

9th UNESCO/NGO Collective Consultation on Higher Education

by Florian Meisser

I had the honour of representing IYCS at the 9th UNESCO/NGO Collective Consultation on Higher Education. It was an interesting experience with those present representing different organisations from different parts of the world. There were many plenary discussions and debates on issues surrounding: Higher education and education for all; Higher education for sustainable development and higher education and the challenges of globalisation.

For me the most important point was that we have to act against the commercialisation of education to ensure equality in the education systems all over the world. We have to keep education as a public good, as it is a basic human right!

The democratically run student organisations (such as IYCS) that were present made a declaration calling UNESCO and other organisation to action. The following is a summary of the key points of the declaration:

- we affirm our commitment to the right of all people to have complete access to and participation in higher education in all its forms, with special attention to the provision of public education.
- solutions need to be found to prioritise access and participation.
- we note that the legacies of colonialism and imperialism continue to act as a major barrier to post-secondary education.
- We are gravely concerned that the many threats to public education posed by the successive rounds of trade negotiations continue to be manifest, with more and more governments implementing trade liberalization measures that include aspects of higher education. The pressure towards privatization, educational user fees, lack of academic protections and freedom, and restrictions on access that trade liberalization usually entails are real threats to the work of improving access to high quality public education for all.
- We note our particular concern about the upcoming Ministerial meetings of the World Trade Organization scheduled to take place in Hong Kong from December 13 to 18, 2005. We urge all governments to remove education from the negotiations of the General Agreement on Trade in Service.

- Further, we urge governments and international bodies to make greater efforts to include and encourage the activities of democratic students' organizations from every region. We note that students' representatives from the regions of Asia-Pacific, Latin America, Middle East and Africa are often excluded for financial and political reasons in the planning and management of higher education.
- We also note that a culture of peace must be a priority, especially given the awful destruction of universities and precious cultural resources that has taken place as a result of conflicts.
- As part of our vision for higher education and for society as a whole, we believe that access to public higher education through eliminating student fees and providing grants to students is not enough. Unfortunately gender inequalities still play a role in access to education, therefore mechanisms to secure equality in access and continuation of studies need to be identified and implemented.
- Higher education needs to be seen as an integral part of sustainability development discussion rather than only an addition.

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after the Consultation at UNESCO, Paris, 6-8 April 2005.*