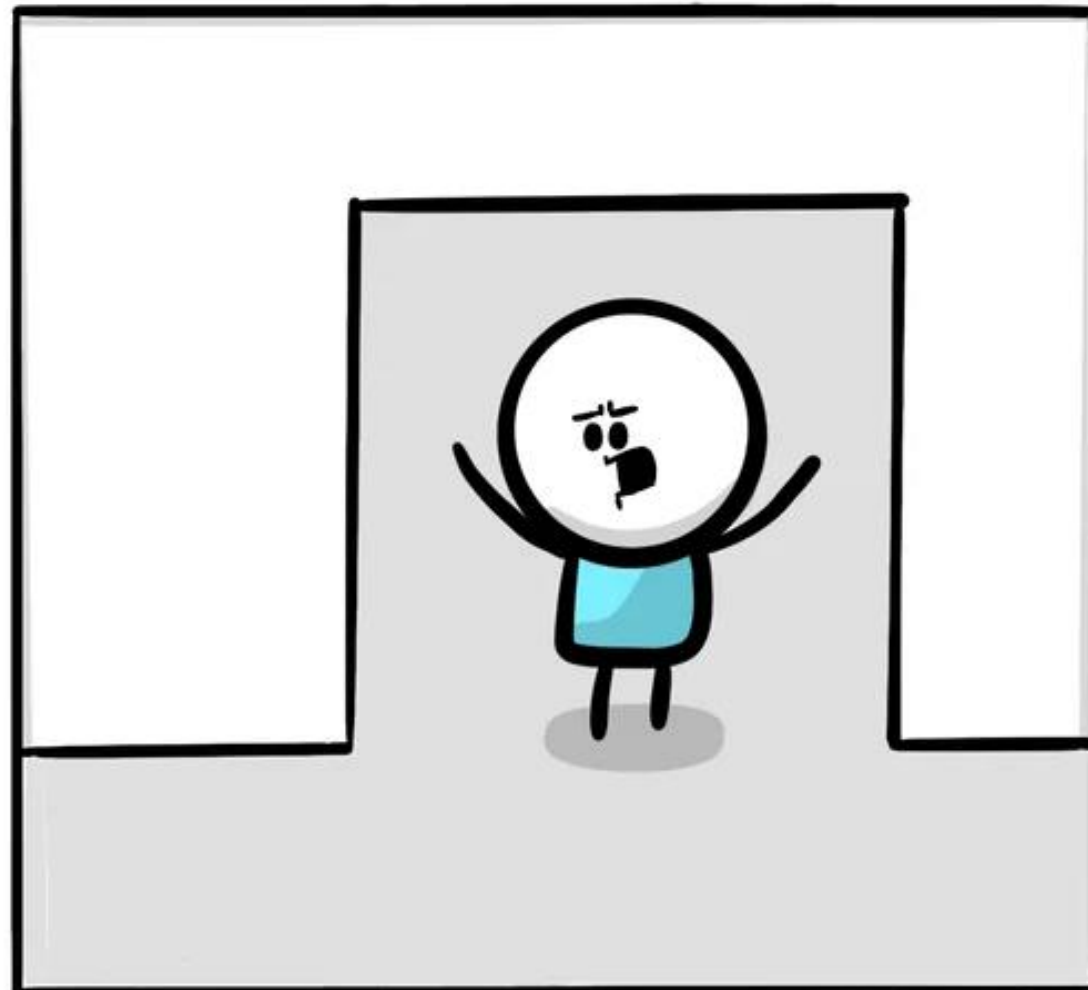
