



Meeting of OECD Education Ministers

Higher Education: Quality, Equity and Efficiency

27-28 June 2006 / Athens

[Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC)]

TUAC/EI STATEMENT

TO THE 2006 OECD MEETING OF MINISTERS OF EDUCATION

Athens, 27-28 June 2006

OECD



Education

TUAC trade union advisory committee to the
OECD organisation for economic cooperation and development
■ CSC commission syndicale consultative auprès de
OCDE l'organisation de coopération et de développement économiques

HIGHER EDUCATION: QUALITY, EQUITY AND EFFICIENCY

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Access and equity in higher education

1. Recalling the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that “[e]veryone has the right to education” and that “higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit,” trade unions call on the Education Ministers of OECD countries to take immediate action to ensure that quality higher education is more equitably accessible to all qualified citizens.
2. Promoting greater access to higher education must be a key priority of all OECD countries. Higher education nurtures talent and creativity, and is essential to the social, cultural and economic development of all nations. Higher education institutions, if fully accessible and adequately funded, can play a vital role in providing lifelong learning, and building a talented workforce active citizenry.
3. To promote more equitable participation in higher education, OECD member governments must ensure that all financial and non-financial barriers to participation are eliminated. Admission to higher education should be based solely on merit. There must be no discrimination in granting access to higher education on grounds of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, religion, or physical disabilities.
4. In many OECD countries, tuition fees have risen dramatically in recent years. Trade unions are concerned about the impact of this rise in fees on the ability of working people and their children to participate in higher education. Governments, through their tax base, have the primary responsibility to fund higher education. Public funding is the most efficient and equitable model of financing higher education. Tuition fees, where they exist, should be reduced to be as low as possible and should never constitute a barrier to access.
5. Trade unions note with concern that public investment in higher education has not been sufficient to meet growing enrolment demands. Funding shortfalls are compromising quality and accessibility. Student fees are rising, institutions are relying more on contingent academic labour, programs are being cutback, infrastructure needs are going unmet, and admission requirements are being raised to unacceptably high levels.
6. Policies intended to improve the quality of higher education must not ignore the primary and secondary school systems. The ability and quality of students entering higher education is directly dependent upon the quality of primary and secondary schools. Consequently,

governments must provide improved resources for schools and increased support for teachers at all levels of education.

Promoting quality in teaching and research

7. Trade unions believe the quality of higher education is neither a measurable product nor an outcome subject to any simple performance-based definition. Quality has to do with the conditions and activities of teaching and free enquiry.

8. The quality of higher education institutions is best assessed through rigorous and regular peer reviews. What constitutes quality teaching and research should be debated, established, and reassessed at the institutional level through effective academic senates or councils that have meaningful representation from staff and students. It is primarily the responsibility of higher education institutions to assure the quality of their programs through these collegial processes.

9. Assuring quality in higher education demands that governments and institutions improve the working conditions and terms of employment for staff. Without a talented and committed work force, quality higher education is simply not possible.

10. Promoting quality higher education and research requires that academic staff be guaranteed academic freedom. As described in the *1997 UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel*, academic freedom includes the right, without restriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion; freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof; freedom in producing and performing creative works; freedom to engage in service to the institution and the community; freedom to express freely one's opinion about the institution, its administration, or the system in which one works; freedom from institutional censorship; freedom to acquire, preserve, and provide access to documentary material in all formats; and freedom to participate in professional and representative academic bodies.

11. Academic freedom is best protected through tenure or its functional equivalent. Tenure or its functional equivalent, awarded after rigorous peer review, ensures secure continued academic employment. It is the means by which academic staff are protected against personal malice, political coercion, and arbitrary actions by their institutions.

12. Trade unions have serious concerns about the rapid growth in contingent academic labour – academic staff hired on a part-time and/or limited term basis without tenure. Funding for higher education must be increased to ensure there is enough permanently and regularly employed staff.

The global dimension of higher education

13. Higher education has always been international in scope, and students and faculty have crossed borders for centuries to study, teach and conduct research. Today, however, the emergence of a global “market” in higher education poses a potentially serious threat to the academic mission of institutions. The international commercialization and privatization of

higher education and research threatens to increase inequality, diminish quality, and undermine the integrity and independence of teaching and research.

14. The economic globalization of higher education is being facilitated by trade and investment agreements like the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). These agreements have the effect of locking-in and intensifying the pressures of commercialization and privatization. Trade unions believe strongly that services provided in the public interest, like education, must not be subject to the commercial rules of trade treaties. Transnational education should be governed first and foremost by educational principles, not commercial imperatives.

15. Trade unions call on OECD Ministers to ensure their country neither makes nor seeks any additional education or education-related commitments in the current GATS negotiations. Ministers are urged to assess the full impact of GATS coverage of education services. Troubling questions have been raised about the impact of GATS on educational access and quality, on public subsidies and funding, and on domestic authority to regulate education providers. While many of these questions remain unsettled, the risk is that once a country has agreed to cover education services, GATS rules can enforce open education markets and enable offshore institutions and companies to engage freely in education activities. Local authorities, including accreditation and quality control agencies, may have little control.

