

HIGHER EDUCATION CAUCUS RECOMMENDATION

6TH EI ASIA PACIFIC REGIONAL CONFERENCE BANGKOK, 28-30 SEPTEMBER, 2009

The 6th EI Asia-Pacific Regional Conference recognises that the global financial crisis threatens living standards, employment security and national income levels throughout the Asia Pacific region. The rapid deterioration of key developed economies – US, UK, and much of the Euro zone – and the global instability in financial institutions, have serious potential consequences for Asian economies many of which are heavily reliant on the export of consumer goods to richer countries. These difficulties are likely to be compounded by the recent slow down in the Peoples' Republic of China. 2008 annual economic growth rates were lower in almost all Asia-Pacific countries compared to 2007 growth, and 2009 forecasts indicate lower growth again.

The deteriorating economic position in the region jeopardises the ability of national Governments to maintain and increase public investment in education, social services and public infrastructure, unless alternative economic and public policies are considered.

The big majority of Asia-Pacific countries have absolutely or relatively low levels of participation in tertiary education compared to most developed countries, and spending per tertiary education student is also low by international standards.

The level of debt and economic contraction in rich countries suggests that Asia-Pacific economies can no longer assume that developed country consumer markets will be a primary driver of future Asia-Pacific growth. Much of the future demand for increasingly complex goods and services will come from stronger domestic investment and consumption in individual countries and the wider region.

In turn, a deeper domestic and regional market requires big investment increases for education, infrastructure and labour force skills development. Increased participation and investment in tertiary education will be an important part of human resource development and economic growth, and will also contribute to greater social justice, critical thinking and vibrant civil society life.

On this basis, the 5th EI Asia-Pacific Conference re-affirms EI's call for a new global education and public investment strategy, a new and stronger regulatory regime for the international finance sector, and the need to maintain global commitments to the Millennium Development Goals notwithstanding the economic down turn.

The Conference also notes that similar goals have been taken up by the Global Unions Council and the International Trade Union Confederation in the 2009 London declaration which emphasises the problem of food security and the impact of increased unemployment on workers in developing countries (including the Asia-Pacific). It also acknowledges the urgent need for debt relief and more public investment in poor countries, and the need to consider nationalisation of key financial institutions as the only viable method of stabilising the global financial system in the long term.

The Conference notes the country reports delivered at the EI Higher Education Caucus which underline the need to oppose the efforts of many Governments to commercialise and/or privatise elements of tertiary education systems.

Decentralization of higher education systems has the potential to increase the autonomy of universities. However, institutional autonomy should not be allowed to compromise the central role of governments in planning and investing in the higher education system. Conference notes that, in some instances, decentralization (particularly in the form of devolution) has been used to diminish public investment and increase costs to students.

In a number of countries, governments have failed to respond to the crisis with new strategies for public investment in, and planning of, higher education provision and instead have used the global financial crisis as a pretext for reducing public expenditure and accelerating market reforms. Of particular note are:

- Moves to restructure and/or merge higher education institutions with an associated erosion of staff and/or union representation on governing bodies.
- Efforts to restrict collective bargaining, accompanied by pressures for salary reductions and reduced professional development and promotion opportunities for staff.
- Policies which reduce direct public spending on institutions and shift the costs burden to students through increased tuition charges.
- Excessive reliance on the movement of students to universities and colleges in richer countries (particularly the US, Australia, UK and the Euro-zone). This deepens the "brain drain" problem and retards the development of domestic labour forces based on skills and knowledge. A better alternative is strengthening domestic universities, and the regulated presence of foreign providers. This will ensure that the spillover benefits of student expenditures are captured by local economies.

The Conference notes that not all countries in the region have persisted with these ineffective policies. While some (e.g. Philippines and Indonesia) maintain market and decentralized approaches, others (e.g.: Malaysia and Korea) have adopted strategies based on high levels of direct public investment and the strengthening of public universities and colleges.

EIAP calls on governments to adopt higher education policies which:

- Increase public investment and achieve a better balance between markets and planning, and between the public and private sectors, noting that in some countries not for profit private institutions can play an important role in expanding access to higher education as a public good.
- Maintain an appropriate regulated balance between foreign and domestic investment, noting the diverse approaches to investment in individual countries. In general EIAP supports continued restrictions on foreign investment where these are current government policies.
- Recognize collective bargaining and academic freedom rights, including the rights to form independent and national trade unions for higher education workers, noting that some governments (e.g: the Philippines) directly or indirectly encourage the political repression of higher education workers' representatives through detention, surveillance and extrajudicial killings.

- Encourage international engagement and exchange between universities and colleges (and the movement of staff and students) within a framework of aid, collaboration (and the strengthening of domestic institutions) rather than a commercial global trade framework.
- Give priority to increasing opportunities for the poor and disadvantaged, particularly women, girls, rural residents and ethnic and indigenous minorities.
- Harmonise qualification frameworks and recognition across national borders.
- Explicitly disavow racism and encourage tolerance and pluralism in curriculum and planning.

The Conference asks the EIAP Regional Office to consider convening an Asia Pacific Higher Education Conference in late 2010 or early 2011 with support and assistance from higher education affiliates within the Region. Such a Conference should seek to develop this policy statement and recommend strategies for increasing the authority and voice of higher education unions in the region.