

Policy Paper Education Funding and Student Welfare

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The Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU) is the platform for cooperation between the national school student unions, syndicates and other such bodies active in general secondary and secondary vocational education in Europe. This policy paper is the outcome of the findings of the Working Group on Education Funding and Reforms, as well as of a focus group organised for the purpose of mapping and conceptualising the demands of our member, candidate and affiliate organisations, who played the principal role in the creation of this document; both through the members they endowed with the capacity to speak on issues concerning their membership – whether it be via the working group of the focus group –, or through the statements and policy documents on this topic that they themselves released.

Introduction

The principal duty of OBESSU is to advocate for free and inclusive education accessible to all and co-created by students. The findings of our research, however, show that formal, institutional, education is oftentimes riddled with hidden costs that contribute to the reality that students from lower-income families or of other disadvantaged conditions in regard to their socio-economic status, cannot access their rights fully. It must be remarked that the problems in society reflect in school, which is not a closed system. These problems lead to the inability to participate in the processes requiring hidden costs because one might lack the capacity and the resources for opportunity costs to do so. The responsibility lies both with those with this capacity as well as those without it. People in a position of privilege ought to stand in solidarity with oppressed groups. Our member organisations identified the following areas, where hidden costs can severely limit the experience of being a student, as well as endanger the very capacity of satisfying basic human needs:

- 1) Transportation;
- 2) Accommodation;
- 3) Books, materials, digital services, and other tools;
- 4) Food;
- 5) Social and cultural life.

Transportation

The expenditures for transport have been identified as the second most expensive hidden cost in education in previous research carried out by OBESSU among its membership. The price of the means developed for the student to arrive in school cannot be considered as separate expenditures, as without them, formal education could not convene.



Some students go to school on foot to save money, but in order to do that, they have to leave home early, having either less time to sleep or less time to study. Such practice stems from the fact that the students' material necessity is at odds with the claim that education is accessible and cost-free.

In some cases, provisions are set in place to mediate this hidden cost, but all too often, they award various discounts that – rather than making school accessible for all students – differentiates among them based on the type of learning facility they attend, or the mere distance they have to traverse, whilst paying no regard to other factors, and inevitably thus leaving some learners behind doing so.

Some partial cost coverages favouring public school students, for example, do not take into account that private schools are also attended by learners, whose financial resources may not allow for covering transportation costs.

Therefore, OBESSU demands:

- Transport be made accessible for students, regardless of the institution they attend;
- Special emphasis be placed on relieving learners from marginalised backgrounds from the financial strain related to transport expenses;
- Costs for transport of students to be covered to an adequate extent not only in the case of home-school travel, but for all school-related journeys;
- Necessary steps be undertaken to support learners from rural areas or other areas with unsatisfactory commuting infrastructures.

Accommodation

With the ongoing increase of prices of housing that many European countries are experiencing, young people and students are facing many different challenges to find accessible accommodation. Testimonies show that for students dependent on their own income to pay off the prices of their accommodation, precisely these prices made up the majority of their spending.

Especially VET-students face challenges when staying outside of home for a longer period of time while being in work-based learning programmes. Often there is no compensation or financial support given, which results in another necessary expenditure, necessary to complete the education.

Therefore, OBESSU demands:

- Dignified living spaces be provided for students;
- Housing scholarships be awarded and social programs be put in place to account for learners from marginalised backgrounds;



Books, materials, digital services, and other tools

Books, school materials, digital equipment and other means are necessary for students to actively engage in education. In the majority of countries, these expenditures are to be faced by the students themselves and their families according to their financial possibilities. This contributes to inequalities among students. Attending a public school does not necessarily mean that students will be provided with all the materials they need to engage actively in education.

Education that requires tools, which one does not possess, cannot claim to be accessible. Therefore education that requires these tools to be acquired cannot claim to be free. It should also be taken into account that many students' households do not provide the safe spaces necessary for studying.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that although families are expected to own certain tools and resources, oftentimes it is not the case. This faulty assumption is the reason why school students fell out of the learning process completely during the pandemic. The unattainability of these tools – digital and otherwise – is conducive to worsening of mental health, to academic futility, and to despair.

