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"Don't Cut Our Future"

Financing Higher Education in Pandemic Years

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Abstract

The Policy Brief proposes a variety of suggestions for policy recommendations starting from an introduction that provides a synthetic picture of the impact of the pandemic on investment and financing tools at global level. The discussion is developed through two essential chapters. Primarily, the qualitative and quantitative analysis of investments, highlighting ideas and limits of public and private spending. Secondly, the Policy Brief focuses on the issue of per-student costs and on the value of global or transnational funds explicitly dedicated to Higher Education. Outlining a concrete platform of demands and policy suggestions, the Policy Brief collects the inspirations of the students' grassroots consultations towards WHEC 2022 and the analyses proposed by the regional and global platforms of student unionism, as well as reports by NGOs, OECD and UNESCO.

Content

Acronyms

AASU: All-Africa Students Union

ESU: European Students Union

GSF: Global Student Forum

NZUSA: New Zealand Student Association

OECD: Organisation for the Economic Co-operation and Development

Introduction: an overview of the education funding policies in pandemic.

The pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities that had already disrupted education systems. These common transnational trends have been underlined by evidence in some OECD reports (*The state of global education. 18 months into the pandemic*, 2021, or *Education at a Glance*, 2021), in the *Financial Times*'s special report *Invest in Education*, in the World Bank's Report on Education Crisis in Latin America and the Caribbean, and in the findings of Education International's research *The public versus austerity: Why public sector wage bill constraints must end*.

According to the OECD, "between 2012 and 2018, the proportion of government expenditure devoted to primary to tertiary education slightly decreased on average across OECD countries (1%)" and "increases in educational expenditure did not keep pace with the growth in government expenditure overall". In general, **al ack of long-term planning in funding education** has been noted, even if, "during 2020, a large share of OECD countries have increased the budget devoted to education in order to respond to the impact of the pandemic". To answer the challenges of the pandemic, some countries have prioritised higher education or funding highly specialised research centres. For some lower-income countries there was a disproportionate emphasis on the improvement of universal access to education.

Furthermore, despite public sources representing a share of 90% of education funding in OECD countries, private funding is steadily increasing. If the greater investments in education are leading to increased privatisation, they could have a disadvantageous effect on the universal access, in regard to tuition fees but also in relation to governance within educating communities.

Mobility restrictions and school closures due to the pandemic did not impact learners around the world evenly. **The World Bank noted the interruption in the education systems and economic challenges of lesser developed countries have led to an expansion of "learning poverty."** In the African situation, a survey conducted by EdTech and eLearning Africa in 2020 stated that "vocational sectors face added difficulties (as do some university students) of not having access to 'practical' work". Ineffective and inadequate funding has had a negative impact on the access to technology and to digital devices. According to the same inquiry, "the large majority of educators have not received financial support for teaching and learning tools to help them continue teaching in the crisis, and do not feel that there has been sufficient preparation to help them adapt".

Even looking out to the plurality of the specific socio-economical, political, and institutional frame of reference, **these common trends intertwine the tragical situation of the unequal distribution of vaccines**: recalling the GSF Declaration of Port-of-Spain after the global student summit *'Vaccine Justice through Fairness, Trust, and Responsibility'*[1], "an unfair and uneven distribution of vaccines globally can worsen the immediate and long-term harms of the COVID-19 pandemic around the world".

Therefore, investing in Higher Education needs to be approached holistically, bearing in mind the multiple impacts on the many aspects of students' lives.

1 Investment in Higher Education: impact and accountability

Rather than relying on a performance-based investment model, it is preferable to try to decrypt possible benefits and possible vices of public and private spending in Higher Education.

[1] Vaccine Justice through Fairness, Trust and Responsibility – Global Student Summit | GSF (globalstudentforum.org)

A performance-based funding model should ensure the fiscal stability of institutions corresponds to an investment study model that inevitably intersects a cost-benefit dynamic.

A one-fits-to-all solution is not appropriate since investments in education must follow the essential principles of the 2021 UNESCO Paris Declaration *A Global Call for Investing in the Future of Education*, for which "equity, quality and efficiency are not competing goals in education" since **"they reinforce each other when investment decisions in education policies are based on evidence and consider synergies and adequate trade-offs"**.

