



OBESSU Organising Bureau of
European School Student Unions

**The Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions'
(OBESSU)
Response to the Public consultation on the future EU 2020
strategy**

About OBESSU

The Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions is a platform for cooperation between the national school student unions active in general secondary and secondary vocational education in Europe. It was founded in April 1975 in Dublin, Ireland, and brings together member and observer organisations from more than 20 European countries. All member-organisations are independent, national, representative and democratic school student organisations. OBESSU is a member of the European Youth Forum and represent students in both general and vocational secondary education.

As OBESSU we stand together to represent the views of the school students in Europe towards the different educational institutions and platforms, to uphold and improve the quality and accessibility of education and educational democracy in Europe, to improve the conditions in the secondary schools in Europe, to promote greater solidarity, cooperation and understanding among the school students and to put an end of the discrimination and injustice where they exist within the educational systems in European countries. The work of OBESSU is based on the statutory documents, the work plan and the political platform.

OBESSU has the following objectives:

- To represent the school students as stakeholders of their educational systems, and in issues in their lives;*
- To provide assistance and support to the national school student unions and co-operate for the development of school student structures;*
- To encourage and enable exchange of experience and good practices among the national school students unions;*
- To promote equal access to education and to strive for the end of all discrimination and injustice within the educational and upbringing systems;*
- To contribute to the development of democratic education systems in Europe, that promotes active citizenship in all forms;*
- To promote solidarity and understanding between young people;*
- To provide assistance and support to the national school student unions and co-operate for the development of school student structures.*

OBESSU's response to the Public Consultation

Public funding for a free Education for all

When asked to set priorities “*beyond the current crisis and to mobilise new sources of growth, ensuring social and territorial cohesion*” one's mind instantly springs to education. OBESSU has for several years called for a stronger public investment in education, and welcomes the discourse laid in the paper concerning investment in education. However, the budgetary policy in European Union Member States in the recent years shows a clear tendency to cut the budgets of the educational sector. To meet the EC's ambitions as regards Education in the framework of the Lisbon Strategy, more than mere promises will be needed. OBESSU believes that all education must be publicly funded and free of any costs for the student. Therefore, OBESSU asks the European Commission to be bolder in its recommendations regarding Education Policy funding by the MS governments. A knowledge-based society demands an increased funding of Education by the public sector.

As OBESSU, we strongly believe that free education is not only a right for all, but also a not-for-sale public service. Education and knowledge must never be considered trading goods and no one can ever put a price tag on it. Over the last years there have been clear tendencies of making space for the private sector to intrude in educational arrangements. One can ask if we are not heading towards a situation where educational arrangements are being controlled fully by forces of the market and in which the interests of companies will be put before those of society when designing curricula and educational policies. Keeping in mind that financial support always walks hand-in-hand with influence, OBESSU is, per principle, against encouraging stronger collaboration with the private sector and corporations in the field of Education. To guarantee the equity and independence of Education, it must remain publicly funded and free of the external influences of the private sector.

States, and by extension the European Union, must guarantee free education for all. We see two aspects of free education: the economical and social ones. The economical one means that schooling should be accessible for all, without any kind of direct or indirect tuition fees, regardless the economic status. The school should provide textbooks, food, all necessary equipment, transports, school trips and all the necessary means to ensure a safe and successful quality education. The social understanding of “free” concerns the fact that school should be accessible for all no matter socioeconomic background, age, race, special needs, gender, and sexual orientation. All schools on the same level have to offer the same qualifications even though the curricula and structures may be different according to cultural, regional or other societal worth differences.

The commission underlines the necessity of an inclusive educational system in which the societal barriers are broken and where there is a focus on preventing early school leavers. OBESSU is happy to see that the Commission now recognizes the importance of investing in education for all. Nevertheless, the indirect discrimination of marginalized groups such as migrants or people of lower social and economical backgrounds still need to be tackled appropriately. In the current systems, these groups show a statistical tendency to achieve less¹ in Formal Education and their participation in Non-Formal Education and Mobility Programmes is also significantly lower. The EU's ideals of equal opportunities for all demands these groups be better supported in order to achieve a real equality amongst citizens.

¹ GLAVIND, Niels, *Skolekarakterer og social baggrund* Study in Danish schools; Labor Movements economical council Arbejderbevægelsens Erhvervsråd - <http://www.ae.dk/files/arkiv/velfaerd/2004/karakter-n-g.pdf>

The emphasis on LLL and open universities are welcomed, yet these must be followed up by the necessary support. It is an investment for society as a whole to have its members participating in LLL. Therefore economical and social measures of support must be made available to all.

For a high quality Vocational Education and Training

Stemming from the Copenhagen process, Vocational Education and Training (VET) and the harmonization between VET systems within the European Union has made remarkable progress during a short period of time. The recognition of VET as a tool not only for working towards the aims of the Lisbon strategy, but also for directing the Union out of the crisis, has thus been heavily emphasized. OBESSU welcomes the initiatives in quality assurance, mobility and transfer of credits that have been taken recently.