Furthermore, though the possibility of borrowing materials and tools enabling online learning is ensured by some institutions, lower-income families often refrain from doing so for various fears, especially those of not being able to remedy for possible damages caused to the equipment.

Therefore, OBESSU demands:

- Books and necessary school materials be provided to students free of charge;
- Digital tools be provided directly to students, such as to minimise the said refrainment from using the technologies they are offered;
- Dignified and safe study spaces be provided.

Nutrition

Meals and lunches at school are considered to be a considerable extra cost throughout the educational path. Even when this is mandatory during school time, the expenses are not always covered. With evidence showing that lower prices of school meals link to not only satisfactory performances in school, but also to higher rates of social inclusion, subsidising this area of education funding is crucial not only for meeting fundamental material needs of students, but also for their social cohesion and development within their collective.

Non-diverse and non-inclusive meal options in school will also lead to marginalised groups of students with diverse dietary requirements not only facing the challenges of finding food off-campus, but also having to opt for meals that are even more expensive, whilst being excluded from the community of their peers..



Therefore, OBESSU demands:

- Costs for school lunches be covered by schools to an adequate extent;
- School meals be of adequate nutritional value;
- School meals to accommodate for students with diverse dietary requirements;
- Necessary steps be taken toward free-of-charge school meals for everyone.

Social and cultural life

Cultural experiences organised as part of the learning process in the spirit of non-formal and informal learning range from – but are not limited to – social activities, field-visits, and festivals to music, visual art, swimming, and sports. The costs of such activities but also the resources and equipment associated with them can severely restrict students, and lead to separation from their peers.

Should these activities also be linked to formal learning, and the knowledge gained throughout their duration be subject to examination, those who were excluded will inevitably perform worse than those who took part. Furthermore, learners from a marginalised socioeconomic background are disadvantaged not only in the sense that they cannot afford the expenses associated with social and cultural life, but also because they are put under pressure as they often also have to work full-time or part-time jobs, take care of their siblings or take up other commitments.

Such exclusion not only jeopardises the cultural development, but will also be limiting the opportunity for a social life amongst students. The latter may result in the feeling of isolation, disrupting their well-being and mental health.

Regarding commuting to cultural events, in some countries, provisions are put in place that entitle only some students to free transportation. Usually, such provisions exclude the students that live in close proximity to the school, due to the minimum home-school distance criterion in the existing regulation.

Therefore, OBESSU demands:

- Free access to social and cultural activities while being under education
- Free public transportation regarding attending social and cultural activities while being under education
- A broader selection of student-relevant cultural and social activities close to campus and schools

Costs of vocational education and training

Many of the costs faced by VET students are comparable to those identified in general education. Nonetheless, VET learners and apprentices encounter unique challenges and situations that need to be tackled independently. Apprenticeships and other work-based learning opportunities play a key role in vocational education and often the expenses related to these periods are not covered, as a result of these placements taking place out of the school premises or in different moments than the academic year.



Some VET curriculums require a bigger investment in materials compared to others or general education. Fashion, craftwork or those that require authorised security clothing are good examples of particular pathways of vocational education and training that require higher financial resources to make the best use of the programme or even to be able to perform it. Additionally, some Member Organisations have identified monopolies in the providers of the mentioned materials that result in overpriced essential goods.

Mobility in VET has gained relevance in the international policy panorama with the EU aiming at 8% of VET learners benefitting from studying abroad by 2025. With some Member States reporting under 1% at the establishment of this objective, additional efforts need to be dedicated to the increase of accessibility to learning (or work) mobility within vocational education and training.

Therefore, OBESSU demands:

- (Same claims as general education for transportation, accommodation, meals and social life) for VET learners during their education and work-based learning programmes regardless of where and when they take place.
- Subsidies to adapt to the needs of each programme in terms of required materials, ensuring that students from all socio-economic backgrounds can access the formation that they are passionate about or best fits their development path.
- States to monitor and prevent overpriced materials required to participate in VET.
- Mobility opportunities to be accessible to any VET student, ensuring the coverage of all expenses incurred during the mobility period.

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