1.1 Public investment

As noted by OECD in *Education at a Glance 2021,* "**investing in tertiary education also pays off in the long run for the public sector, since tertiary-educated adults pay higher income taxes and social contributions**." For this reason, we should not forget the main set of principles on which a Higher Education public funding system is built up: **delivering high-quality education and training that meets the needs of learners, employers and communities; supporting equitable access to learning; delivering strategically important programmes that meet national and regional needs; producing research of high quality, including research that is socially or economically valuable**.

The division of responsibility for education public funding between different levels of government (national/central, regional and local/municipal) is an important factor in education policy: especially in the most socially complex contexts, this aspect is often marginalised, despite the strong importance that local authorities and communities have in promoting social and material infrastructures at the service of universities and research centres. Precisely for this reason, it would be essential that future research take into account this very important aspect, in a specific and original way. This dimension pushes us to take on an aspect further underlined by the 2021 *Education at a Glance* report, namely the comparison between centralisation and decentralisation in investments. Mentioning the report, we could note:

"**Tertiary education is much more centralised than non-tertiary education, as the proportion of public funds coming from the central government is relatively large, both before and after transfers to lower levels of government**. On average across the OECD, the central government manages 88% of funds before transfers, and this barely changes once intergovernmental transfers are taken into account. In most OECD and partner countries with available data, central governments directly provide more than 60% of public funds in tertiary education; in about two-thirds of countries, the central government is the main source of initial funding and there are no or small transfers to regional or local governments. In contrast, countries such as Belgium, Germany, Spain and Switzerland source over 60% of tertiary-level funding from regional governments with little or nothing transferred down to local governments. **Local authorities typically do not have an important role in financing tertiary education, representing only 1% of public funds on average, with the exception of the United States where local governments provide 12% of total expenditure to the level**".

This aspect must be balanced with an investment governance that addresses the autonomy of university institutions: a safeguard against authoritarianism and the political directions of Higher Education but, sometimes, a place of excesses and uncontrolled patronage. This means that the balance provided by local authorities in supporting Higher Education systems can implement the role of public stakeholders while maintaining the benefits of the State commitment (holding a more strategic role in the main teaching and research assets) but also expanding the the possibility of co-participation of authorities at different levels, capable, for example, of defining with greater interest the role of scientific hubs in the position to align basic research in Higher Education with productive or industrial districts: a possibility that only advanced and social forms of planning can cater for.

An important element pointed out by to the OECD report *Resourcing Higher Education* is the notion of the *public accountability* of the public investment in Education and Training:

"The complement of public funding for Higher Education institutions is public accountability for that funding. **Accountability for funding needs to operate at two levels: assurance that the money has been appropriately spent on the purposes for which it was allocated** – in other words, a prudential assessment of the spending; **strategic accountability** – assurance that the funded institutions were contributing to the outputs and outcomes that the government was 'purchasing' in allocating funding".

The two interpretations with which to strengthen accountability and transparency of public funding are, primarily, democratic governance ensured by the equal participation of all components of the academic community. Secondly, the possibility that these investments are aimed at implementing some serious transnational defects in higher education systems. Precisely in this sense, the direction of public funding should aim at supporting two very circumstantial elements: gender equality and representativeness, ecological transition. The proportion of women in academia has been increasing over time, but women tend to be under-represented in senior staff categories and certain fields, and face more precarious employment conditions: as reported by OECD, some governments are able to provide targeted funding to increase the number of female professors. In the Flemish Community of Belgium, for example, the government has included the share of women in research positions at all levels among the indicators used for research formula funding, while, in Norway, institutions receive additional funding for appointments of female faculty members. As far as the ecological transition is concerned, a certainly interesting reference is the European implementation of the **Recovery and Resilience Facilities** in the framework of the pandemic, which according to the guidelines of the European Commission provided massive financing - planned and arranged in a mandatory manner towards the Member States - towards the dual transition (digital and ecological). Towards research and knowledge infrastructures, these investments have been transformed into eco-efficiency, environmental low-impact buildings, digitization of existing structures, as well as implementation of environmental awareness in study curricula and digital skills and towards green jobs, which are also connected to high professional training. This **holistic idea of fair transition** can guide an advanced conception of accountability, reliability, sustainability and quality of planned public spending.

