

Dear Commissioner, Dear State Secretary,

In Hungary, the new laws on public and higher education, as well as government actions affecting the sector have elicited concern from broad circles of society. A unique collaboration has been formed between students, parents and teachers. Among the protesters against the government's education policy is the Network for the Freedom of Curriculum (Hálózat a Tanszabadságért, HAT) with its membership of secondary school teachers, the Network of Academics (Oktatói Hálózat, OHA) with the participation of almost 230 university and college instructors, and the Network of Students (Hallgatói Hálózat, HaHa) with its constituency of hundreds of university and college students.

The initiators of these networks ask you to consider the following problems at your meeting of 29 February 2012:

We believe that the transformation of the Hungarian public education and higher education systems is being made hastily, without the necessary preparations based on expert knowledge and without negotiations with the affected parties. The laws were prepared with no respect for the elementary rules of democratic legislative practice: there were no expert opinions, feasibility studies or relevant discussions with professional and civic groups.

The legal frameworks of the transformation are similarly inadequate. The laws on education are incomplete and incoherent; in some respects they even cover procedural details, while a number of fundamental questions are relegated to the purview of government decrees.

The government's education policy eliminates institutional diversity from the sphere of public education, transfers in state (or in some cases church) ownership the schools founded and maintained by local governments and other organisations, puts an end to university autonomy, and pushes in a precarious situation prestigious, internationally recognised institutions of higher education.

It imposes centrally prescribed contents of education and instruction on schools, and abolishes creative teaching methods capable of shaping educational content according to the individual, collective and local needs of students.

The new law on public education has enacted a regime that does not guarantee the cutback of segregation, but encourages biased treatment of students instead. The new laws radically undermine the possibilities of equal opportunity both for public and higher education. The reduction of the end of compulsory schooling to 16 years is a serious step backwards as it will increase the dropout rate and prevent the implementation of the common goals of the Europe 2020 strategy. Numerous expert studies show that the highest unemployment rate is among dropouts in Hungary.

The extremely difficult living conditions, low educational qualifications and social segregation of the Roma population constitute an escalating problem in Hungary. The new law on public education neither facilitates the integration of the Roma, nor improves their labour market situation. It limits the possibility of the formation of Roma intellectuals as even it diminishes their chances of getting into higher education.

The law on higher education and related decrees eliminate the autonomy of the universities and together with the unpredictable financing, the arbitrary and radical reduction in university enrolment quotas, and the dismantling of certain disciplines, an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear will prevail in the universities. It will be impossible to plan the functioning of the institutions as well as the future of both employees within higher education and young people wishing to pursue university studies. The belated decision on the university enrolment quotas, the radical reduction in state-financed places, and the drastic increase in tuition fees only a few weeks before the application deadline hijacked tens of thousands of students' plans to continue their studies in higher education. The government decree on student contracts contradicts the fundamental principle of the Lisbon Treaty on the free movement of labour and also raises human rights issues. The proposed arrangement, called Student Loan 2, will put young people wishing to continue their studies as well as their families into an untenable financial situation.

We strongly disagree with the radical, ill thought-out and ad hoc decrease in university enrolment quotas that does not take into account the current parameters of the labour market – in which the employment opportunities of graduates among jobseekers are by far the best – or the consensus of professionals concerning development directions in education.

Although we appreciate that Hungary finds itself in a difficult budgetary situation, we believe that further reductions in education spending – which, at 1% of GDP, is already low relative to the EU average - is not the right direction. The education laws and related government decrees do not contribute to the development of a knowledge based society, nor those development goals that the Hungarian government committed itself to in international agreements and received funding from the EU and other sources in order to meet those goals.

Serious concerns are raised that the planned educational regulations bring into question the realization of the goals and indicators incorporated in existing international and EU agreements as well as the sustainability of results already achieved.

- ***Europe 2020 Strategy***

Meeting the politically most relevant requirements of the agreement becomes questionable. The government has undertaken to decrease the percentage of early school dropouts to below 10 % at primary and secondary levels, while increasing the proportion of those graduating with degree qualifications from higher education to 30%. The aforementioned steps will have the opposite effect.

- ***Hungarian National Social Inclusion Strategy (2011-2020)***

As a consequence, an otherwise welcome initiative contained within the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies (COM 2011/173) will run into serious difficulties. One of the key undertakings in the NRIS is to assist 20 thousand young Roma obtain a marketable profession by 2015. The proportion of Roma pupils who drop out of the education system early has been a steady 25 % for a long time.

- ***The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU***

Because of this, the expectations of the indicated key document (COM/2010/ article 133-21.), which aim to promote the social and economic integration of European Roma could fail.

- ***2000/43/EEC Equal Treatment Directive***

The most recent modification of the Hungarian legislation on equal treatment and promotion of equal opportunities (CXXV/2003) has introduced serious limitations with regards to the execution of anti-discrimination legislation. Concerning the aim to decrease the incidence of segregation in education, this is emphatically not a progressive development.

- ***Previous support agreements between the EU and Hungary***

Failure to meet earlier commitments seriously jeopardizes future cooperation between partners. It is a warning sign that the National Development Agency has taken out 47 billion Forints from the Social Renewal Operational Programmes. This puts an end to programmes aiming at spreading the pedagogical culture of competence development.

- ***The Treaty of Lisbon (39/2)***

The student contract, introduced as a condition of entrance into the higher education system on a state fund, strongly limits students' opportunities on the labour market, since it forces them to work in Hungary under circumstances which do not ensure adequate job opportunities. Furthermore, the student contract contradicts EU fundamental rights, especially the basic principle of the freedom of movement of labour force, accepted under the Treaty of Lisbon, as it limits the freedom of movement of students after receiving their degree.

Our letter has been born out of a shared concern about Hungarian education policy. We offer the knowledge, the commitment and the deep sense of responsibility of our networks, experts, members working at all levels of education for creating the best possible legislation based on cooperation in this important area of Hungarian development.

Representatives of the Network of Students
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