16. Trade unions are convinced that decisive action is needed now to address the “brain drain” of highly qualified personnel from developing countries to the OECD countries. We strongly support labour mobility rights, but it is also clear that the export of teachers, researchers and other highly skilled labour is crippling to poorer societies. Ministers are urged to consider ways to mitigate the damaging effects of the brain drain, such as providing financial compensation to countries losing skilled people, assisting developing countries in building their domestic higher education systems, developing student and staff exchanges to promote two-way knowledge transfer, and encouraging collaborative projects and research networks with less developed nations.

Industry-sponsored research

17. Direct links between higher education institutions and the private sector have been increasingly promoted in all OECD countries, particularly in the form of industry sponsored university research. These research partnerships may help improve productivity and raise living standards through the discovery and commercialization of new innovations, but they can also raise significant risks to the integrity and independence of academic research. Many high profile cases have exposed the fact that industrial sponsors can exert undue pressure on academic researchers and delay publication of research results that are not favourable to a company’s financial interests.

18. Conflicts can often arise between industrial sponsors and academic researchers because of differences in research cultures, motives and objectives. Effective commercial research requires non-disclosure to protect industrial secrets. Effective academic research requires sharing of knowledge. Trade unions believe that all academic research should be made publicly available. At a minimum, industrial sponsors of research should not be permitted to delay publication of research results beyond the minimum time required to obtain a patent.

19. At another level, more subtle biases may be imposed on academic research as higher education institutions rely more on private sector research funding. Certain disciplines are ignored. Basic research is funded far less than applied research. Important research into social issues like poverty, the environment, and labour rights will be of little interest to companies who are primarily interested in research that will produce commercial outcomes. This can distort academic research in a way that does not serve the public interest. In the area of medicine, for example, commercial pressures are leading to more research that produces minor modifications to existing medicines and treatments, rather than research into the prevention of diseases.

20. It is important that industry-sponsored research not drive the university research agenda. In fact, this would be counter-productive for industry itself. The value of basic research at the university level -- with its long time horizons, breadth of knowledge, and independent voice -- is that it is far more likely to make ground-breaking discoveries that will lead to unanticipated commercial applications. For these reasons, trade unions call on the OECD Ministers to provide better funding for independent, basic research in all disciplines.

Opening up higher education not only to industry but to the whole society

21. Higher education and research institutions are increasingly urged to transfer knowledge and technology to the business sector in order to strengthen productivity, competitiveness and economic growth. However, competitiveness and growth are only parts of a broader set of means to the end of socially sustainable development. Thus, higher education institutions must also contribute to equity and social cohesion within OECD countries. The challenge is to make higher education serve citizens and the whole society more broadly. In this respect they must contribute in particular to lifelong learning in order to make it a reality for all: Higher education institutions must take on a stronger responsibility for continuous development of the skills and competencies across our societies.

22. Lifelong learning is a key to achieving the objectives of full employment, enhanced competences, high qualifications and mobility, as well as a fairer distribution of income and an appropriate balance between work and family life. We believe that this calls for a new approach, with far reaching reforms of education and vocational training systems to satisfy the needs of individuals, society and the economy. For education policy this is a question of opening up higher education institutions, in particular universities, to society at large. Closer cooperation with civil society and labour market institutions is also needed. Stakeholders, in particular social partners and students must be integrated in the process of opening up of higher education institutions for a lifelong learning perspective

The participation of trade unions in higher education reform

The UNESCO/ILO Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers was adopted unanimously by member states of both organisations including all current members of the OECD in 1966. It is an important and widely recognized normative instrument. The date of its adoption, 5 October, has been recognized since 1993 as World Teachers' Day. The Recommendation includes the following key article:

Article 9

Teachers' organisations should be recognized as a force which can contribute greatly to educational advance and which therefore should be associated with the determination of educational policy.

In 1997, the UNESCO General Conference adopted the Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel. Under Guiding Principles, this Recommendation articulates the same concept:

Article 8

Organisations which represent higher-education teaching personnel should be considered and recognized as a force which can contribute greatly to education advancement and which should, therefore, be involved, together with other stake holders and interested parties, in the determination of higher education policy.

Reports on the application of both recommendations are provided regularly by a Joint Committee of Experts, CEART¹, to the governing bodies of both ILO and UNESCO. The Committee will meet next in Geneva in October 2006. The normative principles of the 1966 and 1997 Recommendations hold the key to an effective approach to education reform.

23. Education unions are open to reforms in education. They are ready to play their role to advance education. They do not seek to remain locked in the past, but they do seek to build on the past, in order to contribute to the challenges of the future.

24. To achieve this involvement in a more effective way, there should be greater clarity on all sides about how to work together. Ministers and unions should identify common understandings about the processes for involvement of unions in the determination of education policy. There should be clarity about issues that are appropriately the subject of negotiation (requiring agreement of the parties), or of consultation (requiring input before a decision is taken) and other form of partnership, including representation on commissions and expert groups.

25. Nowhere is the need for such clarity more evident than in the field of higher education, especially at a time of great change, and of searching for the way forward in all OECD countries. TUAC and EI have made it clear that they can help to build better partnerships between governments, unions, and other stakeholders. TUAC and EI can help to make the concept of social partnership in education a reality. The Athens Ministerial is the occasion for governments to provide a clear signal of openness to working in the context of the OECD to build better partnerships with education and other trade unions, in order to contribute more effectively to the advance of education in our societies.

¹ CEART, Committee of Experts on the Application of the Recommendation on Teachers.