Public investment should also take into account the evolution of the expenditures devoted to the educational personnel in Higher Education. As highlighted by the 2021 OECD Report, "in many higher education systems, **academics play a reduced role in institutional governance, while professional staff play a wider role**. Professional staff take on the responsibility of meeting new challenges in institutional management, such as facilitating the responsiveness of institutions to student and external stakeholder needs, marketing, raising income and responding to accountability demands. This **specialisation** represents an important change in academic culture, academic careers, and the governance and management of higher education institutions."

Public investments should be the first to think about increasing the basket of professions connected to Higher Education with attention and maximum need. We are talking about a wide range of professions: from the stabilisation of young researchers in training (teaching and research fellows / assistants) linked or not to doctoral research grants, post-doc research fellows in charge of teaching courses, young researchers, explicitly dedicated officials the composition and following of multi-year financing projects, officials dedicated to internal assessment and the relationship with student services, staff dedicated to libraries and research services. These professions, sometimes outsourced by universities to ensure a limitation of spending volumes, should preferentially be internal or directly managed or, at least, subject to public law foundations or regulatory tools that allow limited (if not absent) recourse to outsourcing: the insurance provided by the public investment of a stable job could allow Higher Education to show itself as a space for a competitive job offer, in which to replace the idea of hierarchical (and sometimes gerontocratic) pressure in the professions with a cooperative concept.

1.2 Private investment

These are the traditional reasons for supporting private investment in Higher Education: (1) private resources may be additional or complementary to public spending; (2) private spending – through tuition fees autonomously set by Higher Education institutions – can potentially lead to more efficient outcomes than systems funded by public authorities; (3) private contributions are – if properly designed – a more equitable means of funding Higher Education than funding through general government revenues. Nevertheless, profits and rights to a fair Higher Education should never be confused and put alongside each other. Whilst public-private partnerships can come in many different forms, for instance, their use conflicts with the right to education. **Public-private partnerships** are one of the forms of private involvement in the provision of Higher Education and the means to facilitate the entry of private actors and techniques into public management of education: does it work fine? Is this a correct complementary solution? Certainly, it increases the importance of non-state actors, activates forms of competition that could have positive developments on the level of applied research, but we have substantial doubts on the possibility that they can provide credible outcomes in terms of the universality of a teaching and of a quality basic research.

We would also like to raise an alarm about a circumstance that has been acknowledged by the OECD: **Higher Education marketisation, privatisation and commercialisation may appear in multiple forms**, including the contracting-out of educational services and the transfer of costs to students, who are increasingly treated as consumers rather than learners, or through the adoption of 'business-like' management practices in the direction of education institution and the entrepreneurial possibility to generate funds at the level of individual institutions.

This profit-seeking mechanism inevitably generates, beyond the intentions of individual actors or foundations of a private or mixed nature, the search for alternative sources of funding which very often lead to student tuition fees or student debt. In times of limited financial resources, however, we are aware that some Countries have also decided on an increase of student tuition fees to ensure the financial sustainability of their higher education systems - as in the UK. It is a political choice which, even though it is also made in State universities, implements a conception of Higher Education as a strictly individual demand service available to an ever smaller segment of the population, against any universalistic possibility.

The contraction of public spending in favour of the private one exposes the system to a further consequence, that is the effective risks of commodification and of a major presence of private-based funding tools in Higher Education. As highlighted by ESU, these measures "are exemplified (..) by changes in financing schemes of national states moving from public responsibility towards market-based and competition-based models of financing HE, by the privatisation of faculties, by curricula being influenced by market demands and market actors and by interfering into research along market and corporate needs".

2. Financial options for access, quality, equity and inclusion in Higher Education

2.1 Per-student investment in Higher Education

OECD showed very clearly in 2021 what the costs of Higher Education per student correspond in absolute values: "OECD countries spend USD 11 700 per student on primary to tertiary educational institutions. This represents about USD 10 500 per student at primary, secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary level, and USD 17 100 at tertiary level. On average across OECD countries, **68% of total expenditure on educational institutions at tertiary level goes to core services**. Excluding R&D activities, expenditure per student across OECD countries averages about USD 11 700, ranging from about USD 2 000 in Colombia and Greece to USD 28 000 or more in Luxembourg and the United States".

