

# Why is education fundamental?

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Education is a human right. Everybody must have the right to the education he/she wants and the kind of education that provides the possibility to develop as a person and as a citizen.

Education is social inclusion. Education is the access to every kind of information, helping everybody become reflective, critical and self-determinate persons. "Education" can be considered a lifelong process of developing knowledge, skills, abilities and social competencies.

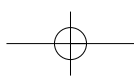
The school students of today are not only forming the society of tomorrow, but also the society of today. Wherever we want to see, society in ten years needs to be reflected in the education of today.

Nowadays neither the interest nor the curiosity of the school students is defining what is taught, but the interests of governments are. We want a school where the fact that everybody is different is acknowledged, where diversity is promoted and individual talents are encouraged. We want a school where there is space for personal development, active participation and curiosity. We want education and school of the best quality. OBESSU wants an education that gives students the tools and the will to question the current values, systems and structures and thereby develop society.

For a long time the European debate about education has merely been considered a technical and economical issue. We strongly believe that education and knowledge are the basis for building a better world. And that education for all is the fundament of a sustainable development and a way of preventing phenomena such as child labour, poverty and social exclusion. It represents a challenge and also a duty to make this debate something valuable for the whole society and not only for the few actors interested in specific educational matter.

## *The Student right charter*

Our proposal of the declaration on the Rights of the Student highlights the rights that are already given and promotes others in areas not yet covered by European legislation. The objective of the charter is to guarantee the same rights for students throughout Europe. Our common declaration also defines the rights of students in vocational education. This is a very important part of the Statute since working experiences for students as part of their studies often turn into non-educational experiences, at times also into exploitation of non-compensated workers.



## **The right to study, to high-quality education and sustainable student life**

### *Social autonomy of students and the student welfare*

The access to education, especially on secondary level, is still an unreachable objective for many young Europeans (as it is demonstrated by the increasing amount of early school leavers). In order to face this problem it is really important to defend the access to knowledge and the value of public schools, and this means to be actively engaged in the renewal of the student welfare systems in Europe. It is necessary to start a debate on how to build a common European students' welfare system.

We want to promote different forms of direct financing of studying, which are already used in many European Countries. Those should be turned into a sort of "student income", based on the recognition of the role of the school students, acknowledging the value of their work as producers of knowledge and recognising their key function in the European development and growth.

OBESSU has a vision of a new welfare system for students: "learnfare". The "learnfare" would mean establishing and developing systems to promote and ensure access to all life-long learning policies. Policies enhancing non-formal education and encouraging active citizenship are of great importance.

Besides specific interventions on European level, it is a matter of fact that school students need a new system of services as well, based on the status of being a student. First of all a system providing free admission to cultural institutions like museums and expositions, the abolition of taxes on goods such as CDs and books, reduced entrance fees for cinemas, theatres and public transportation. Of great importance is the access to Internet and the availability and affordability of communications technologies.

We demand that this system of services should be financed by European structural funds like the European social fund.

## **Towards a European framework for recognition of secondary education**

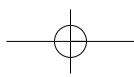
### *Common area for secondary education*

The harmonization of the different systems of secondary education is a necessary step in order to enhance the quality of education in Europe, and to contribute to a greater mobility of the school students.

We are aware of the fact that the quality of the education offered in the European countries differs quite a lot, as it does all around the world. We fight for an educational system, giving people the same opportunities, no matter where they are living.

The Education & training 2010 has set the recognition of diplomas as one of its targets, but the situation is not progressing at all.

OBESSU wants to see an area of quality education, promoting lifelong learning and active partaking in society, where different educational systems develop through cooperation at the European level.



A well harmonized European dimension of education is also the one that is networking those experiences without discrediting the national and local diversities.

#### *EQF (European Qualifications Framework)*

OBESSU recognises the need for a framework, such as the EQF, that enables comparison among the competences and qualifications achieved in different regions, countries or in different fields. This is an important tool in order to obtain mobility and transparency, not only in the education but also in all fields of learning. It should also be a tool for promoting lifelong learning, underlining that all forms of competences must be considered, those obtained in a formal setting of learning but also those obtained in a non-formal or in-formal setting. Our concerns towards this type of framework are linked to the standardisation of the educational systems.

There is a concern linked to the strict use of only the learning outcomes as descriptors in the EQF, we believe that the process is almost as important as the outcomes and this needs to be considered.

The different qualification frameworks have to be coordinated and the EQF has to be seen in relation to both the Bologna process and the Copenhagen process.

### **The Lisbon strategy and education**

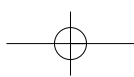
In 2000 the European Council carried out a new plan called the Lisbon Strategy, aimed at making Europe "the most competitive knowledge based society in the world". The broad objective of the Strategy is to make the European Union the most dynamic and competitive economy of the world by 2010, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and a greater social cohesion. A very broad reform package is proposed and regarding education the Council prepared a set of measures as follows:

- To increase investment in the educational sector.
- A European portfolio of competencies to be provided in the lifelong learning framework.
- A real and effective mobility for student and teachers.
- A common form for European Curriculum vitae in order to improve the recognition of the acquired competencies.

These are not revolutionary targets, but they represent a first step towards a real investment in education and training. During the last years, the implementation of the aims stated above has been weak.

OBESSU is concerned by the mostly economic approach that is the basis of the Lisbon strategy. Europe needs a more social oriented strategy, able to link different sectors in the struggle for a sustainable model of society. The goal of a knowledge based society should have a different starting point: democracy, equality and active involvement.

Education has to be the core of the Lisbon strategy. We need to empower the role of education as a way of guaranteeing every citizen equal rights and opportunities, and thereby giving new perspectives and inputs on the European political arena.



