



ETUCE Statement on the European Commission's Communication: "Efficiency and Equity in European Education and Training Systems"¹

**Adopted by the Executive Board
on 30-31 October 2006**

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In response to the Commission's Communication on "Efficiency and Equity in European Education and Training Systems" of 8 September 2006, ETUCE first of all welcomes the focus on this theme at EU level. In the opinion of ETUCE, this Communication should be seen as a first starting point in the follow-up of the Council of Education Ministers' call in February 2006 for a dual focus – economic and social – on the role of education and training in today's society. The statistics underline the importance of this issue. Although the general level of education of the population has been rising steadily since the 1960's, the EU education systems are still not succeeding in delivering equity: Education systems reproduce rather than reduce inequalities in socio-economic differences among the population. As such, ETUCE encourages the Commission to continue its work on this issue, but wishes to bring forward a number of comments and reservations regarding specific recommendations in the Communication and the accompanying Staff Working Document.²

ETUCE strongly opposes the Communication's approach to funding of education

ETUCE strongly opposes the Communication's view that investment in education should be based on a principle of distribution of a given amount of money within the education sector according to where the rates of economic returns are highest. ETUCE reminds that we need sufficient resources at all levels of the education sector in order to meet the twin challenges of a more equitable and a more competitive society, and it is a political priority to ensure that the funding is there. Furthermore, the Communication's proposed approach to funding would risk drawing attention away from the interrelation and impact between the different sectors and levels of education. ETUCE stresses that the concept of equity must apply to the whole sector. The education system should be seen as one entity, promoting equity for all and at all stages.

A predominantly economic view

On a general note, ETUCE finds the Communication's approach to the topic of efficiency and equity predominantly economic in nature. Arguments for increasing equity are largely based on their degree of economic returns. While ETUCE acknowledges that economic arguments weigh heavily – and thus can have a positive impact on promoting policy measures that increase equity in education – the broader social and personal benefits of achieving a more equitable society should be given equal attention.

Likewise, ETUCE challenges the use of the term 'evidence-based policy' in the Communication. It seems obvious that research, surveys and concrete experience

¹ COM (2006) 481

² SEC (2006) 1096

should be the ground for sustainable political decisions. However, seen from the European level, all evidence is anchored in a special national and cultural context and may not be evidence for drawing more general conclusions.

Lack of focus on the issues crucial to Central and Eastern Europe

One of the Communication's main lines of argument outlines the economic benefits of raising the educational attainment level of the population. This perspective is based on the relatively high percentage of early school leavers in the 15 old EU member states and then compared with OECD data on the personal, social, and fiscal returns of increasing the educational attainment level for 14 old EU countries. As such, the equity benefits of raising the percentage of the population achieving upper-secondary school education are seemingly high for Western Europe. However, considering that the majority of the 10, soon 12, new EU member states score high in terms of the percentage of the population with upper-secondary education, the question of how to reduce inequalities in socio-economic differences in these countries seems to beg a supplementary approach with regard to primary and secondary school education, in comparison to that of the 15 old EU Member States.

In the majority of the new EU Member States, the approach to increasing equity and efficiency in education should take an increase in funding for the education sector as a starting point, together with ensuring remuneration of teachers for the full amount of their work and at a decent salary level which follows the general increase in living costs. Giving teachers the possibility to only work a standard norm of working hours per week would be the first step to providing learning environments in which teaching practices can be based on equity measures such as tailoring the class-room teaching to the needs of the individual pupils.

ETUCE welcomes increased attention to the importance of pre-school education

During 2004 and 2005 ETUCE has on several occasions called for more attention to the area of pre-school education in the Education & Training 2010 process. ETUCE welcomes the Communication's recognition of the importance of early learning and the long-lasting benefits it can bring in terms of educational achievements and wider socialization.

ETUCE supports the Communication's call for careful consideration of the type of early childhood provision, e.g. the pedagogy used and cooperation with parents, as well as the call for the need to improve the supply of specially trained pre-primary teachers. ETUCE is pleased to note that the Commission intends to include the area of pre-school education as a topic for exchanges of best practice between Member States. As a consequence the Commission should make sure that projects in this area are eligible for EU funding in all Member States.

