

A background image of a classroom filled with young school children. They are wearing red and white checkered uniforms. Some children are looking towards the camera, while others are looking slightly away. The image has a dark blue overlay.

**EASG**

Education & Academia Stakeholder Group

# RESPONSE TO ZERO DRAFT OF THE HLPF MINISTERIAL DECLARATION

# 2025

The Education and Academia Stakeholder Group (EASG) welcomes the emphasis in the zero draft on science, evidence-based solutions, and human rights. However, we are concerned that the vision for education and learning presented remains too narrow, particularly regarding the critical role of higher education, academic freedom, and the fundamental rights of students as active participants in shaping sustainable, inclusive societies

We emphasize the following key points:

### **1. Student Rights Are Human Rights**

The zero draft must explicitly recognize students and young people as rights-holders. Access to quality, inclusive, and publicly funded education at all levels, including higher education, is a fundamental human right. Student rights—including freedom of expression, academic freedom, and participation in decision-making—must be protected and promoted to enable genuine civic engagement, democratic renewal, co-creation for innovative solutions, and sustainable development.

### **2. Knowledge over Narrow Skills Training**

While we acknowledge the importance of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) for employment and just transitions, we caution against an overly instrumental focus on "skills development" that reduces education to immediate labour market outcomes. Education must be understood as a public good and a human development endeavour that fosters critical thinking, scientific inquiry, civic participation, and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Education for sustainable development is repeatedly acknowledged as a key enabler for the achievement of all SDGs, reinforced by SDG 4.7. Therefore, investments in education and the elevation of student voice must not only prepare learners for current job markets but also empower them to imagine, create, and adapt to future societal needs by instilling a collective responsibility for learning.

### **3. The Role of Higher Education and Research**

The transformative potential of science, technology, and innovation depends on strong, independent and public higher education and research systems. Yet, the zero draft fails to sufficiently recognize the need to protect universities, research institutions, and scholars from political interference, privatization pressures, and market-driven distortions. Support for academic freedom and public research funding is essential to achieving evidence-based solutions to serve communities in achieving sustainable development.

### **4. Education for Sustainable, Democratic Societies**

We call for a renewed commitment to free public education that promotes peace, human rights, democratic participation, environmental stewardship, and social and climate justice. Lifelong learning must go beyond "reskilling" to include critical reflection, solidarity, intercultural understanding, and collective action.

### **5. Equity, Inclusion, and Public Financing**

We reiterate the urgent need for increased public investment in public education, especially in developing countries, to address systemic inequalities, including gender disparities. We recommend the adoption of mechanisms to avoid tax evasion, as well as the adoption of tax justice mechanisms to increase the fiscal space and consequently the availability of domestic funds for education. Further, we urge the international community to increase aid for education and to adopt debt relief mechanisms, since the indebtedness stress reduces funds for education. Private sector involvement must not undermine the right to education, nor lead to the commodification of learning. Efforts to bridge digital divides must also ensure that access to knowledge remains a common good, not a privilege determined by market forces.

## **Conclusion**

EASG urges Member States to strengthen the Ministerial Declaration by reaffirming free quality education as a right, a public good, and a transformative force for people and the planet, as emphasised through the Transforming Education Summit in 2022. Building a more just, sustainable world requires investing in education, empowering student agency, mobilizing academic voices, and safeguarding their rights.

## **Organising partners of EASG**

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