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We ask the Commission and the European Council to confirm the same engagement that was undertaken in 2000. It is fundamental to harmonize the investment in education of the member countries; raising their levels up to no less than 6 % of the GNP.

The school student movement plays an important role in this process and in order to ensure the involvement of the civil society, OBESSU has to invest in a dialogue with the other stakeholders working on the Lisbon strategy. Through cooperation the decision making process can be influenced and the Lisbon objectives made more consistent with what we see as crucial points in the field of education and the development of the knowledge based society.

### Processes threatening the public education

#### *Privatization of education*

In the economy of today knowledge is considered to be one of the most important resources, fundamental in the human development. The access to education is one of the pillars in the development of both the human-being and the society as a whole and the aim of controlling the education is becoming one of the main issues in the modern democracies.

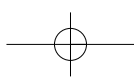
Privatization of education is the process through which partial or total responsibility for the management and administration of public educational systems is contracted out by government to private companies or foundations. However, integrating the corporate ideology in educational institutions has not been proved to improve the quality of the education nor does it support the provision of an objective and general tuition. Nevertheless, educational services have a multimillion-dollar yearly turnover and are prospectively an enormous source of profit for the private sector.

We firmly believe education should always remain a governmental responsibility and a strictly public service, reflecting the interests of the society and not only those of a private contractor. The integrity or objectiveness of education should never be compromised. Therefore, potential financial challenges within the educational system cannot be faced through reforms involving privatized management and cost cutting strategies from the private sector. However, savings in public schools should not lead to cost cutting in the classroom nor the acceptance of advertisements in the school.

School students are not to be seen as consumers of a service called education, or as means of production to be refined for the labour market. Education considered as a "service" or a "product" is denying the role of the students as "creators of knowledge" and education as the result of a collective cultural involvement. A privatized education is not promoting an equal society but a concept of competition, efficiency and profit maximization. This is limiting not only the access, but also the "circulation" of the knowledge, already endangered by the copyright policy.

#### *GATS*

Education should never be subjected to trade negotiations such as the GATS. After the failure of the negotiation rounds in Cancun, the WTO (World Trade Organization) is trying to apply



the GATS (General Agreement on Trade and Services) on education as well. The GATS treaty considers every service as tradable and it is therefore a source of profit and potential new markets. The only exception is public services, services completely run by the state, without any other private or external provider or competitor. Only a few countries have an educational system completely run by the state and therefore WTO considers education to be a tradable service.

The first consequence of the application of the GATS treaty in the field of education would be the privatization of the education itself or some services related to it. The governments' funding of the public schools could be considered as unfair competition towards the private educational providers. The WTO might request to grant private and public schools in the same way without any distinction, reducing the small funding that the states are investing in public schools and endangering the budgets and functioning of the public schools. This brings directly to a privatization of large segments of education or, in alternative, raising or imposing tuition fees. Another consequence connected to privatized schools (or enterprises) is the loss of importance in terms of democracy, where the important decisions are taken by council of administrations or foundations.

The third aspect linked to privatization that we need to stress out is the idea of focusing the learner on certain subjects leading him/her to a specific profession. This idea does not reflect our common understanding of education or the goals of life long learning. A narrow education leading the student into a profession is yet another risk within privatized education.

#### *The Service Directive*

The policies developed on the external market by the European Union in the framework of the WTO are also developed in the creation of an internal market, considering again social and economical rights as an obstacle to the establishment of a free market.

The Service directive, which has been scarcely approved in the first reading in the EU Parliament, is giving enterprises the possibility to provide services in Europe. The directive is influencing the national legislation guaranteeing rights for employees or consumers.

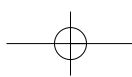
The directive has been opposed by many stakeholders and NGO's, such as OBESSU, highlighting the strong negative impact the directive would have on the principle of quality education for all.

The directive is still vague and unclear in the field of education. The parliament has decided not to clearly define what Services of General interests (SIG) are, concluding that public goods are just part of it.

OBESSU will continue monitoring the situation together with the other stakeholders and partner organizations, highlighting the controversial points and stressing the responsibility resting with the Commission and the Parliament regarding education and towards the students in Europe.

#### *Financial cutbacks*

We are very concerned about the last developments in the Financial prospective approved in February 2006. While the parliament and the EU Commission are claiming a bet-



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ter investment in the youth field, especially when it comes to student mobility, in the budget the cutbacks were affecting also the aspects related to lifelong learning, with the consequent reduced budget for the student mobility. One of the outcomes of those cutbacks is the suspension of the development of new programs like the Junior Erasmus that will remain a pilot programme until 2013. This is not the way to deal with the demands and the perspective of young people and school students. This course of action will effect the development of a real European understanding for young people. It is necessary to start a phase of reflection together with the other stakeholders, aiming at influencing the midterm financial prospective revision that will take place in 2010.

### **Added values to education (in brief points)**

Secondary schools in Europe should provide the students with the necessary tools and guidelines on what lifelong learning is and what it can offer.

The non-formal education is an important complement to the formal one, offering the students a possibility to develop new personal skills and actively partake in the civil society. Recognising non-formal education is a way of activating young people.

Intercultural education is fundamental and all teachers should be trained in order to be able to include all children, take into consideration the diversity in the classroom and benefit from it.

Student counselling has to focus on the students' individual interests, instead of stereotypical ideas and expectations based on their gender. The learning environment, teaching and school material (notably books and such resources) have to be free from gender-based stereotypes.

School must be the primary place for education about sexual orientations, towards the acceptance - which goes beyond simple tolerance - of any of them. This chiefly involves the simple incorporation of sexual orientations alternative to heterosexuality, at the same level; an open, prejudice-free dialogue about these issues between the educational team and school students; and a reprehensive attitude towards homophobia.

