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Statement on Countering Commodification in Higher Education

As ESU outlined in the Policy Paper on Public Responsibility, Finance and Governance of higher education, we believe that “Education is a public good, a public responsibility, and should be publicly steered and supported.” This position is rooted in the understanding of education as a human right, as guaranteed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1). This view entails forms of education closely linked to society and active citizenship while standing in sharp contrast to education being treated as a commodity.

In this statement, ESU outlines the importance of the concept of education as a human right by showing how a commodified education would leave our society poorer, less democratic and less versatile. Protecting education as a human right for everyone is a goal in itself, as well as a prerequisite for free research and teaching and democratic debate in a pluralistic and diverse society.

In the last decades, however, we as students of Europe, observe growing tendencies of commodification. Commodification is a process of quantifying education in order to attach an economic value upon it, creating the conditions necessary for a transactional interaction. These transactions are characterised by monetary value, such as fees paid by the student, as well as a determination of potential earning power of the qualification. Commodification, therefore, creates a culture that depersonalises the nature of education, which in turn undermines the public and social good that it provides. Commodification further undermines the public good by creating the perception that investment in education is to invest in human capital to produce economic outputs rather than as an investment in the development of the individual or to the benefit of wider society. This focus on human capital development shows a culture of competition across education, between institutions, between funders, as well as between individuals. Therefore the innate value of education as the freedom to explore, to grow as a person and as an enabling experience to be an active citizen is diminished and neglected. Moreover, the commodification of education encourages momentary decision with a short timeframe instead of long-lasting decisions. This creates a risk of reducing the quality of education by satisfying counterproductive and short-sighted objectives such as solely focusing on student throughput. Meaning getting as many students as possible through their studies regardless of obtained knowledge.

We as students of Europe observe processes of commodification happening in many countries. These processes are exemplified in the introduction of more tuition fees and increase of current tuition fees, by changes in financing schemes of national states moving from public responsibility towards market-based and competition-based models of financing HE, by the privatization of faculties, by curricula being influenced by market demands and market actors and by interfering into research along market and corporate needs. ESU's members all over Europe report continuous cases of commodification tendencies taking place within the systems of Higher education in their countries. ESU cannot consider this inclination in any other way than as a movement against the fundamental values attributed to higher education and as hindering the right of students to free education. As opposed to commodified education, we strive for education that makes us responsible, critical and active citizens with an eye on solidarity.

The commodification of higher education as a common tendency is the result of a cut of public funding for educational programmes. With the number of students increasing and public funding decreasing, the HEIs are not able to cover all expenses connected with the educational process and HEIs staff. Thus, HEIs are forced to look for other types of funding, with the risk of threatening the independence of research and teaching. Alternative sources of financing can come with a price that leads to the commodification of education in two ways.

First, there are tuition fees which lead to a perception of education as something that is bought and sold for individual use. This perception is a violation of the right to free education as only some have the economic means to access this. Besides the exclusion, it also harms the right to a free choice of study topics as certain fields are discouraged depending on their alleged use in the market. The same happens in a second way when HEIs strive for funding directly by market actors. Free research runs the risk of being compromised when confronted with demands and (not necessarily explicit) expectations of the private financiers of higher education to have a market purpose and directed towards goals of personal interest or interest only of parts of society. While we strive for the opposite: research and teaching in the interest of the whole society and not only for and by parts of it.

Commodification tendencies are widely observed within internationalisation of education. ESU is concerned by the fact that international students are seen as consumers by HEIs and by governments. Not only in 95% of respondent cases international students have to pay tuition fees, but they also pay much more in comparison to the national students (2). Furthermore, the necessary tools and support that international students need in order to participate at the same level as local students are often missing. Examples of these are course availability, low linguistic quality of courses taught in foreign languages, translations of official documents or language courses and course materials. This results in international students, not only often paying significantly higher tuition fees, but also often receiving a lower standard of education, which is not what we stand for and strongly oppose it. There are even cases reported of HEIs referring to international students as

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“consumers.” ESU additionally would like to stress that the commodification of HE is not the result of internationalisation. In reality, higher education becomes more commodified by choice of governments to create an allegedly self-regulatory education market, encouraging to choose international students as a part of HE that can increase profit.