Within Europe, access to early childhood education varies greatly, ranging from universal access to only a few percent in some countries. The lower the percentage of early childhood participation, the more inequality in access. While the provision of early childhood education obviously has a dual purpose in today's society – childcare and educational – ETUCE stresses that early childhood education should first and foremost be for the child and for the child's opportunities to learn. Early childhood education is too often only seen as a care sector enabling parents to be active on the

labour market, which in turn tends to be accompanied by a sector dominated by private providers with limited quality standards and low qualified staff.

The Communication's call for careful consideration of the type of early childhood provision is much needed. While the consensus around the benefits of pre-school education is growing in the EU and elsewhere, there is still a lack of knowledge about actual learning processes and about what high-quality pre-school education means. ETUCE emphasises that, as for the whole education sector, the content and type of pre-school education should always be embedded in the national context and its cultural values. However, some aspects can be identified as crucial to the quality of early childhood education: **i) well-educated teachers and qualified leadership**: early childhood teachers should have a high academic level of teacher education and access to continuous professional development, and their status should be on an equal footing to other categories of teachers; The salary-level and working conditions of early childhood teachers are in need of improvement in most countries, and as it also is recognised in the Staff Working Document accompanying the Communication, "*the quality of pre-primary education depends on adequate staff training and good working conditions across the sector*"³; **ii) ratios and group sizes**: this varies greatly, as documented by the OECD Starting Strong study from 2001, as does the ratio of qualified vs. non-qualified staff; a sufficient number of qualified teachers is a prerequisite for acceptable quality; **iii) inclusiveness**: the question of how well systems manage to cater for children with special needs and children-at-risk is crucial, including cooperation with other specialists; **iv) children of ethnic minorities**: early childhood education has a special importance for children of ethnic minority backgrounds, in particular for their acquisition of a second language; **v) continuity and coordination within the education system** is vital; all sections of education services should preferably be under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education or its equivalent; **vi) children's influence and cooperation with parents**: children should enjoy the right to make decisions at an age-appropriate level and good communication with parents is essential to gain a richer understanding of the child.

ETUCE encourages the Commission to focus its future work within pre-school education on these central areas. ETUCE advocates for early childhood education that is publicly funded and universally accessible, with fully qualified and educated staff.

Primary and secondary school level: ETUCE calls for a culture of evaluation focused on bringing about improvements

The Communication calls for promoting a culture of evaluation throughout the education sector. The Communication itself deals only very generally with evaluation, but states that the Commission intends to support further work on developing evaluation systems (p. 11). In relation to the issue of evaluation, ETUCE stresses that the success of any evaluation system depends on its acceptance by the persons and institutions concerned and whether it succeeds in bringing about improvements in the education system. Too often the issue of evaluation is approached as a question of assessing and monitoring performance; these aspects are evidently crucial, but the overall emphasis should be on how evaluation systems can bring about improvements. Importantly, this implies that the evaluation systems should entail proper guidance for teachers and school leaders on how to follow-up on the results of an evaluation process.

³ Commission Staff Working Document accompanying the Communication, p. 17.

ETUCE takes note of the Communication's reference to international evidence suggesting that a combination of local autonomy for institutions and central accountability systems can improve student performance, and ETUCE commends the Communication for stressing that "*accountability systems should be designed to ensure a full commitment to equity (...)*" (p.6).

The Commission Staff Working Document accompanying the Communication refers more extensively to different forms of evaluation systems, without having the status of policy recommendations, of course. In the opinion of ETUCE, the document predominantly reflects an Anglo-Saxon approach to evaluation, with an emphasis on accountability by external, standardised testing and publicising results. ETUCE rejects the claimed connection between evaluation and improvements inherent in the statement: "*International evidence suggests that institutional features that introduce accountability by externally testing and making public the quality of what students and schools deliver create incentives that improve educational performance*" (p. 21). ETUCE rejects the simplified notion that external testing or publicizing results in themselves bring about improvements. On the contrary, as the Commission Staff Working Document also reports, external evaluation via standardised tests of pupils entails a range of problematic side effects, such as: additional stress for teachers and pupils; a tendency to focus teaching on the testable skills; incentives for disintegration of disadvantaged pupils, etc.

