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Galina MERKULOVA  
Branimir STRUKELJ



5, Bd du Roi Albert II, 9th  
1210 Brussels, Belgium  
Tel +32 2 224 06 91/92  
Fax +32 2 224 06 94  
[secretariat@csee-etu.org](mailto:secretariat@csee-etu.org)  
<http://www.csee-etu.org>

**European Director**

Susan FLOCKEN

**Treasurer**

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# ETUCE

## European Trade Union Committee for Education EI European Region

### ETUCE reaction on *Commission's communication on a renewed EU agenda for higher education* to the Committee of Regions hearing

11 July 2017

On 30 May 2017 the European Commission published its *Communication on a renewed EU agenda for higher education*.

The European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) represents 131 education trade unions in 48 countries. The following text is the first reaction of the ETUCE on this initiative.

1. We welcome that the aim of the proposal is to support the EU countries in modernising their higher education systems in order to achieve 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 contributing 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 professions and others strongly relates to the economic situation of a country and the lack of quality job offers in these professions. Therefore, higher education cannot be responsible for solving the mismatch of demand and supply 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 **labour market needs**, 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 the fear of repression or censorship, or the distortions that might arise from the pressures generated by market values.

4. We see a short-term and business-centred approach also 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 Member States to ensure **academic freedom and autonomy** of higher education and research.

5. As the European Commission lays the importance in **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 reviews 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 remind 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.

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 wrong, e.g. on a one size fits all or a penalising approach. There are several examples of school and university funding based on badly established indicators, which, instead of improvement, **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 poverty rate, the existence of local industries, qualification level of parents and rate of low-skilled parents, 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.

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 such support more systematically to higher education staff. Furthermore, following the mid-term review of the Erasmus+ programme, we believe that staff support would be achieved best if they (represented by ETUCE) are involved in decision-making on the use of the Erasmus+ funds.

8. In order to modernise higher education more is to be done on **improving teachers' working conditions** and solving the problem of fixed-term contract of staff. 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 work load 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 support that the European Commission promotes **inclusive and connected higher education systems** and suggests 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, flexible study options (part-time, modular courses, online), and supporting the recognition of prior learning (especially, qualifications held by refugees).