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OHCHR

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Input for the HR75 Youth Declaration

Dear OCHCR,

The European Students' Union represents nearly 20 million higher education students across Europe. Despite fewer immediate threats to students' lives compared to some regions, there's a rising crackdown on student activism, the right to education, and academic freedom in Europe. These developments have significant human rights implications and signal a worrisome downward spiral. In the following, we will provide a general overview of the situation, offering examples from various countries within ESU's purview.

1. What are the challenges the world is facing now, how they will affect the future of human rights, and what future do you want for human rights?

I. Student rights & fundamental values

Anticipatory, **systematic persecution** of individual and unionising students, encompassing psychological and physical violence, persists in [Belarus](#), [Russia](#) and [Turkey](#).

Concerning the **fundamental values** of European higher education (HE), academic freedom, institutional autonomy, student participation in HE and academic integrity are increasingly under attack. Notably, during and after the pandemic, [attacks against academic freedom](#) originating from public authorities, politicians, segments of society, and regrettably, some members of the academic community occur more frequently. **Academic freedom** is on the decline, driven by the forces of illiberalism (e.g., [Hungary](#), Turkey, Belarus, Russia) as well as the influence of right-wing and/or fascist ideologies (e.g., [Germany](#), [Italy](#), [Sweden](#), [Netherlands](#), [Slovakia](#), [Poland](#), [Finland](#)) and neoliberalism. Governmental forces claiming to protect academic freedom are in fact undermining academic rights (e.g., [France](#), [UK](#)). Additionally, **institutional autonomy** within higher education



institutions (HEIs) is increasingly under threat, e.g., due to law enforcement on campuses for intimidation purposes (e.g., [Greece](#)) and expanded governmental interference in HEI governance through legal reforms. For the latter three modes of intervention are evident: firstly, efforts to augment the participation of individuals from the business sector in HEI governance (e.g., [Sweden](#), [Denmark](#)); secondly, the amplification of governmental influence through individuals tied to government figures (e.g., [Hungary](#), Turkey, Belarus); and thirdly, the curtailment of student involvement in HE governance as well as autonomy and structure of student unions (e.g., in [Croatia](#), [Spain](#), [Slovenia](#), [France](#)).

Significantly, the European model of higher education democratic governance, particularly with regard to **student participation**, faces mounting challenges. Many European student unions report that both governmental actors and HEIs leadership are increasingly attempting to sideline students for political motives. In addition, student activists do experience punishments that can range from unjustified grades to other forms of pressure, expulsion or even lawsuits.

With regard to the **fundamental right to education**, especially undocumented migrants fall through the cracks as they are not able to enter HE. Paralleling the trend towards illiberalism worldwide, more and more students at-risk are seeking opportunities to finish their educational pathway in Europe, with several programmes having been established. In addition, the war against Ukraine has led to many international students having been denied to continue their educational pathways elsewhere in Europe, male and male-assigned at birth students are stuck at the borders, Ukrainian students are displaced and many have trouble finding housing etc.

II. Discrimination in Higher Education

Student poverty is on the rise all across Europe, with many not being able to afford basic costs of living anymore, paired with the effects of a growing housing shortage and inflation.

The lack of accessible infrastructure and assistive technologies and support has a significant impact on the academic success of **students with disabilities** which face constant structural barriers. Moreover, stigma and discrimination further exacerbate these challenges and create an unsafe environment, hindering the life of disabled students. Additionally, both the **psychological and physiological health** of students in Europe has deteriorated massively due to inadequate support and structural causes, amplified by the effects of the pandemic and the war against Ukraine.

Women and LGBTQIA+ students are often subjected to harassment and discrimination, which can make them feel unsafe and isolated. This can lead to stress and anxiety, which can impact their academic performance and overall well-being.

Racism against persons with migrational background and indigenous persons, **antiziganism** and **antisemitism** prevail in Europe. They face significant discriminatory challenges in accessing mainstream education, healthcare, housing, and sustainable employment coupled with everyday discriminatory experiences. These challenges are exacerbated by the lack of access to higher



education, which would provide opportunities for empowerment and poverty reduction. Additionally, more and more third-country nationals are subjected to paying study fees (e.g., [Norway](#), [Germany](#)).

Furthermore, as an effect of the pandemic the usage of **digital tools**, including the use of automated **proctoring software and AI**, has become more prominent in higher education. This has serious implications for students' human rights as these tools have been proven to [infringe students' privacy and data protection rights and discriminate against minorities](#).

2. What are your recommendations to decision and policymakers, including governments, civil society, international organizations, the United Nations, and others, to advance human rights in the future?

The European Students' Union believes that the following four aspects are key to improve the situation of students not only in Europe but worldwide:

- 1) The establishment of a Universal **Students Rights Charter** (paralleling the 1997 UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel,
- 2) The embedding of **fundamental values** (academic freedom, institutional autonomy, student and staff participation, responsibility of and for HE, academic integrity) in international and transnational **treaties**,
- 3) Sufficient **financing to combat commodification** tendencies,
- 4) The establishment of an **international students at-risk scheme** & the creation of **humanitarian visa schemes** for at-risk students,
- 5) **Systematic inclusion** of students and young people through **social dialogue** as well as during all **decision-making processes** and all stages of the **policy-cycle**.
- 6) Creation of **national action plans** encompassing policies to enhance access and inclusion in higher education.

For further questions please do not hesitate to reach out to us!

Kind regards,

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Vice-President of ESU