ETUCE emphasises that an institutional culture of evaluation should bring about confidence and support to teachers and staff to improve the quality of teaching, rather than create a controlling, fearful climate. Instead of external, standardized testing, ETUCE points to coherent and transparent systems of self-evaluation for schools as a better way of bringing about a closer link between evaluation and quality improvement. In addition, ETUCE highlights that external evaluation should also include a range of aspects related to the whole infrastructure of schools, e.g. cooperation with parents, support systems, management, etc.

Primary and secondary school level: ETUCE calls for more attention to the role of teachers and more close consideration of teaching practices fostering equal opportunities

ETUCE agrees with the Communication in underlining that: "*The most important factors for efficiency and equity are the quality, experience and motivation of teachers and the type of pedagogy they use*" (p. 6). However, the Communication and the accompanying Staff Working Document deal only sparsely with this issue, and mainly as a question of ensuring adequate supply of highly qualified teachers, particularly to schools in areas with a higher percentage of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. ETUCE agrees with the importance of the supply question, but encourages the Commission in its further work on equity and efficiency to look further into the role of the teacher in creating equal opportunities for pupils, e.g. creating learning environments that foster pupils' incentives to undertake further learning, ensuring attention to those in special need, the ability of the teacher to judge what is best for the individual pupil, or awareness of which teaching practices may inadvertently only favour pupils from more advantaged backgrounds, awareness of anti-discriminatory teaching practices in dealing with pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds, etc. ETUCE stresses that a high level of initial teacher education and regular access to

continuous professional development for all teachers is crucial for ensuring quality in education, and this fact is underscored by debates on how to increase equity in education considering the crucial role of the teacher and individual teaching practices aimed at increasing equity. The issue of how teacher education can impact equity in the education system should be a priority.

With regard to the issue of motivation of teachers, ETUCE notes with satisfaction that the accompanying Commission Staff Working Document refers to research suggesting that rather than monetary incentives such as performance-related pay, incentives of more qualitative character would encourage teachers to enter or stay in challenging schools, such as “*smaller class sizes, more non-contact time, more classroom support, better management and support in relation to behaviour, a clear message that the teacher is valued and time for respite from the job linked to continuing professional development*” (p. 23). ETUCE stresses that the kind of quality and even equity that are attempted to be reached through a combination of performance related pay systems and career development systems can indeed be questioned. Furthermore, the focus on more quality aspects in motivating teachers can not overshadow the fact that teachers’ basic salaries generally are all too low and that there is an urgent need to raise the status of teachers, also through higher salaries.

In addition, the Communication’s recommendations in relation to primary and secondary education also draw attention to the negative effects of early division of pupils into different educational tracks before the age of 13. ETUCE strongly supports more integrated education systems which postpone ‘tracking’ until later stages. Research has documented that early tracking is “wasteful and inequitable”⁴, as the division of pupils according to their abilities at early stages severely aggravate the impact of socio-economic background factors on educational achievements.

ETUCE welcomes the discussion on equity in higher education, but rejects tuition fees as a main solution in dealing with the “funding gap” in higher education

ETUCE strongly welcomes the discussion on equity in higher education, as there is a strong need to address this issue. Ensuring greater equity in participation and access is one of the central challenges of European education, and higher education in particular.

ETUCE supports the affirmation made in the Communication that there is an inadequacy of funds for higher education, especially when considering the steep increase in student numbers over the past years, however ETUCE rejects the argument put forward in the Communication which simply refers to tuition fees as a main solution in dealing with the “funding gap” in higher education. ETUCE is convinced that equity in higher education must be achieved through offering equal opportunity to everybody, not only to access, but also to successful completion of studies, and governments must do more to eliminate all barriers to participation in higher education, including financial barriers. It is ETUCE’s conviction that tuition fees and rising student debt now constitute a serious obstacle to access, particularly for students from lower socio-economic groups. ETUCE reiterates that public funding is the most equitable and efficient way of financing higher education.

^{4 4} Commission Staff Working Document accompanying the Communication, p. 19.

