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European Trade Union Committee for Education EI European Region

HIGHER EDUCATION IS NOT FOR SALE!

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ETUCE Statement on the Commission Communication: Supporting growth and jobs – an agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher education systems

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ETUCE, the European Trade Union Committee for Education calls upon the Education Council of the European Union and the European Commission to restrain from further marketization policy in higher education and research. ETUCE invites the Education Ministers to take into consideration the concerns of the teachers in the next Education Council meeting on 28 November and to decide to maintain the public responsibility and public investment in higher education and research while adopting the Council Conclusions on Modernising higher education and research.

Hereby ETUCE would like to highlight its concerns on the *Commission Communication: Supporting growth and jobs – an agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher education systems* {SEC(2011) 1063}.

The European Commission defines the role of Higher Education Institutions in the introduction of the modernisation agenda as "... crucial partners in delivering the European Union's strategy to drive forward and maintain growth". As far as ETUCE is concerned, this is a far too narrow and simplistic view of the purpose and mission of higher education institutions in Europe. ETUCE agrees that higher education and research is playing a growing role in the future development of our societies in the European Union and that economic development is absolutely dependent on a highly qualified and well-educated work force.

Nevertheless, we insist that the mission of universities and other higher education institutions in Europe is much broader than only to provide knowledge to the business sector. Modern, democratic societies need, more than ever, free and independent higher education and research institutions. Thus, the scope of the universities should not be limited to the immediate needs and interest of the business sector. The universities must be encouraged to maintain and develop their key role in society, which is generating and disseminating knowledge and developing and sharing their independent analysis and critiques with the wider society on all issues without the fear of repression or censorship, or the distortions that might arise from the pressures generated by market values.

In order to fulfil this role, universities need autonomy and the academics need protection of their academic freedom. The governance of the institutions should be based on principles, which secure that academic rationales at all times prevailing over irrelevant political or economic pressure from external forces, such as of national governments and/or economic-financial interests. Up until now, no system other than collegial governance, peer reviews and involvement of staff and students has proven to be able to fulfil this principle.

While ETUCE agrees that quality of teaching and research is crucial to maintain and develop further, it is the most significant to realise the two main parameters of quality in higher education. The first one is the connection between teaching and research: it is not possible to deliver education to the highest intellectual and scientific degree based on the newest knowledge without a close connection to research. Research creates this new knowledge and it is intellectually challenging for the mind-set of the scholars, both students and staff. The second one is the attractiveness of higher education and research institutions: it is impossible to keep and further develop the high standards of European higher education without being able to attract and retain a highly qualified academic work force.

On this basis of this comprehensive view of the broader missions of higher education and research, ETUCE has a number of more specific comments in relation to the Commission Communication:

1. Education is a human right; it must be publicly funded and accessible by all. Higher education is not a commodity and it is not for sale. Therefore, ETUCE urges the European Union institutions to restrain from further marketization policy in the sector: the interests of business and the private sector should not jeopardize the autonomy of the universities, to undermine the collegial governance of higher education institutions, and to impose burdens on students through tuition fees.
2. ETUCE urges the European Commission to reverse its policy of supporting the expansion of tuition fees in higher education. ETUCE strongly criticised the Youth in Move flagship initiative, which announced the future creation of a “European level study loan facility” for socio-economically disadvantaged students. Now the modernisation agenda proposes launching a “European level student loan guarantee facility” operating from 2014 to provide loans for students to attend Masters courses abroad. Additionally, the European Commission describes the growth of private funding to universities in positive terms, and welcomes the fact that “tuition fees are becoming more widespread, particularly at masters level”. ETUCE is against the proposal of the European Commission in the *Multiannual Financial Framework programme 2014-2020*, which foresees that the “Commission will work with the EIB to provide guarantees for loans to Master students wishing to do their Masters in another Member State”.¹

While ETUCE supports the widest accessibility of the universities for all, our concern is that the Commission’s approach will encourage governments to issue more tuition fee based studies and/or to increase the tuition fees in all levels of higher education for all students, contributing to the marketisation of the higher education and social exclusion. This market strategy in higher education will exclude the socio-economically disadvantaged groups that are already marginalised and have fewer opportunities to access higher education.

3. Furthermore, ETUCE is against the kind of internationalisation of the universities, which aims to marketise them and generate competition between them, by providing teaching for non-EU students solely to generate higher income for the universities.
4. ETUCE is astonished at the sudden shift in the European Commission policy in defining the concept of “knowledge triangle” as education-research-business. This is another obvious pressure on the higher education sector towards marketisation,

¹ Communication from the Commission [...]: A Budget for Europe 2020 - Part II: Policy fiches {SEC(2011) 867 final} {SEC(2011) 868 final} : http://ec.europa.eu/budget/library/biblio/documents/fin_fw1420/MFF_COM-2011-500_Part_II_en.pdf

therefore ETUCE calls upon the European Union institutions to restore the notion of “innovation” in this concept as it is defined in the Education and Training 2020 strategic framework programme². At the same time ETUCE reminds the Commission to consult the relevant stakeholders on any such significant changes to Commission education policy, well before it is finalised or put forward. ETUCE expects to be invited to nominate a member of the proposed High-level Group on Modernisation of Higher Education.

