

1 ESIB statement on Efficiency & Equity in HE Institutions

2 reaction to the Communication from the Commission:
3 “Efficiency and Equity in European Education & Training Systems¹”

Introduction

4 ESIB, the National Unions of Students in Europe, representing 10 million students
5 through its 45 member National Unions from 34 European countries expresses its grave
6 concerns on the view of equity in higher education as recently proposed by the European
7 Commission. Particularly, we find that the communication proposes a particular view of
8 education economics that is by no means universally agreed upon, basing itself on a limited
9 array of sources, and presents it as fact. Thus, ESIB contests the view that public funding of
10 Higher Education is regressive, particularly since most progressive tax systems are indeed
11 built on the very notion that some sections of society (including university graduates), will
12 pay more into the public purse so as to finance social benefits such as educations for the
13 underprivileged.

14 The commission argues that equitable access is not achieved by free education, and
15 that therefore tuition fees will contribute towards the achievement of this aim, while itself
16 acknowledging that socio-economic background is the main contributor towards inequity.
17 While the latter argument is irrefutable, it does not follow that the cost of education will
18 have no effect on the decision to pursue Higher Education or otherwise, since socio-
19 economic background will first and foremost effect what a prospective student is able or
20 willing to pay.

Socio-economic
factors in HE

21 ESIB also notes that the Commission proposes offsetting the negative effects of
22 tuition fees through the use of targeted financial support (such as loan schemes), while itself
23 admitting that the data on such support from European countries that have tried it is, “too
24 recent to have been fully studied”. Any comparison with the U.S. or Australia is in this
25 context inapplicable since the context of the European Higher Education system differs
26 sufficiently to make it impossible to draw direct parallels.

Inapplicability of 3rd
country parallels

27 ESIB further supports the twin goals of equity and efficiency. However, we stress
28 that ensuring equitable access means giving attention to the very issues which the European
29 Commission chose to exclude from its definition: gender, ethnic minority status, disability,
30 regional disparities and so on. Furthermore, while we strongly welcome the attention paid
31 to the holistic concept of lifelong learning - recognising that attaining equity in higher
32 education demands action at all levels of education - the communication cites many
33 problems, but fails to propose solutions beyond the kneejerk response of proposing tuition
34 fees, which are not a concrete solution to either the issues of the higher education funding
35 gap nor the issue of equity of access.

Towards a better
definition of equity

¹ COM(2006) 481 – Brussels, 08.09.2006. Available from the web at:
http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/back_gen_en.html

<p>36 The goal of efficiency, as described in the paper, ‘<i>Delivering on the modernization</i></p> <p>37 <i>agenda for universities</i>²’ is also achievable, and as rightly pointed out by the Commission,</p> <p>38 will require 2% of GDP invested in Higher Education Institutions. However, in its latest</p> <p>39 Communication, the Commission suggests that such investment should be made by</p> <p>40 students, who can afford it the least. This argument is untenable; the communication</p> <p>41 acknowledges that the loss to the "knowledge economy" in respect of students who do not</p> <p>42 participate in higher education is over a quarter of a million Euro per student³.</p>	<p>Alternatives views of efficiency</p>
<p>43 Furthermore, claiming that “evidence suggests that the market effects of tuition</p> <p>44 fees may improve the quality of teaching and management in universities, and reinforce</p> <p>45 student motivation”, is a weak suggestion indeed in improving the equity & efficiency of</p> <p>46 universities. ESIB holds that the ideal mechanism for improving the quality of teaching is</p> <p>47 proper state funding, training and quality assurance mechanisms; that efficiency in</p> <p>48 management is achieved through the involvement of social partners in the governance of</p> <p>49 HE; and that student are motivated by consultation and support systems to aid them in</p> <p>50 completing their studies. The priority should now be to provide a student-centred learning</p> <p>51 experience for all students, that empowers individuals and strengthens social solidarity in</p> <p>52 Europe.</p>	<p>Real policy alternatives are needed</p>
<p>53 While promoting a strong pro-tuition fee stance, the absence of any concrete</p> <p>54 propositions or schemes to <i>enhance</i> equity leaves the Communication blatantly incomplete,</p> <p>55 and dangerously suggestive. Considering the fundamental importance of equity and</p> <p>56 efficiency to member states and the European society at large, ESIB calls for member states</p> <p>57 attending the Council Meeting at the end of September to refer this Communication back to</p> <p>58 the Commission for redrafting, so as to truly reflect the needs and concerns of European</p> <p>59 students and citizens.</p>	<p>Member States should reject this view of equity & efficiency</p>
<p>60 ESIB supports the Lisbon’s strategy goals of more growth and better jobs, hence it</p> <p>61 stresses that for these aims to be reached <i>students</i> and not just institutions must be made</p> <p>62 central to the strategy. In a scenario where the knowledge economy is struggling due to a</p> <p>63 lack of trained graduates, we question the wisdom of creating extra barriers to access even</p> <p>64 if partially mitigated by targeted support schemes, and reducing student choice to a</p> <p>65 calculation of least cost. In this spirit, it is also essential that students be consulted on issues</p> <p>66 regarding higher education. ESIB thus renews its call to be included within the consultation</p> <p>67 structures on the Lisbon Agenda, and suggests that relevant stakeholders, including ESIB be</p> <p>68 consulted on the issue of equity and access.</p>	<p>Students are essential to Lisbon</p>

² *Delivering on the modernization agenda for universities: education, research and innovation.*
COM(2006) 208 – Brussels, 10.05.2006. Available on the web at:
http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/comuniv2006_en.pdf

³ COM(2006) 481 – Art. 5