



EDUCATION INTERNATIONAL Pan-European Structure

**Higher Education and Research Standing Committee
Oslo, September 2006**

EU Commission Communication on "Delivering on the modernisation agenda for universities: Education, research and innovation" (May 2006)*

Representatives from trade unions for teachers and researchers in higher education and research, assembled in Oslo on September 27th 2006 to discuss ongoing developments in higher education and research, among them, the steps taken by the European Commission in the field of higher education.

With respect to the prescriptions and proposals of the above-mentioned Communication, the Unions present welcome the reference made therein to notions of geographical and inter-sectoral mobility, the portability of grants and loans, lifelong learning, and a reinforced dialogue with all stakeholders. Notwithstanding these positive issues, we feel the need to express a substantial number of concerns which arise upon a reading of the same Communication, in terms of the issues mentioned below.

Autonomy for Universities

The Communication refers to the need for universities to be given "real autonomy and accountability". However, we note that the Communication recommends that Member States "guide the university sector as a whole[†] through a framework of rules, policy objectives, funding mechanisms and incentives for education, research and innovation activities". The apparent contradiction is that it refers to this as being a "freedom" from over-regulation and micro-management, for which "universities should then accept full institutional accountability to society at large for their results". We can only support overarching political frameworks referring to basic principles, and we oppose more detailed and prescriptive interventions in this respect.

The Communication goes on to refer to internal governance systems based on "strategic priorities, and on professional management of human resources, investment and administrative procedures", in the context of such an autonomy-accountability system. These are not the notions on which the principle of institutional autonomy is based, and we reject any reference to institutional autonomy on such terms. Rather, institutional autonomy is a twin principle to that of academic freedom, as put forward in a recent Recommendation by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.[‡] The reference to institutional management in the Communication denies the role of academics in the university community, treating them simply as "human resources", with set objectives to fulfil. In this way, academics are denied the possibility to carry out free and independent inquiry, to develop and disseminate genuine knowledge, to participate in governance structures and to voice their opinion on daily institutional matters. Indeed, current trends pointing in this direction have translated into an almost complete removal of collegial governance structures.

It is important to note that the cadre of academics who achieved the massive expansion of higher education of the last 25 years is approaching retirement. There should be an emphasis on renewal of academic staff under favourable conditions, and not on the management infrastructure.

* Brussels, 10.5.2006 COM(2006)208 final

† Ibid. pp.5

‡ On academic freedom and university autonomy - Recommendation 1762 (2006).

Funding of Higher Education and Research

Higher education and research are recognised as a vital public good that contributes to the social, cultural and economic development of communities, regions, and nations. Consequently, universities operate according to clearly defined public service principles: equality of access, comprehensiveness, affordability, high standards of quality, and public responsibility. Universities are thus a public asset and should be funded primarily by public investment. Indeed, universities in Europe are primarily publicly-funded to ensure that they are of consistently high quality, and that they are universally accessible by all qualified students of all ages.

In this respect, we are against the excessive emphasis that the above-mentioned Communication places on the relationship between universities and the business community in terms of funding of research, as it fails to consider a number of aspects. From the experience of academic staff in Europe, this gives rise to a number of negative consequences, the following being an indication of some of the most serious of these:

- Excessive separation between teaching and research, which is particularly problematic when research is carried out in universities;
- Restrictions placed on the use of research funds in terms of fields of research, and thus also restrictions on academic freedom;
- Restrictions on publication of research results. A frequent and very grave occurrence is that businesses often refuse to make research results public as they see them as damaging to their corporate image or identity, thus denying the dissemination of genuine knowledge. This is particularly harmful in areas linked to nutritional or health issues.

In general terms, we reject 'modernisation' as a code for neo-liberal policies and the infiltration of the corporate business ethos and practices into universities. Universities have built their remarkable success and longevity upon collegiality, academic freedom and a careful and balanced link to society and the public good. These characteristics need to be sustained. A closer relationship with the business community will endanger them.

As regards funding of higher education, we must express great concern over the notion of output-based funding. This is a notion which needs to be examined with extreme caution, as it can give rise to a number of negative and harmful consequences. Due consideration has to be given to the considerable effort needed in identifying the relevant indicators on which such output-based funding is built, and in trying to avoid over-complication of the system. Experience has shown that systems based on numerous and complex indicators have failed, that large transaction costs are required in the reporting process, and that increased pressure on universities and academics to focus on output does not ensure better quality of higher education.

Universities and Society in Europe

The Communication mentions the necessity to carry out the changes proposed therein as "necessary in order to reinforce the societal roles of universities in a culturally and linguistically diverse Europe". We recognise and greatly advocate for the role of universities in European societies, yet do not agree that the changes proposed in the Communication contribute to this. In this respect, it is also unconstructive to take the top flight US institutions with their historic build up of private endowments as a comparator of European institutions. We must build on the stronger public ethos of our historic tradition.

Along the same lines, it is necessary to express severe doubts regarding the Commission's proposal on a "European Institute of Technology", which has all the aspects of a high profile project, requiring a considerable amount of effort and financial commitment, which however looks as though it will do little for the system and those in it.

Conclusion

Through the ongoing Bologna reforms, the university system in Europe is already in a process of major evolution. The reforms proposed in the above-mentioned Communication do not complement the Bologna Process. Rather, what they hope to achieve is a market-oriented and corporate vision of universities, which tampers with the success that the European university system has achieved so far, in terms of enrolments, quality and democracy.