5. It is high time that the European Union institutions and national governments should accept the fact, that universities and education in general, are one of the best investments in our shared future; thus, they should start to act accordingly. ETUCE reminds the European Commission that its mission is to serve the citizens of Europe as a whole and not merely the private sector. While the financial institutions demonstrably lack the moral and ethical dimensions necessary to perform as responsible social actors, and as they continue to trigger financial and economic crises, it is unacceptable that the policies of the European Union apparently pursue the protection of the private sector at the expense of the public. The public sector and the citizens of Europe did not create this crisis, yet they are bearing the biggest share of the pain inflicted by ‘solutions’ which have failed.
6. ETUCE emphasises that the goal of education is to prepare people for life and not being reduced to serve the short-term needs of the labour market. Therefore, ETUCE invites the European Commission to avoid using expressions, which reflect this narrow and partial view of the purpose of the education and which view EU citizens merely as economic units (“right mix of skills, “mismatches”, finding the “right people”, “human capital development”).
7. ETUCE fundamentally disagrees with the view of the European Commission that *“Involving employers and labour market institutions in the design and delivery of programmes, supporting staff exchanges and including practical experience in courses can help attune curricula to current and emerging labour market needs and foster employability and entrepreneurship”*³. This policy attacks the basic academic freedom of universities allowing the private sector to design university courses on a profit basis, and increase their involvement in the governance of the universities. This policy would potentially contribute to the deterioration of the quality of teaching by private employees, who lack the holistic approach to teaching and the skills and competences to deliver quality teaching, and who are driven by crude instrumental ‘performance’ criteria.
8. ETUCE urges the European Commission and the Education Council to value the arts subjects and human faculties the same way as natural sciences. The Member States must ensure the same quality of infrastructure, research, teaching of the arts subjects and the same salary and working conditions of the professors, researchers as of the natural sciences. Public authorities should not allow or encourage the deterioration and underinvestment of the arts and cultural studies just because of a simplistic and outdated idea of their economic merits.
9. Teaching and research are both crucial to the quality and relevance of universities and their enduring mission. Academic freedom for both teaching and research is a core value, which must include the resources and support to make academic freedom

² Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (‘ET 2020’): <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2009:119:0002:0010:EN:PDF>

³ p. 5

a reality, as well as policies protecting individual professional autonomy and intellectual property rights. Therefore, it is unacceptable that the European Commission describes the research as an activity to serve commercial goals and defines the mission of the research sector as to train 1 million new researchers to the industries. It must be noted that many of Nobel Prize winner researchers were supported from a non-“*cost-effective*” approach.

10. Public authorities must retain the primary responsibility for research and doctoral training policy and for setting the norms for the working conditions of researchers through negotiation with the relevant staff unions. Participation and investment of private enterprises in the training of Ph.D.'s should never undermine the principle of public responsibility for maintaining the quality, funding and training of Ph.D.'s. Accordingly, ETUCE believes that investment in research and doctoral training must be increased and the proper conditions for research work must be supported for all research, whether through public and private funding.
11. ETUCE considers that one of the roles of the higher education institutions should be the fight against early school leaving, attracting more from a broader range of social groups, including the socio-economically disadvantaged and vulnerable. However, we believe that the Commission fails to clearly encourage the Member States to invest more into higher education generally and especially for this purpose. ETUCE seeks clarification on the financial support to be provided to the low-income and disadvantaged students by “better targeting resources”.
12. ETUCE calls upon the Council of the European Union and the European Commission to emphasise the need of improvement of high quality teaching in the universities. The Member States should reform their national strategies and invest more in pedagogical, personal and professional development of academic staff and researchers to support and develop their classroom performance and to reduce the dropouts of students. This should be achieved through a collegial, not a managerial approach.
13. The modernisation agenda should also highlight that academic staff require an improved physical and less stressful working environment, modern working facilities and a supportive infrastructure for research. The Member States must be encouraged to improve the working conditions by more investment in the sector. The Framework Programmes can help to set standards by strengthening the criteria for the research they support.
14. The European universities have built their high quality, reputation and diversity relying on their complex balance of academic freedom and social responsibility on the base of centuries of continuous evolution. ETUCE believes that the European universities should not be categorised according to relatively short-term, unscientific and often misleading or subjective world rankings and classifications. As far as we are concerned, the world rankings are politically or commercially driven or measure only those characteristics, which appear to lend themselves to (often invalid) quantification rather than the many and more nuanced characteristics that actually contribute to the quality of an institution.
ETUCE strongly supports transparency and the publication of reliable information about institutions to enable students and staff to make informed decisions, but reducing institutions to a single ‘rank’ is a quite unhelpful for any meaningful purpose. Frequent peer reviews and evaluation by peers, combined with a well-established quality culture at each higher education institution provide a much more reliable picture than annual ranking lists. The relevant time-span to assess the

outcome of teaching and research of only one year contributes to misleading that the rankings are based on reliable data.

ETUCE represents 135 Teacher Unions and 12.8 million teachers in Europe, 5,5 million teachers in the EU, from all levels of the education sector. ETUCE is a Social Partner in education at the EU level and a European Trade Union Federation within ETUC, the European Trade Union Confederation. ETUCE is the European Region of Education International, the global federation of teacher unions.