Nevertheless, VET is not only a tool through which the effects of the crisis can be monitored, but secondary vocational education and training is also suffering the wave of the crisis. The social status of VET has generally fallen in the shadow of academic secondary education, this often resulting in governments being reluctant to invest in VET. Although European-level policies do emphasize the importance of investing in national VET systems, VET is still suffering a lack of resources. While OBESSU agrees on the fact that resources has to be pumped into VET OBESSU sees a danger in strengthening the profile of the influence of the private sector in shaping VET, especially VET systems becoming financially dependent on actors within the private sector. OBESSU stands firmly on the claim that education must be publicly financed, while the private sector should be consulted as external expertise, making sure the teaching contents match the current and future demands of the labour market.

VET students all over Europe are dealing with severe troubles finding appropriate apprenticeships matching their educational path. In too a many case, the apprentice is not well informed about her/his rights at the workplace and in the worst situations, the apprentice is used as cheap labour by the employer. The most worrying consequences are the rising unemployment-rates, hazarding both the social and economical situation of the students.

There is still a deeply rooted tendency of some fields being completely dominated by only one sex. VET students are often even experiencing low-level counseling based on traditional patterns of the labour market instead of the individual skills and interest of the student. In some cases, even though counseling service would be available for the students, the access to these is limited. Thus, VET students run the risk of ending up in fields of labour which do not correspond to their interests and personal skills. Students are, moreover, often learning in old facilities, using out-dated equipment. In some cases, there is a lack of teacher's and trainers' capacity, both at professional and pedagogical level.

Therefore, OBESSU demands that national governments design mechanisms by which every VET student is secured an apprenticeship in line with the student's choice of professional path. It can not be enough emphasized that an apprenticeship is a place for learning, not a way for employers to get cheap labor with fewer rights. Every apprentice must be well informed about her/his rights at the workplace and where to turn in case these rights are violated. It must also be made sure that the students have easy access to high-level counseling before and during VET studies. In their education, VET teachers and trainers must be not only professionally but also pedagogically trained in order to meet the needs of different learners. Added to this, VET trainers and teachers should continuously take part in re-training in order to keep up with the changes of the labour market. So must also all

facilities and equipment be kept up-to-date. Finally, OBESSU wishes to emphasize that VET should never primarily be a tool in recovering from the crisis. Vocational Education and Training, as general secondary education, must foremost be a place for self-fulfillment and development of professional skills in line, catering for the needs of each individual learner according to her-his individual interests and abilities.

Students as global actors facing climate change

The Lisbon treaty has set it as a goal to combat climate change. OBESSU believes that the educational system can play an active role in this. Climate change already created various problems, but many solutions are already available: it is just a matter of developing and implementing them, which will take firm political will. Starting from those, green technology must be developed, free access to all knowledge must be guaranteed, and research must be based on cooperation, not competition in order to meet the challenges. So far the effects of mankind on the environment have been ignored and even if we change our ways living, acting and producing NOW, the current problems still remain. School democracy fosters democratic actors, and democratic actors and democracy are necessary to solve global challenges such as climate change. Climate change threatens the majority of people's living and therefore this majority must take part in the decision-making processes. This is a global problem that demands a global solution found and the people feeling and behaving as global actors, in particular youth, must be considered actively in the search for these solutions. At a time when the world faces unprecedented social, economical and climate crises, we believe that the school community and in particular the school students must play a central role in bringing new ideas and solutions to face the challenges and grasp the opportunities of globalization.

The way forward

The consultation is in many ways the most forward-minded proposal we have seen from the Commission as of late, yet it is still subordinated to the objective of creating a strong free market where everything, including education can be bought and sold. Schools are not simply factories which produce future tax-payers and the sole purpose of education is not to create people who can meet the job demands of the future. The purpose of education is to create active citizens, not only of the future but also of today. The purpose of education is to ensure all citizens a chance to reach their full potential in life, and throughout life. Only through a sustainable and spacious public educational sector can the EU reach its goals of becoming a strong democratic example of international cooperation.

Standing behind the afore exposed demands, OBESSU would like to put emphasis on the inclusion of civil society organisations and NGOs such as OBESSU and so many others in the future processes. The civil society sector often represent a minority voice which is often not included in the mainstream debate, while having proposals and insights that public authorities, social partners and corporations lack. Consultations, stakeholders' forums and other events which bring together governmental and NGO representatives are vital to the dynamic development of the European society. This is particularly true in the field of Education and Training which, in an ever-evolving world needs to be constantly updated to fit the needs of all and thus needs to address its challenges innovatively. The voice of the Student, being the central actor of his/her Education, must be heard in these processes. If Europe is to continue its development towards the strongest knowledge-based society we can simply not afford to lose anyone. It is not a utopia to have an educational system that can meet the needs of the individual, yet bring us together as democratic citizens. It is a necessity.