

WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century

Vision and Action

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All Africa Students' Union (AASU)

Note1: To meet UNESCO publishing standards, some editing of papers has been required.

Note2: Authors are responsible for the choice and the presentation of the facts contained in signed articles and for the opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

**Speech of Mr Benson Obua Ogwal
Secretary-General of the All Africa Students' Union**

**Opening the Big Door
Student Declaration on Equality, Democracy and Quality in Higher Education**

1. Introduction

Democracy defines a political system in which power - directly or indirectly - rests with the people. In that sense democracy implies actual participation of each individual in the decision-making process. Therefore each individual should act as a responsible citizen. The key to the development of this responsibility is education and free access to information in a pluralistic and open media landscape.

Learning how to participate and take an active part in a democracy is a continuous process. The higher education system is the best forum to teach and learn democracy. This means that all levels of education must be open to everyone and that all are given equal opportunities. The professor must be given full freedom and autonomy.

Education is the answer to the numerous problems we are faced with. Therefore each country should have its educational policies tailored to its peculiar needs within the context of global environment.

2. Access to Higher Education

The right to education is guaranteed in the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights (Article 26). The access to higher education is not without barriers. People from a disadvantaged social background, cultural minorities, physically disabled, women and refugees are facing various obstacles, leading to lower representation in higher education. The processes of globalization and change in the educational system from a national welfare service to an international economy-driven market must not disturb the principle of equity in access to higher education.

2.1. Financial barriers

All over the world the funding for higher education is decreasing, affecting both the accessibility and the quality of higher education. In principle we believe that higher education must be free of any charges. Financial barriers must not prevent access to higher education.

The increasing costs of higher education give a reason for concern as the living standard has severely declined in certain parts of the world during the same time. This tendency leads towards an elitist higher education only available for a small, privileged group of society. We ask for a social security that recognizes students' needs for housing, food, medical care, study material and transportation. This way, financial barriers can be restricted. The state has the main responsibility for the financial resources of education. Regarding those countries which do not have a fair policy of student financial assistance, curriculum adaptation is suggested in order to allow students to work and study at the same time.

We note with deep concern that one of the major limitations on adequate state funding for higher education is a result of the structural adjustment programmes and conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank on many of our countries. Therefore we strongly condemn this action by these Bretton Woods institutions and urge states to have the ultimate control over their budgets from which they should prioritize the funding of higher education as a social expenditure.

2.2. Socio-Cultural Thresholds

Socio-cultural factors play a vital role in the road to higher education. Youngsters possessing the necessary skills for a higher education may be barred from entering by their families or their social surroundings.

In a lot of societies women still meet discrimination in higher education. The percentage of female students in higher education has increased in some parts of the world, but in their working careers they are still disadvantaged compared to their male counterparts.

In many parts of the world the difficult situation of cultural minorities in higher education requires immediate action. Cultural minorities are seriously disadvantaged and they always encounter a lot of difficulties. They also have different needs, demands and expectations. The development of multi- or intercultural learning is very important. It gives us insight into different cultural realities necessary for mutual understanding.

2.3. Political Thresholds

Many students face difficulties pursuing higher education due to the political crisis in their countries. Countries in conflict or those recovering from their ruins of conflicts do not consider education a priority. Besides being destructive to infrastructure and lives, conflicts are disruptive to studies, sometimes delaying whole generations of students and affecting academic calendars. The international community should help such countries to reconstruct and rehabilitate their higher education systems. More importantly, preventive diplomacy and peace education should be used as tools for forestalling conflicts, whether inter- or intra-state, and their resulting devastating effect.

In several countries, cultural minorities are denied the right to higher education in their native language. These rights, formerly guaranteed, are threatened to be or have been abolished recently. We see a danger in these developments and support actions to re-establish these rights.

3. Student Participation in Decision-making

Higher education is the key to our future, the key to being able to cope with the knowledge society. As major stakeholders in all levels of education, student participation in the decision making process is vital and important. Students' right to organize in order to seek their rights and interests, and students' right to participate in all levels of decision-making should be enshrined in applicable national or sub-national laws.

Institutions of higher education should be a model of a democratic community. They should reflect the elements of such a society and thereby give the students the tools to integrate and form an active part of the democratic process. The structure of the institutions of higher education should instill democratic understanding within all groups (e.g. students, professionals, workers, teachers and administrators).

The elements of the structure should be:

- Equal opportunities for active participation and involvement in all aspects of institutions of higher education.
- Dialogue and recognition of all arguments as the underlying principle in the decision process.
- Institutions of higher education should be open to the rest of the society, giving and receiving knowledge and critical arguments in relation to that knowledge.

The authorities of higher education institutions, students, and academic staff have to accept each other as equal partners in the democratic process of developing higher education. To this end, the work has to include listening, discussing and most importantly, building of trust among the participants. This will give students the keys to relate critically toward new and existing information and knowledge, and the possibility to understand the responsibility towards democratic values, the responsibility also to pass on the fundamental meaning and importance of these values to the coming generations.

In the building of higher education, students need to have a broader perspective, and they have a responsibility towards society and to people who are not included in the knowledge society. We recognize the power of students and how it can be used in society so as to make a difference. Student participation should be possible for all students regardless of socio-economic background. Everyone must be given the opportunity to take part in the knowledge society.

3.1. Higher education in the Twenty-first Century

Higher education in the twenty-first century will face a lot of old problems, but we need to keep in mind that new and unexpected situations will arise as well. Students shall face these problems and must find new, creative solutions fitting the spirit of the age. We demand recognition for our sense of responsibility

for our own higher education. Students should participate and be supported in their participation in the organization of our higher education at different levels. We are partners rather than clients. Decisions made at national, regional and international levels influencing higher education or students' social life cannot be taken without consulting us.

Higher education is expected to strengthen a person's ability to act as resource in a democratic society and to be a responsible citizen. Student organizations and other international organizations dealing with higher education have a vital role to play in discussions and decisions taken at a regional and international level and their potential should be actively used.

3.2. Student Organizations

To secure good student input at all levels, student unions and organizations cannot be underestimated. They should play a central role in their institutions' development. Student organizations can provide their members with training courses and background information. They make sure the voice of the students will be heard at all levels and act as an intracommunicative body.

The creation and development of student organizations need active support from both local, regional and international bodies and national governments. At the regional level also, student structures need support; morally, materially and financially to be able to play their rightful roles such as dissemination of information and student leadership training at all levels as well as being the counterparts and interactive partners to institutions and decision-makers to make the students' opinion heard.

Efforts to promote and strengthen international solidarity among student organizations in order to create continuous and constant interaction in defence of democracy and human rights must therefore be strongly supported.

At the end of the 20th century, in the year we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights, we reaffirm the importance of free access to higher education, the fundamental role of the state in funding education, the autonomy of the institutions and the full participation of students in the decision making bodies in all aspects of the higher education system.

We, as students, are very grateful to UNESCO for giving us the opportunity to gather here at the World Conference on Higher Education. We are proud of our collective efforts which yielded this joint statement on behalf of the students of Asia, Australia, Latin America and the Caribbean, North America, Arab States, Europe and Africa. And we hope that these fruitful relations we have had so far with UNESCO in the preparations and conduct of this conference will continue not only with headquarters but also with the UNESCO regional offices in Beirut, Bangkok, Bucharest, Santiago, and Dakar.

This declaration was sponsored by the regional student organizations of the world:

National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB)
Asian Students Association (ASA)
Continental Organization of Latin American and Caribbean Students (OCLAE)
General Union of Arab Students (GUAS)
All Africa Students Union (AASU)

and adopted generally at the Student Debate.