

## **Statement on the Higher Education Budget Cuts in Estonia**

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The Federation of Estonian Student Unions (EÜL) and the Nordic Organisational Meeting (NOM) stand firmly against the proposed budget cuts to higher education in Estonia, strongly advocating for continuing and enhancing state-funded higher education in Estonia. Higher education is the cornerstone of a thriving, innovative society. Diminishing its funding would not only harm the current generation of students but would also have long-term detrimental effects on the country's social and economic progress.

As a nation aiming to align itself more closely with the Nordic model, Estonia must consider the principles of quality, accessibility, freedom and inclusivity that underpin the success of Nordic higher education systems. Our opposition to budget cuts is not simply about maintaining the status quo; it is about safeguarding Estonia's future as an education-driven, knowledge-based society capable of attracting and retaining both domestic and international talent.

### **The Need to Improve the Social Support System for Students**

Students in Estonia currently face significant social and economic challenges. The insufficiency of social support mechanisms, such as stipends and grants, severely impacts students' ability to focus on their studies and complete their degrees on time. As in many Nordic countries, state support for students should be seen as an investment in the nation's future, ensuring that all individuals – regardless of their socio-economic background – have the opportunity to access and complete higher education.

Adopting a more holistic approach to student welfare is crucial, encompassing financial support, mental health services, and housing solutions. A socially supportive environment enables students to engage fully

with their studies and fosters a culture of learning and innovation that is essential for Estonia's continued development.

### **The Risks of Tuition Fees and Brain Drain**

The potential introduction of tuition fees for higher education would have a profoundly negative impact on access to education and would likely lead to an increase in brain drain. Many talented students who cannot afford tuition fees may be forced to seek educational opportunities abroad, which results in losing local talent when most HEI seek an increase of incoming international students. As neighbouring Nordic countries maintain strong commitments to free or affordable higher education, Estonia risks falling behind and losing its position as a competitive destination for both domestic and international students.

Free education is not merely a financial issue; it is about guaranteeing that higher education remains accessible to all and fostering a diverse and inclusive academic community and guaranteeing academic freedom. State-funded higher education must be protected and prioritised to preserve Estonia's competitiveness and to ensure social mobility.

This is in addition to the previous topic on student support systems, which are not sufficient to ensure equal access to higher education if tuition fees are introduced.

### **Addressing the Funding Deficit and Ensuring Student Involvement**

The chronic underfunding of the higher education system requires a strategic and long-term solution. Any plan to address this funding deficit must involve meaningful and proportional input from students, the education system's primary stakeholders. It is of importance to allow students the freedom to explore, question, and engage deeply with their education. It is vital that students' voices are heard and that their needs are considered throughout all stages of policy-making and implementation. A collaborative approach

involving students, educators, and policymakers will ensure that reforms to the higher education system are fair, sustainable, and conducive to the overall advancement of society.

The Nordic Organizational Meeting (NOM), which consists of national student unions from across the Nordic and Baltic countries, supports EÜL's position. As Estonia seeks to strengthen its ties with the Nordic region, it must adopt similar educational policies and practices that prioritise its students' long-term well-being and development.

The EÜL, with the support of the Nordic Organizational Meeting (NOM), urges the Estonian government to protect and enhance the higher education system, ensuring it remains a pillar of growth, innovation, and social cohesion that is accessible for generations to come.