



Call for Input: Views of youth-led and youth-focused organizations and institutions on the future of human rights for the development of the Human Rights 75 Youth Declaration

Through its 202 member unions from 122 countries, the GSF is the democratic and independent voice of learners worldwide, representing the economic, social, cultural, and educational interests of more than 200 million secondary and tertiary students from across the globe towards the international community and its institutions. It was founded in 2020 by the All-Africa Student Union (AASU), the European Students' Union (ESU), the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU), the Commonwealth Students Association (CSA), and the Latin American and Caribbean Continental Students Organisation (OCLAE) as the formal unification of the world's largest student federations and their national organizations.

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?

Today the world is confronted with frightening tendencies of continued shrinking spaces for civil society, a global decline in democracies worldwide and human rights being increasingly threatened. According to the V-dem there has been a decline in democracy over the past decade leading to the 2021 levels of democracy comparable to those of 1989, the end of the Cold War¹². CIVICUS, which monitors the freedom of civil society, estimates that only 3.2% of the world's population currently lives in countries rated as "open," while nearly 28,5% of the world's population lives in countries rated as "closed."³ The Academic Freedom Index report 2023 shows that Academic freedom is in retreat for over 50% of the world's population. The report identifies 22 countries and territories where universities and scholars enjoy significantly less freedom today than 10 years ago. During the same period, academic freedom has improved in only five small countries, which benefits a mere 0.7% of

¹ https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf

² https://saih.no/assets/docs/SAIH-rapport_170323_v3.pdf

³ <https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings/>



the global population. In 152 countries the level has stagnated often “at far too low a level”.⁴

These tendencies are expressed worldwide through increasing attacks on freedom of expression, censoring of academic freedom and attacks on the autonomy of scholars, students and education institutions. Because students are active civic participants and leaders in movements for social and political reform, student activism can be seen as the “canary in the coal mine” pointing to societal tendencies far beyond the classrooms and student democracy.⁵ According to Scholars at Risk’s Academic Freedom Monitoring Project approximately 41% of the incidents that it identified between September 1, 2021, and August 31, 2022 were acts that repressed student expression.⁶ Beyond direct and violent attacks on students the report *Activism under Attack 2023* by SAIH, exemplifies more subtle ways of repression.⁷ These are in the report exemplified in Belarus where students participating in protests in 2020 would be threatened with expulsion by their universities. In Zimbabwe where students have been framed as terrorists and threats to the state. Or examples of intimidation of family members to gain information of activists or increasing online surveillance including states hacking activists’ phones. Merely being a member of a student union is sufficient reason for arrest in Myanmar. Violent attacks monitored as human rights violations are thus only the visible consequences of subtle repression limiting the freedom of individuals, civil society and educational institutions.

Engagement of higher education institutions, systems and students are essential to the fundamental transformations required to address the needs of young people in situations of conflict and fragility. Likewise, investment in higher education in emergency and humanitarian settings can anticipate and prepare students and refugee youth for sustainable futures, whether in their host country, home country or a third country. Today only 6% of refugees worldwide have access to higher education. This is only a slight increase from the 1% in 2019.⁸

⁴ <https://academic-freedom-index.net/>

⁵ https://saih.no/assets/docs/SAIH-rapport_170323_v3.pdf

⁶ <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/free-to-think-2022/>

⁷ https://saih.no/assets/docs/SAIH-rapport_170323_v3.pdf

⁸ <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/education/tertiary-education>



First Nations, aboriginal, and indigenous students continue to remain disenfranchised through social and economic exclusion, while encountering systemic and structural racism. In Canada, numerous unmarked graves were uncovered at former indigenous residential schools in British Columbia, believed to contain the remains of children forcibly taken from their families during the 1880s to the 1990s⁹. In Western Australia, Aborigine high school students are reported to suffer from blatant racism and bullying, including being told they “should be another Stolen Generation”¹⁰. Meanwhile in New Zealand, a letter from several non-Māori scientists¹¹ - declaring that Māori education was not a legitimate science - attracted global attention, following a letter signed by 6,800 professors, students and graduates against racism at a local university in 2020. Racism and segregation in education is still a real threat to ensuring quality education for all.

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

There is an enormous untapped potential in collaboration with independent, representative and accountable student unions. Supporting the ways that they advocate and organise supports autonomous youth led organisations’ strive towards human rights, academic freedom and increased democracy.

Concrete recommendations include:

- Promote monitoring mechanisms and methodologies to strengthen evidence based data of human rights violations against students
- Implementation of Student at Risk programmes and the creation of humanitarian visa schemes for at-risk students,
- The establishment of a Universal Students Rights Charter (paralleling the 1997 UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel)

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/28/world/canada/kamloops-mass-grave-residential-schools.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-22/broome-high-school-indigenous-students-speak-out-over-racism/13252688>

¹¹ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/pou-tiaki/300368356/university-academics-claim-that-mtauranga-mori-is-not-science-sparks-controversy>



- Promote the right of students to express, assemble and organize, and grant their effective implementation
- Ensure student representation in decision making processes relating to education and issues affecting students' lives at all levels from local to global
- Endorse student activism as part of the ecosystem of all levels of education and academic freedom
- Support an educational environment for cultural and social inclusion to uphold indigenous and minority cultures
- Promote the radical reform of segregated educational systems, to eliminate any discrimination
- Protect and advocate students' rights as human rights

These recommendations should be commitments and actions realised as a collaboration between young people and civil society, international organizations, the United Nations, and others, to advance human rights in the future.