The above-mentioned Communication⁵ refers to the “knowledge triangle of education, innovation and research” and mentions the “significant and positive impact” that education and training policies can have on “economic and social outcomes”. OECD’s “Education at a Glance”⁶ also points out that the benefits of public investment in higher education include “increased revenues from income taxes on higher wages, plus social insurance payments”. It further states that “better educated individuals generally experience superior health status, lowering public expenditure on the provision of healthcare” and that “for some individuals, achieving higher levels of educational attainment may lower the likelihood of committing certain types of crime; this in turn reduces public expenditure”.

In this respect, ETUCE rejects the reference that the Communication makes to students as the “main direct beneficiaries of higher education” and further opposes reference to students as “consumers,”⁷ on which “demand” and “supply” terms and considerations are then elaborated. ETUCE rejects the idea of students as consumers, as much as we reject that of academic staff as human resources with pre-defined tasks. Students and academic staff are to be considered as partners in the higher education system, as mentioned in the Bologna Process, and as is evidenced by participation in the Bologna Follow Up Group.

The Communication states that a system of “free” higher education is not equitable, as potential students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds still do not make it into higher education, and that the progressive tax system does not offset private returns in higher education.⁸ What the Communication however fails to consider is that it is largely the “free” systems of higher education that led to the sharp increase in student enrolments over the past 2 decades, with most of the students originating from middle-income families. These are the same families who seriously consider the financial implications and risks connected to their children taking up higher education, and are those who struggle to keep up with costs that arise in terms of tuition fees where these apply, but also in terms of other costs such as study materials, accommodation, living expenses, and so on.

The availability of loans to students from middle income families, in order to be able to counter such costs is also not an adequate solution, and the above-mentioned OECD publication “Education at a Glance” itself indicates that loan repayments “can be a substantial burden to individuals and can have an impact on the decision to participate in higher education”.⁹ ETUCE is convinced that aid granted to students should be in the form of grants, rather than loans, in view of the high economic and social benefits that arise from increased participation in higher education, as referred to above.

As regard socially disadvantaged students, the Communication refers to the need for there to be financial support which is targeted towards such students in order for them to be able to access higher education. ETUCE strongly agrees with the need for such financial assistance to be granted to socially disadvantaged students. It is necessary for such assistance to be effectively and realistically guaranteed to such students, in

⁵ In Section 1.1. “Facing the economic and social challenges”

⁶ “Education at a Glance” OECD INDICATORS, 2006 Edition, pp.130

⁷ In the Commission Staff Working Document – Accompanying document to the Communication on Efficiency and Equity in European education and training systems” [Brussels, 8.9.2006 SEC(2006) 1096], pp.25

⁸ p.7

⁹ p.236 thereof.

guaranteeing access to higher education for all. Yet ETUCE stresses that this is not an issue which depends on tuition fees, and is not connected therewith. Students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds should not be given such support after an implementation of, or rise in, tuition fees. They need this support at present, even with “free” systems of higher education, in a manner that gives them the guarantee that they will be allowed to complete their studies successfully and in good time.

If higher education institutions are to fulfil their public mandate and to make their full contribution to the social, economic and cultural development of societies, ETUCE believes that a renewed public service vision of higher education must be embraced. This requires public financial support, which in turn means that tuition fees, where they exist, are kept very low and no one is denied access for financial reasons. Tuition fees will not promote higher participation rates and increased participation from non-traditional students. Stable, predictable, and long-term public funding ensures that institutions can provide sufficient spaces and a range of programmes to fulfil their academic mission, and to meet student demands.

ETUCE warns against tailoring VET provision too narrowly to the immediate needs of the labour market

ETUCE agrees with the Communication’s overall recommendation on developing clear and diverse pathways through VET to further learning and employment. However, ETUCE finds that the individual points in the section on VET places a too strong emphasis on tailoring VET to the needs of the labour market. In the initial vocational education and training system, a too strong focus on the immediate skills needs of the labour market risks precisely reducing the flexibility of the VET system. In addition, while ETUCE acknowledges that the issue of equity evidently steers the attention of the Communication to the role of VET in providing adult learning opportunities and learning for the disadvantaged, ETUCE finds that it should be reminded that a VET qualification is indeed a respectable qualification in its own right.

In conclusion, ETUCE looks forward to continue the debate with the Commission on the further work on the important issue of equity and efficiency in European education and training systems.