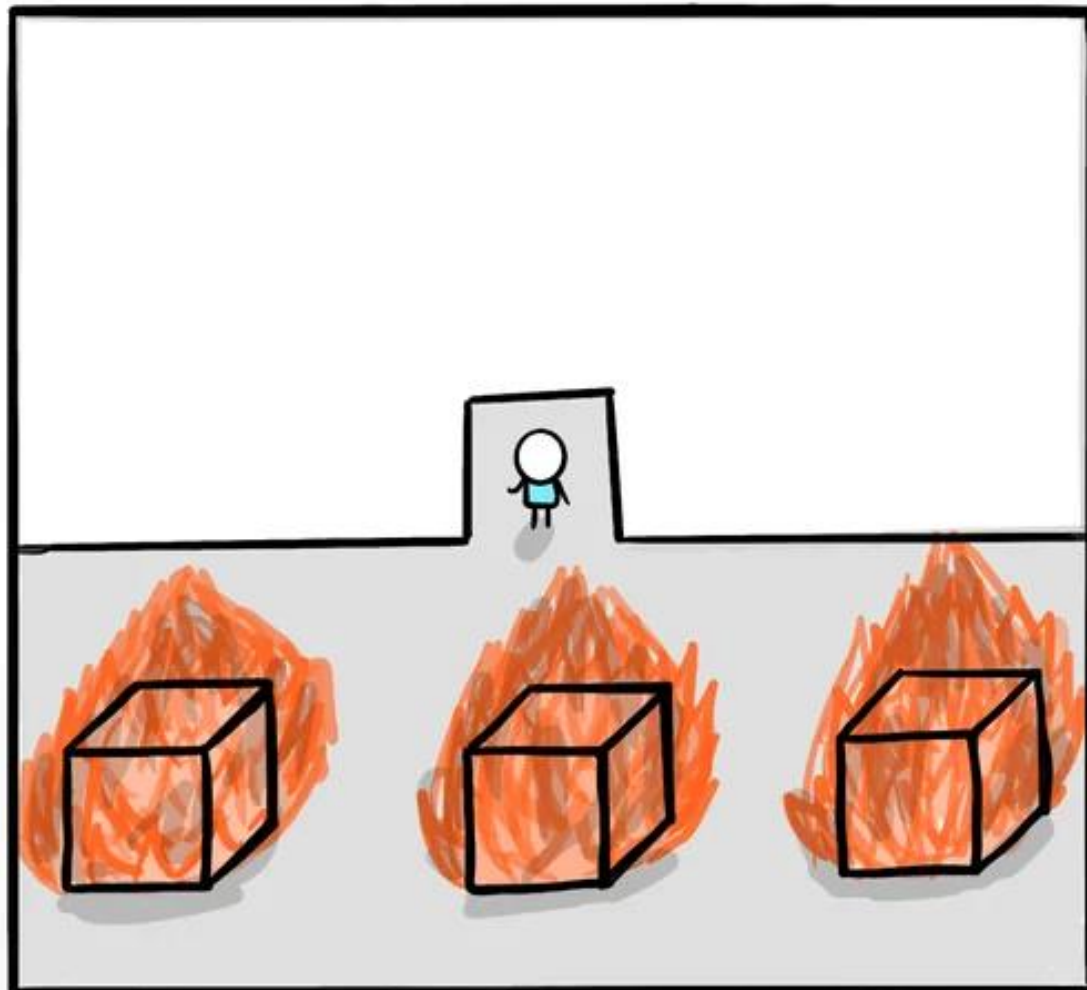
Transparency & accountability:

Students ask the tough questions institutions sometimes overlook.

ACCOUNTABILITY 101

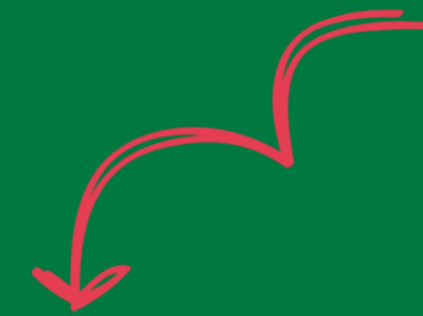


- I MEANT WELL.
- THAT WAS NOT MY INTENT.
- I BROKE THE EGG.



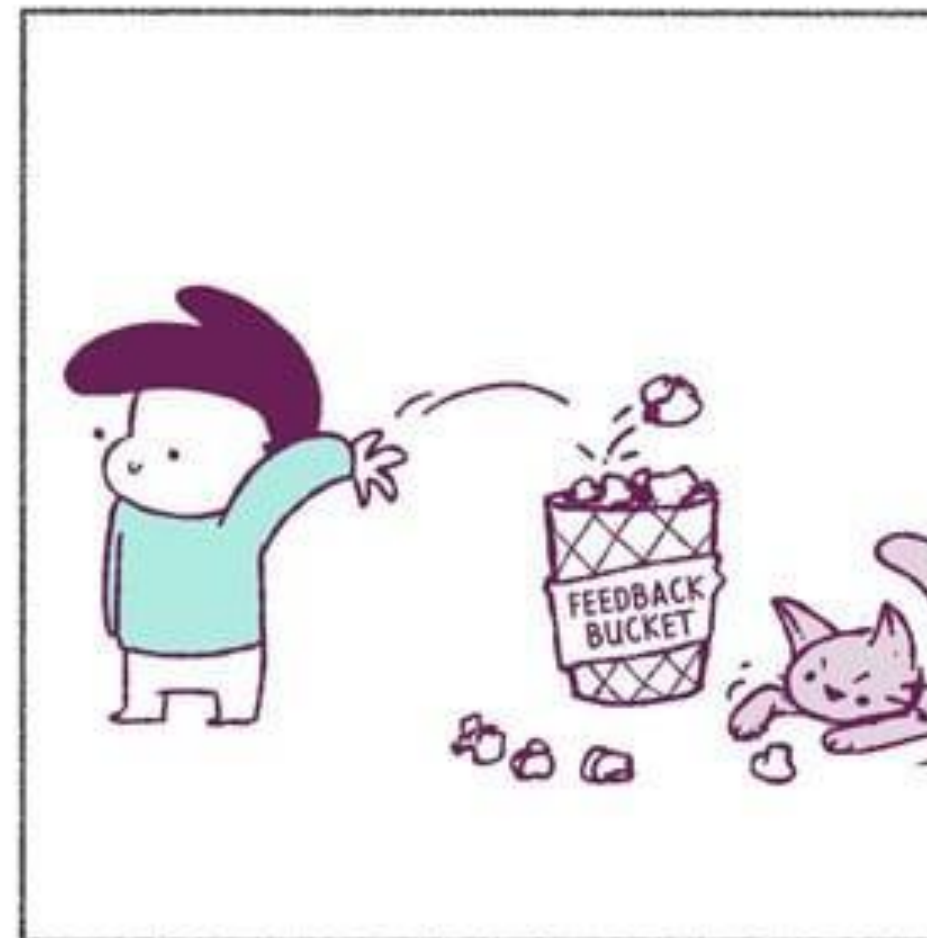
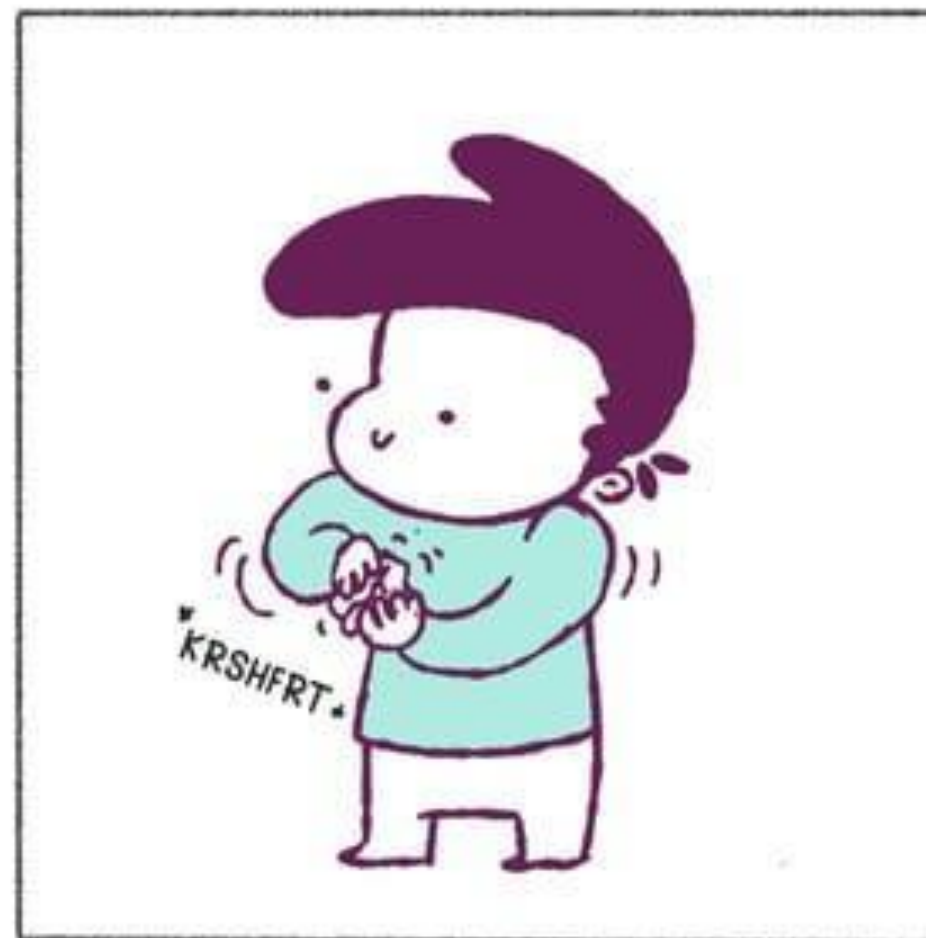
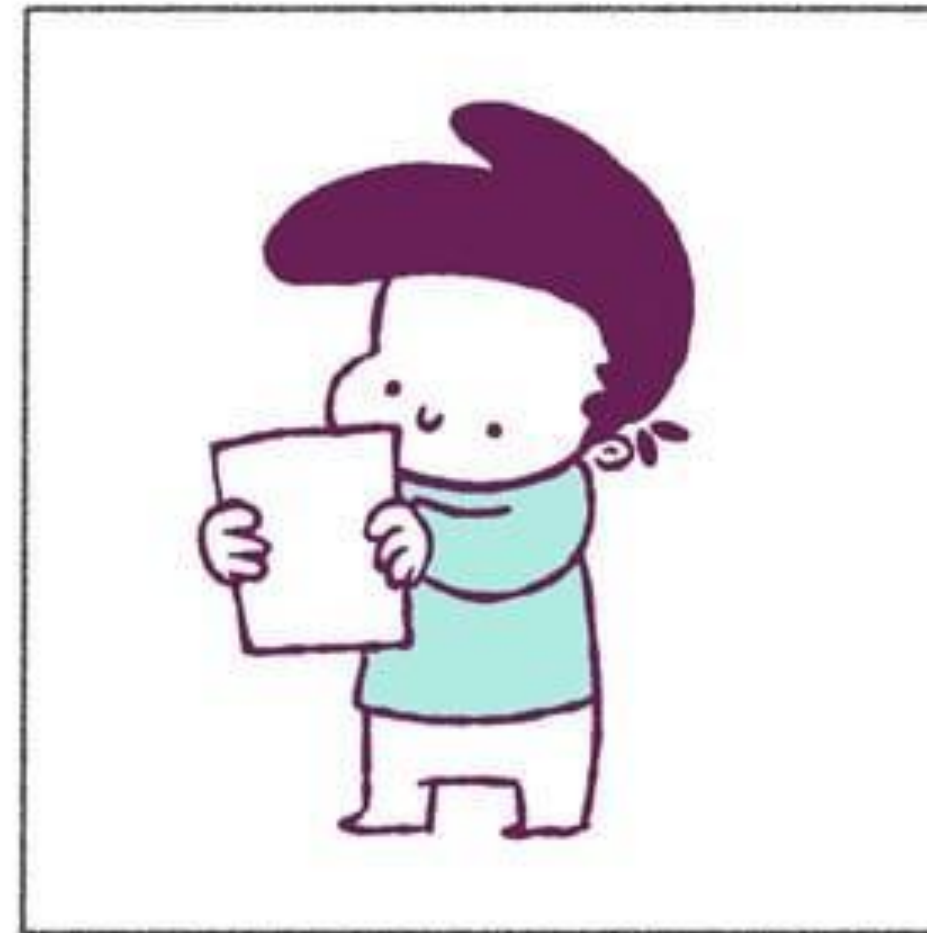
Relevance:

We highlight gaps in learning environments, employability skills and equity.



Capacity-building:

Participation equips students with leadership, evaluation and dialogue skills - creating a generation of quality-aware graduates.



From Policy to Practice: Building a Culture of Excellence

- A culture where students and staff share **ownership of quality**.
- Where **feedback is valued as a gift**, not a threat.
- Where improvement is **continuous**, not episodic.

No student left behind

- An education of high quality provides the **right tools** for students to **meet future challenges**.
- A high quality higher education system is characterised by **removing all obstacles to access**, ensuring **progress** and **completion** for all students, implementing a **student-centred approach** to learning and teaching, and **fairly assessing** students.
- This system must also be braced by **adequate student support services**;
 - ensuring links between learning, teaching and research activities;
 - individual, social and civic training for responsible and active citizens;
 - mobility opportunities;
 - artistic and academic freedom;
 - interdisciplinary, multi-disciplinary and cross-border programs.

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