An aspect that should be noted is the median destination of these costs, which allows us to develop a reasoning on the purposes of this thought: again according to OECD, **the share of expenditure on ancillary services tends to be higher in tertiary education than at lower levels of education**. We therefore record a clear prevalence in services, which however has a different response depending on the Country of reference: not only on the level of the destination of the investment, but also on the level of the trainee who is specifically financed, with some important considerations to be developed regarding gender discrimination. The 2021 OECD Report Education at a Glance noted: "Turkey has the lowest total costs for both men and women (USD 13 200 for a man and USD 7 500 for a woman), while Switzerland has comparably high costs for both men and women (USD 85 100 and USD 86 600, respectively). This represents the highest costs for a woman across all countries with available data. The Czech Republic has the highest costs for a man (USD 109 500). Note that these figures have been adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP) and therefore they provide a comparable measure of the financial effort that individuals in different countries must make to finance their education, relative to their ordinary cost of living". Financing Higher Education foresees a great financial effort *pro capite* in the United States, in relation to the ordinary cost of living.

This specific example inevitably introduces us to the formula with which the United States is known about how to unload the cost per student: **individual long-term debt formulas**. There is a necessary point to address, according to the international students movement and according to the elaboration provided by many inputs coming from the student digital assemblies carried out towards the WHEC 2022: it is essential to avoid any costs being charged to students in the long term through short and long-term forms of debt. According to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York[2], **the US student loan debt is nearly $ 1.75 trillion in total, concerning 46 millions of people**; 11.1% of student loans were 90 days or more delinquent or were in default before the coronavirus pandemic and the average monthly student loan payment was $ 300 before the White House instituted the repayment moratorium - a suspension put in place through May 1, 2022. This is an extremely well-known phenomenon and which is sometimes suggested as a formula of trust between banks or credit institutions, in order to stimulate the student's productivity in the (neo-liberal) terms of future working life - without necessarily considering the economic weight of the debt, the risk of insolvency, the impact on mental health and emotional life, the never symmetrical development of the job offer in relation to professional figures that cannot emerge in a detailed and precise way from Higher Education.

The student loan debt is negatively correlated with financial wealth throughout an individual's lifetime. Significant effects have been found on outcomes such as net worth, financial distress and retirement savings. Individuals with outstanding student debt have consistently lower levels of net wealth and are more exposed to financial loss. Indebted graduates suffer higher levels of financial distress, both in terms of credit access and loan repayments.

[2] U.S. Student Loan Debt Statistics for 2022 - Student Loan Hero and Household Debt and Credit Report - FEDERAL RESERVE BANK of NEW YORK (newyorkfed.org).

The best way to build a progressive conception of the cost per student is that of a large and progressive investment in the future of the learner, detached from a debt logic and anchored to progressive general taxation - as health is conceived in the inclusive and universal systems of the welfare state and the school. In this sense, we envisaged a Copernican Revolution that starts with the right to study and that invests in quality universal Higher Education. We take up with interest the hypothesis launched by NZUSA of an **Education Income**, considering it part of a basic income on which to reflect publicly as an instrument that is not mere helicopter money but a combination - different for each country or transnational area - of services. and monetary disbursement. The provision of services would allow to start a positive economic cycle and to alleviate the financial cost per student, discharging it not in a check to be submitted to the inevitable law of the cost of living, but in the multiplication of economic and lucrative activities linked to the offer of home, work orientation, individual demand services, catering: it is in this that the high creativity of economic systems could be demonstrated, thus avoiding an individualization of financial costs as much as a mere welfare idea of student citizenship.

2.2 Developing/sustaining a global fund for Higher Education

International sources of funding Higher Education include public multilateral organisations for development aid such as the World Bank, the United Nations, and NGOs. In Europe, a large share of international funding comes from the European Union initiatives: the EU integration and the Bologna process have led systems towards the creation of a European Education Area, sharing standards and guidelines for quality assurance. Some outcomes of the recent EU-AU 2022 Summit, however, showed how the forms of strategic interaction on the financial level, starting from the Global Gateway[3], in addition to the partnerships already in place (Africa-EU Partnership on Higher Education, AfricaConnect3, the EU-Africa High-Level Policy Dialogue on Science, Technology and Innovation), have seriously considered the implementation of wider and stable to allow mobility in Higher Education: for this same reason, AASU, ESU and GSF have supported the establishment of an Africa-Europe academic mobility scheme; such a scheme shall promote brain circulation between students and staff of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) of both continents, and shall promote partnerships between HEIs of the African and European Union. This can, as well, be a great step to reduce the increasing levels of brain drain. Consequently, we are also of the conviction that the Global Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications (GCRHEQ) will support actions to streamline and strengthen student and academic mobility schemes across Africa and Europe.

