**++PRESS RELEASE++**

**AEGEE-Europe’s position on the communication of the European Commission “Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes”**

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by AEGEE-Europe / European Students’ Forum

#### **AEGEE welcomes the initiative of the European Commission inviting the Member States, the European Parliament, the European Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions, to reform the structure of the Educational Systems in Europe.**

#### We agree that the current education model is outdated and does not match a society that has changed at high speed through the last decades. However, we regret that the Commission does not address education in all its dimensions, but chooses to focus only on its impact on the employment rate of young people. We acknowledge the importance of education in solving the issue of unemployment, but we consider it necessary to truly “rethink education”. European decision makers have to avoid the temptation of satisfying only the needs of the labor market, and realise the bigger role of education in the development of a Europe of citizens. Education is to be seen as a lifelong process which enables people to develop not only professional skills, but also to develop a civic approach to society. This is fundamental to continue the holistic model which is at the basis of the education model in Europe, and which has brought Europe to the position it enjoys nowadays in fields such as democratic rights, human rights, and social well-being.

#### Europe should be ambitious and brave in the reforms we undertake. A superficial reform would be a temporary fix with limited impact. We should question not only what is learned, but also how the learning process is structured. If we want to provide European with the skills they need (creativity, entrepreneurial spirit, critical thinking, initiative...) we need to admit that these will hardly be acquired by sitting in front of the professor with a top-down discourse. In this context, AEGEE appreciates the focus on the development of “transversal skills” in communication, as those skills can make the difference for young people on the labor market and in their future role as citizens. However, we regret that the Communication focuses on entrepreneurial and language skills, leaving aside a wide range of other transversal skills: team work and soft skills, intercultural education, citizenship. AEGEE strives for a better integration of Non Formal Education and formal education, which should be combined with quality internships and a wide range of mobility offers. A strategy for recognition of the skills and knowledge acquired through voluntary work, participation in civil society initiatives, mobility and internships is needed. In general, we regret that the communication of the commission does not go into details on how to implement the changes they pursue.

#### We think that the process of rethinking education needs to be conducted involving all the relevant stakeholders, considering the needs of each one of them. Given the speed of the changes of our society, focusing on short term educational needs will create a gap between skills required at a certain moment and skills learned ten years before, leading to an increased rate of unemployment in the long term. If Europe wants to avoid this, our learners have to be prepared for the scenario of an ever-changing environment, and we need to provide them with the skills needed for facing new challenges, being flexible to adapt to new situations during their whole life, and reacting to these changes with a positive attitude. For providing this flexibility, curricula have to be reviewed periodically with the involvement of representatives of the labor market, of teachers and professors, and of the collectives that represent the needs of students such as Student Unions and other youth organizations. It should not be forgotten that students are the main stakeholder in Education.

#### The need for a smooth transition between education and employment has been tackled by the European Commission in the last year. The recently proposed Youth Guarantee Scheme, if properly implemented at the level of the Member States, can play a key role in combating youth unemployment. Nevertheless, special attention has to be given to the risks that the model potentially poses, like the proliferation of unpaid internships and precarious jobs. Vigilance systems to avoid abusing the scheme have to be established. However, the main risk for the Youth Guarantee Scheme is the lack of will of government of the member states to finance such an ambitious project. This however evidences the lack of a long-term vision, as the costs non-action will be several times higher in the future than investing in the scheme now.

#### AEGEE encourages the investment in education in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) as one of the clear ways to find a way out of this economic crisis. Cuts in national funding for education, science, and research, represent an invitation to a new crisis in the upcoming years. Member States cutting on these lines in their national budgets should pay attention to all messages warning them about the risk of being left behind in a Europe led by knowledge and innovation.

#### Vocational Education and Training (VET) needs strong support and a firm campaign to increase its attractiveness. This has to include more than a simple makeover, with a strong investment to provide the students following this education pathway with a quality educational system that covers all their needs, in order not to remain perceived as a second class educational option. VET has a great potential to provide learners with the needed skills for getting quality jobs and should be an equal alternative to university studies, including opportunities for mobility and flexibility to adapt the curricula.

#### AEGEE considers the cooperation between private and public institutions a tool to match the young graduates of university programmes with the needs of the labor market. However, we see a high risk in these partnerships of giving an unbalanced decision power on curricula to companies and limiting or nullifying the influence of other stakeholders on mapping the educational needs of the students. We firmly believe that education is a public service that has to aim at developing individuals and improving society. We fear that these criteria will not be considered anymore with demands that education be efficient and a curricula increasingly dictated by market impositions, leading to wrong decisions when it comes to investment in education. Collaboration and mutual understanding between education institutions and the labor market are positive and should be encouraged, but always preserving the independence of the education system.

#### As a conclusion, AEGEE-Europe’s opinion on the EC Communication “Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes” is generally positive. We have pointed out specific aspects which can potentially cause the strategy to fail in achieving its objectives, from the lack of a holistic approach to education, to the absence of concrete steps on how to implement this strategy and the limited attention paid to skills acquired through Non Formal Education. Taking into account the opinion of the collectives that represent the students (both Student Unions and student-based youth organisations like AEGEE-Europe) is the key to achieve a balance between the needs of society and the needs of the labor market, resulting in a reduction of unemployment that is long-lasting and economically and socially sustainable. This is the only way we can guarantee a generation of young Europeans that will be able to contribute to maintaining Europe in a leading position not only in the economic field, but also in other aspects as relevant to the European identity as democracy, human rights, tolerance and social inclusion.

#### **About AEGEE-Europe**

AEGEE was born 27 years ago with the vision of creating a unified Europe, based on democracy and respect for human rights, bringing together students with different cultural backgrounds. Today, AEGEE is Europe’s largest interdisciplinary youth organisation: 40 countries, 200 cities, 13 000 friends. This network provides the ideal platform for young volunteers to work together on cross-border activities such as international conferences, seminars, exchanges, training courses and case study trips. In line with the challenges young people are currently facing in Europe, AEGEE’s work for the period of 2011-2014 is focused on three main areas: Youth Participation, Bridging Europe and Inclusion of Minorities.

#### **Contact**

If you would like more information about AEGEE, or Erasmus: You cannot vote!, please contact:

Pavel Zborník

European Institutions and Communications Director of AEGEE-Europe

Phone: +32 2 246 0320

Mobile: +32 487 410 060

E-mail: pavel.zbornik@aegee.org

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