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ESIB Statement on Commodification of Education

Noting the increasing frequency with which higher educational is being referred to as a commodity tradable in a free market framework.

Aware also of certain positions taken in this respect in international fora such as the WTO (World Trade Organisation).

Concerned that this approach to higher education is continuously undermining the belief that higher education must be fully accessible.

In view of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the UN Covenant on Social, Cultural and Economic Rights (1966) and the European Social Covenant, which confirm that the right to education is a basic and fundamental human right.

Also in the light of the various policy positions endorsed by ESIB on various issues such as Student Welfare, Student Rights, Human Rights, Accessibility of Education and Student Participation in decision making.

ESIB is further concerned that the discussions regarding the formation of a framework for trade in education based on free trade principles increases pressure towards privatisation of publicly funded or subsidised Higher Education Institutions and raises questions regarding, amongst other, the rigour of quality assurance and licensing.

ESIB declares that:

The notion that education is a commodity tradable with the same rules as any commercial product is unacceptable.

Whilst understanding that there are benefits derived from the internationalisation of education, ESIB is wary of negative consequences that could result from such an approach. Insisting on treating higher education as a mere commodity – an approach which prevails in various international agreements such as the GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services) – could risk negating the wanted benefits of transnational education.

It is imperative to ensure that accessibility to higher education is not hindered or dictated by market forces. Degrees are not commercial products. Higher education institutions are not supermarkets and whilst education may be traded, this should not be allowed to prejudice accessibility to education and the basic human right to education.

In this light ESIB resolves to:

Promote on an international level increased consciousness as to the current and possible future negative implications of commodification.

Analyse in further detail the implications and consequences of commodification of education as well as the manner in which ESIB may positively contribute towards ensuring that education remains a public good.

Encourage student unions and decision makers in higher education to involve themselves in the discussion relating to the commodification of education.