Among other essential tools, the **Global Partnership for Education** deserves a unique mention: it is a special institution, the only global fund dedicated to improving education in developing countries, working with 76 low-income countries and through the active participation of developing country partners, donors, education unions, NGOs. The partnership can catalyse action and support low- and middle-income countries to increase their tax-to-GDP ratio from the current 17% to twice that of developed countries. The GPE, together with the international financial institutions or other international bodies involved in financing higher education and national governments must act now to guarantee this right.

To increase international mobility, it would be essential to think about the implementation, through the formula of a global fund available to students, of **basic universal grants formulas for university students**: this would be a way to increase the subsidiary importance of this organisation of study funding. Basic universal grants are often provided to support student choice and matching to available opportunities, as well as to promote geographic mobility. Additionally, they may promote access to education for socioeconomically disadvantaged groups who may underestimate the net benefits of higher education.

[3] Global Gateway | European Commission (europa.eu)

3. Policy Recommendations

Advocating for fair investment and consistent political responsibilities, all around of the world, we aim to highlight a common global platform of claims and demands:

- long-term economic planning with meaningful and sustainable public investments in Higher Education according to the point n. 8 of the 2021 UNESCO Paris Declaration *A Global Call for Investing in the Future of Education*[4]; public funding should guarantee stability and sustainability in the development of higher education, being based on wider goals and not on short-sighted financial benefits.
- against any risks of commodification and privatisation, the presence of private-based funding tools should be carried out in a transparent manner by democratic bodies, either on an institutional or governmental level or by a publicly mandated independent body, involving main stakeholders of higher education;
- imagine mixed tools to support the right to education, through direct provision of services (catering, accommodation) that impact carefully on the cost of living in the country of origin, while ensuring a sort of Basic Education Income with a characteristic of portability through programs of international mobility, to stimulate the possibility of spending by the student and, therefore, to increase the possibility of a healthy circulation of the real economy through student citizenship;
- specific funding programmes including basic needs infrastructure, particularly around sanitation and hygiene, in eco-sustainable and digitally connected buildings;
- developing of educational settings to accommodate face-to-face learning while the COVID-19 pandemic persists, improving at the same time sustainable, equitable, and ethical digital platforms;
- addressing the unequal gendered power relations as a result of the COVID-related school closures;
- investing in ensuring students' mental health, providing concrete services on well-being; psychosocial interventions by educators and counsellors on site and through online programs can prevent depression, aggressive behaviours and substance abuse among students;
- setting a real involvement of students' unions in decision-making process for education planning at local, national and global levels, to ensure participation, transparency and accountability in budgets and in any decision-making process of higher education institutions, paying special attention to externally funded projects to avoid improper external influence on research;
- sustaining stable contracts and adequate salaries for young researchers and professors, to ensure the dignity and attractiveness of the profession and to provide for the social recognition of teachers based on healthy working conditions and minimum wages, depending on the national context;

[4] "We urge all governments to fulfil without delay the commitments they made at the World Education Forum in Incheon in 2015 and the Global Education Meetings in 2018 and 2020:

•allocate at least 4-6% of GDP and/or at least 15-20% of total public expenditure to education;

•devote an adequate share of national stimulus packages to education, particularly towards targeted support for marginalized learners' school (re-)enrolment, learning recovery and socio-emotional well-being, as well as skills development for employment;

•increase the volume, predictability, and effectiveness of international aid to education by (a) meeting the benchmark of 0.7% of donor gross national income (GNI) for official development assistance (ODA) to developing countries; (b) increasing the share of ODA to education as a percentage of total ODA; and (c) ensuring that international aid to education is aligned with national education plans and consistent with aid effectiveness principles."

- having a crucial and irreplaceable role in development and in building fairer, more equal societies, public and private investments must be effective and always subject to a process of public review, social balance sheet, transparency and accountability; agents of government ministries and international organisations must always be allowed to investigate, especially in the case of private or jointly-owned foundations, the final purposes of the investments; safeguarding the independence of funding must protect higher education as an area of freedom against possible retaliation by authoritarianism and, at the same time, make it a glass house for public opinion against speculation and private interests;
- stopping pursuing austerity policies, rather setting ambitious targets for progressive tax reforms, using progressive taxes, especially on wealth and corporations, to ensure major public investments on Education, implementing alternative macroeconomic policies.

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