As ESU policy states, we strongly welcome international cooperation in higher education, but we need a comprehensive, transparent and inclusive debate with all stakeholders in HE on all levels. Internationalisation and commodification are separate issues, thus it is essential to have an open discussion based on respect for community interests, global solidarity, human rights, and non-discrimination.

As one more result of commodification, we see the influence of industry on educational programmes. The presence of industry in the everyday life of students around Europe can be observed in the presence of representatives of different companies at HEIs boards – sometimes at the cost of student representation. At the same time, ESU understands the importance of cooperation between industry and education institutions to provide relevant and applicable knowledge, this partnership is especially relevant for HEIs of applied science. ESU encourages HEI-industry cooperation that widens opportunities for students, such as quality internships, and provides them with insights and experience. Nevertheless, these partnerships should always be voluntary, transparent and acting in students' greatest interests rather than exclusively for the profit of businesses. The purpose of education is not to serve economic interests, but to enable students to be active members of society and continuously gain skills and competencies through life-long learning. Therefore, the content of research and teaching at HEIs must not be controlled by the industry. Therefore, we demand that when collaboration agreements between HEIs and industries are put in place, the industry can never be assigned a decision-making position in the HEI. The content of the contracts made between HEIs and industry partners must be publicly accessible in order to guarantee transparency. The full text of the contract should be accessible and put under the scrutiny of the relevant stakeholders, including student representatives. This is important to prevent the industry from being able to make decisions on the content of research and teaching in HEIs. However, a consultative role can be given to them.

Commodification is also encouraged by the tendency to reduce the purpose of education to the criteria of employability. Employability is only one of the purposes of higher education, that alone can neither suffice to define quality education. Education has many purposes and these must be taken into account. Examples of these are the development of critical citizens, development of knowledge and public value, among many others.

The effects of a commodified and under-funded higher education system do not end once a student graduates from their studies. While in most European countries some senior positions in academia remain relatively untouched, the bulk of researchers and teachers are confronted with precarious working circumstances, with fixed-term-contract-rates ranging from 20% to 90% of employed academic staff (2). The combination of fixed-term-employment and the necessity to acquire private funding for continuing to stay in academia does not only lead to hard and unfair conditions for academic staff but must also be seen as a driver of commodification. We believe that instead of

being dominated by competition over rare funding opportunities in a commodified education system, research and teaching depend must be based on cooperation.

Conclusion

ESU firmly maintains the position that free higher education must be seen as an indispensable pillar for shaping the future. As such, Europe should set free higher education as a high-priority goal. In order to achieve that, adequate support through publicly funded higher education systems must be provided. At the same time, adequate student support through grant systems is also more than necessary and must be preferred over re-payable support systems.

ESU calls for governments and HEIs to discontinue discriminatory practices regarding study fees, such as enforcing mandatory fees for international students. These practices are counterproductive with regard to internationalisation. Higher education must be accessible for all without the labour market being the leading player in higher education policies. The sole purpose of higher education must never be to balance or profit the labour market. Education in itself is a fundamental value.

Governments should support HEIs in cases where industry interferes excessively in the autonomy of researchers, teachers, students and HEIs. Governments have to make sure the independence of decision-making is guaranteed. We acknowledge the importance of HEI-industry-cooperation, but we see it as a voluntary process, with businesses having a consultative role in drawing educational programmes.

ESU will continue to fight against commodification. We will defend education as a human right against tuition fees, we will defend a differentiated view on education against reductionism to employability for the market, we will strive to strengthen the freedom of research and teaching against necessities to compromise with demands not coming from rigour, reason and academic interest itself. Therefore ESU calls for everyone to enact public responsibility for free education.

1) Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>

2) Commodification survey conducted by ESU among the NUSes around Europe