

On 24-26 October, Education International (EI) member organisations convened in Mexico City for EI's 12th Further and Higher Education and Research Conference. Together, they adopted the following statement:

Go Public! Advancing Further and Higher Education and Research for the Common Good

The landscape of further and higher education and research is complex, shaped by national specificities and diverse funding models. Every system presents its unique challenges and there are huge disparities between systems; however, chronic underfunding, increasing privatisation, precarity and inequalities are universal concerns. Addressing these challenges and achieving equal access to quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, as stated in Sustainable Development Goal 4.3, requires a unified approach rooted in core principles, ensuring that higher and further education, along with research, serve their true purpose: the common good.

Principles We Stand For:

- **A Human Right, the State's Responsibility :**

Further and higher education and research is a human right, integral to the advancement of society. It serves the collective good by preserving and advancing knowledge and culture. As such, it is the duty of the State to guarantee robust public funding, allowing these sectors to fulfil their public mission.

Yet, alarmingly, many countries are not allocating adequate public spending to further and higher education and research. Furthermore, the allocation of funds is increasingly driven by a narrow approach, often focusing on serving labour market needs. Some countries are cutting funding to particular subjects such as arts and humanities, thereby undermining education's broader purpose. To truly uphold the principle that knowledge should be freely and universally available, governments must shoulder their responsibility towards well-funded further and higher education and research, and fund all subjects, recognising the sector's broad societal benefits beyond preparation for the labour market.

- **Public Funding to Fight Inequalities:**

The introduction and escalation of tuition fees pose significant threats to equitable access to further and higher education. They create financial barriers and often result in crippling student debt, disproportionately impacting women, minorities, indigenous communities, disabled persons, migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons, international students, and economically marginalised groups. In some countries, financial support for students is becoming more selective and harder to access. Increasingly, inadequate public funding also obliges teachers

and researchers to bear costs related to publishing, accessing research and teaching material, and participating in academic conferences.

Further exacerbating inequalities is the growing trend of privatisation and commercialisation, particularly through the rise of ed-tech industries and public-private partnerships, that threaten the public nature of education and research. Governments must actively work to counter privatisation and marketisation trends in the sector and ensure that public funding is used for the public good and not to bolster business profits. A human rights-based approach to further and higher education and research is best upheld through increased public funding, allocated equitably.

Quality Terms of Employment and Working Conditions:

The quality of further and higher education and research depends on quality terms of employment and decent working conditions for all workers in the sector. These should be determined through collective bargaining. Many countries face staffing shortages leading to high faculty-to-student ratios, while evolving funding models in the sector promote employment casualisation and the outsourcing of certain roles. The development of digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence threatens some functions within the sector and may result in positions being cut.

The shift towards performance-based and external funding threatens the quality and breadth of education and research, and undermines the academic freedom, rights, and status of teachers and researchers. It also contributes to skyrocketing workloads, leading to burnout, and low salaries. All these factors are pushing many out of the profession, further exacerbating the challenges faced by the sector, with women and equality-seeking groups disproportionately affected.

To achieve quality further and higher education and research, governments must ensure security of employment including tenure or its functional equivalent, decent work, academic freedom, quality professional development and training opportunities, collegial and democratic governance and institutional autonomy. Further and higher education and research institutions must be free from discrimination. Pay equity as well as targeted measures to support and retain staff from equity-seeking groups are crucial to ensure a diverse workforce.

Conclusion:

Central to these principles is a profound conviction: quality public further and higher education and research, accessible to all, requires sustainable public financing. Funding of the sector must be predictable, recurrent and unconditional. Progressive tax reforms, ending austerity, and debt relief initiatives are key steps forward. Fostering international cooperation, decolonising further and higher education and research systems, and ensuring open access to resources and knowledge is essential.

We urge governments to recognise the magnitude of these challenges and to respond decisively. It is crucial that they commit to engaging with unions in the sector through meaningful social dialogue and collective bargaining. Only through such collaborative efforts can we truly ensure inclusive, sustainable, democratic and peaceful futures for humanity.