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ETUCE

European Trade Union Committee for Education EI European Region

ETUCE views on *Commission's communication on a renewed EU agenda for higher education*

Adopted by the ETUCE Committee on 24 October 2017

EUROPEAN REGION- ETUCE

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On 30 May 2017 the European Commission published its [Communication on a renewed EU agenda for higher education](#).

The following text is the reaction of ETUCE, which represents 11 million teachers in Europe, based on consultation with its Member Organisations on the Commission's document.



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1. We welcome that the aim of the proposal is to support EU countries in renewing their higher education systems in order to ensure that **graduates are highly skilled and socially engaged**, while respecting the national competence on education.

2. We welcome that the document emphasises the role of universities in helping to ensure that more teachers, medical and STEM professionals graduate, because there are high **shortages in these sectors**. At the same time the document should mention that in some countries demand for these and other professions strongly relates to the national economic situation and the lack of quality job offers in these particular sectors. Therefore, higher education cannot be responsible for solving the 'mismatch' of supply and demand in the labour market.

3. While we agree that an additional work-based learning component of higher education can be beneficial for students, we believe that the document focuses too prominently on preparing students only for the **short-term needs of the labour market**, for example via the following proposals: strengthening Erasmus+ business consortia, turning institutions into 'entrepreneurial actors', introducing stronger focus in doctoral programmes on the application of knowledge and interaction with future employers, promoting the establishment of regional and national university-business fora, etc. We insist that the **mission of universities** and other higher education institutions in Europe is much broader than only providing knowledge to the business sector. Democratic societies need free and independent higher education and research institutions. Thus, the scope of universities should not be limited to the immediate needs and interest of the business sector. 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 fear of repression or censorship, or the distortions that might arise from the pressures generated by market values.

4. We also see a short-term and business-centred approach towards **research** via the proposed expansion of '**Higher Education for Smart Specialisation**'. We do not agree that

according to this strategy universities should align their curricula with “Smart Specialisation strategies” of local and regional enterprises in order to meet the needs of priority industry sectors. Therefore, we request that the European Commission also demands that Member States ensure **academic freedom and autonomy** of higher education and research also in line with the 1997 UNESCO recommendation on the status of higher education teaching personnel.

5. As the European Commission stresses the importance of **good institutional leadership** and effective internal cooperation and resource management, we underline that universities need autonomy and 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 prevail over political or economic pressure from external forces, such as national governments and/or economic/financial interests. Effective **social dialogue** with education trade unions, collegial governance, peer review and involvement of staff and students in **collaborative and democratic governance** has proven to fulfil this principle.

6. The Commission’s document suggests the introduction of **performance-based funding** models in higher education to increase prestige and rewards associated with good teaching and to design funding systems that encourage higher education to deliver what society needs, reconciling the objectives of effectiveness, equity and efficiency. We would like to remind the Commission that **education is a human right** and it must be publicly funded and accessible to all. Higher education is not a commodity and it is not for sale. ETUCE urges European and national decision makers to restrain from further marketisation policy in the sector and from performance-based funding models.

Moreover, we demonstrated with several national examples in our document “[ETUCE views on the “A New Skills Agenda for Europe” of the European Commission](#)” (17 February, 2016) why performance-based funding should not be introduced in education. It **may create unequal funding** to schools and higher education institutions and inequality among students and institutions. The financing strategy of higher education should not be based on a one-size-fits-all approach or a punitive model. There are several examples of school and university funding based on badly established indicators, which, instead of improvement, **have had a negative impact on the achievement** of students and teaching. Performance-based funding systems rarely take into account the **different micro-economic environment of schools**, for example, the poverty rate, the existence of local industries, qualification level of parents, the unemployment rate of parents, distance from and access to schools, etc., which have also impact on the performance of students, thus, of the schools and higher education institutions.

In higher education and research performance-based funding may also encourage the **homogenisation of research** and discourage experiments that take new approaches by rewarding “safe” research, since performance-based funding encourages competition. We strongly believe that introduction of performance-based funding resulting in increased administrative tasks may signalise that **academics are not to be trusted**. Furthermore, lack of funding of universities and competitiveness for funds demanding academics to publish results in an **unacceptable level of work related stress**.

7. We agree that the initiative highlights the need for **pedagogical training and systematic investment in continuous professional development** of higher education teachers. The Commission proposes strategic support for higher education teachers, doctoral candidates and post-doctoral graduates through **Erasmus+**, to improve pedagogical skills, curriculum design, teachers' cooperation and mobility. However, we strongly believe that member states should provide more systematic support for higher education staff. Furthermore, following the mid-term review of the Erasmus+ programme, we believe that staff support would be achieved best if staff (represented by ETUCE) are involved in decision-making on the use of the Erasmus+ funds.

8. In order to modernise higher education, more needs to be done to **improve teachers' working conditions** and solve the problem of fixed-term contracts. Addressing poor working conditions for staff will, in turn, help to improve learning conditions for students. At the same time, the document suggests provision of flexible and modular courses and integration of digital technologies in research-based teaching without considering how these changes may contribute to the increase of working time and workload of teachers.

9. The document rightly recognises the importance of acquiring **advanced transversal skills and key competences in higher education**, including high-level digital competences, numeracy, autonomy, critical thinking and a capacity for problem-solving, through higher education, irrespective of discipline. It also promotes teaching STE(A)M subjects including arts (A) but it has a predominant focus on entrepreneurial skills and digital competences. Focusing in higher education on **digital skills** and integration of digital technologies in **research-based teaching** are essential.

10. Finally, we welcome the European Commission's emphasis on promoting **inclusive and connected higher education systems** and in particular support for developing and implementing integrated institutional strategies for inclusion, gender equality and study success, enhancing cooperation with schools and VET providers, additional career guidance and mentoring, and supporting the recognition of prior learning (especially, qualifications held by refugees). However, in order to achieve these important objectives greater public investment in higher education, including in staffing, is required.