

## Consultation of OECD Education Ministers, Athens June 2006

### **TUAC/EI statement on Higher Education : Quality, Equity and Efficiency**

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We are here to discuss one of the great adventures of the human spirit – education for the knowledge society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The actors of this adventure are first and foremost the students and their teachers. But we are all actors, aren't we? Ministers or advisers, international officials or researchers, business leaders or labour representatives. We all have been students, and, hopefully, we all continue to learn.

From the view point of officials and politicians, it might look as though the drivers of change in higher education are, as the OECD paper says: issues of governance, finance, accountability. We put it to you that this is to pose the question the wrong way.

The driver of change in our societies, our economies, is education. Education, innovation, research, got us where we are today. Our industrial development, globalization, are the results of education and research. Over the last 100 years whether all the outcomes of education and research are desirable is another question. Education and research do not, as such, shield us from the consequences of collective folly. On the contrary, the knowledge society increases both the opportunities and the risks – opportunities of unprecedented development, generation of wealth and culture – or risks of environmental disaster, mass destruction and growing gaps leading to societal breakdown.

The point is that the contribution of publicly provided education, and publicly supported research, has been immense. The public-private balance, and interaction, has historically varied among the countries that today form the OECD – especially in higher education and research.

But the risk is that models driven essentially by the assumption of a declining tax-base are driving us towards new OECD-wide approaches. That could actually damage and undo the contribution of higher education and research to further development – both economic development, and human development in the broader-sense, as the representative of BIAC has just said.

A major issue is equity. As we point out, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that *"higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit"*. Obvious you might say? Not so obvious, if current trends continue. That is why there is so much contestation in many countries on tuition fees, on growing student debt, on privatization.

Quality, equity and efficiency are not mutually exclusive. They can and should be mutually reinforcing. During this consultation and this afternoon in the Forum, my colleagues from Higher Education and the Labour movement are ready to discuss with you how we can enhance quality, put equity and equality of opportunity in the centre of our goals and value-systems, and achieve efficiency.

As trade unions, we recognize the role of the private sector. We will work with governments and representative employer organizations on that. But we are also concerned at some of the more radical moves towards privatization.

The market is not a panacea. Far from it. And when a missionary zeal for the market is associated with denigration of the very concept of public service, we say “stop”!

At the Ministerial Council last month, the head of BIAC, Tom Vant, spoke of his experience in running a company, defending the record, and the social responsibility, of good companies. I understand that. I respect that. And in the same vein, I want to say to you that public service has immense intrinsic value, that is forgotten or overlooked by too many people who have themselves benefited from public education. That value should not be thrown out of the window. The concept of public service, of working in the public interest, for the public good, continues to have great merit.

Policy responses to today's challenges are not easy, we recognize that when we look at the actual situation in countries, there is often sharp controversy. Witness the controversy right now in the host country for this meeting, and the decision of the host government to shift the whole meeting out here.

Controversy about education – its purposes, its relevance, and yet, its funding – is not new. It dates back to the origins of the city of Athens. One of the key messages I want to convey to you in this introduction is that the organizations of teaching personnel, represented here by TUAC's Global Union partner Education International, are key social partners in confronting the new challenges, and not just here in a two hour consultation and a three hour Forum. I mean back home, where the decisions must be taken.

There is a simple truth that governments so often overlook, you can't **impose** changes. If you want to succeed, you have to consult, and yes negotiate, so that people are part of the decision. Modern enterprises recognize the importance of having their people **involved** in change, of them feeling “ownership” of change.

Education is by definition “people-centred” but too often fails to apply the same principles of participation that **are** applied in the modern companies of the knowledge societies.

This afternoon, in the Forum, my colleagues from higher education will present you with an alternative scenario to the ones you have before you. It is the scenario of the Public Service University. It is a scenario that recognizes education – and research – as public goods, not just as commodities to be traded. It is a scenario that adds value for societies, for individuals **and** for employers. It is a scenario that we believe will help carry forward the adventure of education for the knowledge society. That scenario confronts governments, politicians, with real challenges, for it requires you to bite the bullet on resources. It requires transparency and democratic accountability. And that is as it should be. Let us engage the debate on higher education as a public good. That is how we would set the scene for this morning's consultation, and for the Forum this afternoon.