



## **Human Rights and Solidarity Strategy**

When it comes to the status of human rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is still more of a dream than reality. We, as students, being change agents within a broader society, must always uphold the ideals of the human rights framework amongst ourselves and within the work that we carry out. We must once again remind ourselves that human rights are equal and inalienable to all human beings. Only if we respect human rights in all its aspects, we will be able to truly create positive change for all members of the society.

The European Students' Union (ESU) was founded on these exact principles and they have always remained an integral part of our work.

The strategy outlines our strategic priorities within the broader area perpetuating human rights. It is important to understand, that all the priorities should be viewed as equal. With this strategy, we hope to consolidate our current work that has been centred around the Students' Rights Charter of 2008. Much of this work has been realised through solidarity statements and partnerships with European institutions such as the Council of Europe and the European Union. Some priorities are directly action-orientated, while others are more closely related to our way of conducting work.

### **ESU's ethics**

The principles of human rights should be embedded in all of ESU's work by adopting a human rights-centred approach. Human and students' rights are two sides of the same coin that cannot be separated. As such, it is important that ESU not only promotes the Students' Rights Charter, but that the work is also continuously being linked with that of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other landmark documents.

ESU should be aware of its unique platform as a European organisation with strong NUSes that have local knowledge about problems and solutions. A direct consequence is that ESU should not involve itself in domestic issues unless prior approval has been given by the NUS (or NUSes) of that country.

In its public appearances, ESU should also consider the possible interpretations of its actions. This includes, but is not limited to, whom we cooperate with, but also whom we appear together with. A guideline is that ESU representatives should not appear together with high-level representatives of countries that are currently in an open conflict or have been within the past 6 months, are known to violate Human Rights systematically and gravely, or have violated Human Rights systematically

and gravely within the past year. This shall also apply for representatives and public figures known to support such conflicts and/or violations. Exceptions can only be made in cases where the Executive Committee (EC) deems it in accordance with the overall ideals and aims of the organisation and the representative has a direct connection to education-related issues. Any such decision must be made in majority and be properly documented. The EC answers to the Board for any such exceptions, and must present sufficient reasons for any exception at the next possible Board Meeting and inform the board clearly about the motivation at the moment of the decision. All participants must be provided with sufficient information to make an informed decision if they wish to attend such meetings or appear in the media with these representatives. The purpose of this guideline is to avoid that ESU sides in conflicts, and thus no longer can be viewed as an independent organisation.

Some of ESU's NUSes are operating in countries with grave human rights violations, discrimination of minority groups and/or conflicts taking place on a daily basis. While it is important that these NUSes are included in ESU on equal terms and not judged based on their respective government's actions, ESU should also attempt to avoid hosting statutory events in these countries. ESU should also have as a defining rule that every event should live up to the freedom of speech. This means that ESU should never be in a situation where any NUS or speaker feels restrained or being held from attending an ESU event due to their beliefs or opinions not being acceptable and safe to express. Also if the participants have reasoned concerns about their safety, no statutory event can be held in this country as long as this situation persists. It is also ESU's responsibility that all participants at events can act and speak freely within the limits of the Code of Conduct.

A first step is that the Board should be presented with a summary with the latest available UN Universal Periodic Review compiled by the Human Rights & Solidarity Coordinator before deciding on any Board Meeting hosts, so as to create an informed decision-process. All unions applying to host statutory events, must present comprehensive information about the security of the delegates, including but not limited to, how they will ensure safe access of marginalised groups and groups targeted in local conflicts

### **NUSes responsibilities**

All NUSes that are members of ESU are also expected to uphold the ideals of human rights and students' rights in their work. In this regard, direct attacks targeted towards students' rights should be answered by the NUS, though ESU should offer its capacities. Attacks on students' rights as stipulated by the Students' Rights Charter and attacks on academic freedom are of grave concern to ESU, and something that the NUSes are expected to pay specific attention to within their countries.

It is important to stress that the membership criteria of ESU should be fulfilled by the NUS at all times. ESU, being an umbrella organisation, is only as good as its members, and because of this, we cannot accept that members do not commit to the basic membership criteria. Should an NUS be deemed not to fulfil the membership criteria anymore, the Board should react to it, so as to protect ESU's reputation and work. It is important to remember that ESU already has a Membership Task Force, which is advised to look into such problems.

Based on the principle of mutual respect between ESU and its member unions, the NUSes are expected to treat ESU's work in the area in an adequate and respectful manner. In particular we want to emphasise the use of ESU statements on human rights, which should never be amended or published within another context without prior approval from ESU. It is important to note that these statements are often a result of sensitive and respectful discussions, in order to reach a strong statement that all NUSes can attest to. Misusing ESU's statements creates mistrust to ESU and harms our solidarity work.

### **Human rights capacity building**

ESU should structure its human rights capacity building within four pillars: information, awareness, support, and partnership. While the fundamentals of ESU's work lays with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other landmark documents, ESU will put the emphasis on human rights issues related to higher education, since that is our area of expertise.

ESU should be able to inform its members and other relevant stakeholders about human rights issues. More specifically, this could often be done through building training capacities that can be requested by the NUSes. The Human Rights and Solidarity Coordinator should not only carry out this capacity, but it should also be present within the Trainers Pool. The aim of the information and training should be to empower other students to raise awareness about and react to human rights violations.

Secondly, ESU should stay updated on human rights violations, and help to raise awareness of these, in a way that fosters positive progress and protects the involved persons or organisations from further attacks.

Thirdly, ESU should continue to support those students and organisations that are in need. It should be a priority for ESU to strengthen its work within this area, so as to create stronger support tools than solidarity statements only. It is important that ESU also possesses the capabilities to support in more direct ways such as through advocacy or trainings.

Lastly, ESU should continue to forge partnerships within the human rights area. While ESU holds a unique position being a student representative with strong support for human rights, we do still rely on support from other and larger organisations in order to achieve our goals. ESU already has existing partnerships with the Norwegian Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund (SAIH), but more partners should be added to list. However, it is important that the partnerships are entered with specific objectives agreed upon beforehand, so as to make the success of the partnership easier to measure.

### **Human rights advocacy**

It is important that ESU continues its strong advocacy for students' rights and human rights. The landscape of human rights is complex, but a few key-stakeholders are nevertheless identifiable. The Council of Europe, created to promote and enforce the European Convention on Human Rights, should continue to be one of ESU's closest partners in advocating the advancement of human rights within Europe and its bordering area.

Currently, the European Union is also increasing its work with development and presence within human rights. In a realisation of this, ESU should also strengthen its advocacy towards the EU Special Representative for Human Rights. The European External Action Service (EEAS) should also be informed about student rights in relevant contexts. It should be viewed as of paramount importance that the EU globally recognises the importance and protection of students' rights, as a means to promote social progress.

Two other important policy areas that can be defined at the moment are attacks on academic freedom and education in general. ESU's strong partnership with the Scholars at Risk Network (SAR) creates a unique platform to speak out against attacks on academic freedom. However, more of ESU's work within this area should be directed toward pushing issues within the member countries, where more subtle attacks are also taking place without ever being reported. In implementing this, ESU should look towards promoting SAR's existing Monitoring Tool, which will also help strengthen the data available for advocacy.

The last years' increase in armed conflicts around the world has sadly also caused more attacks on education and its institutions. ESU believes education is one of the primary drivers to achieve active citizenship and democracy, and that it also provides the means to reconciliation/peaceful conflict resolution and building the path toward democracy. As such, we should do everything in our power to prevent attacks on education from happening so that education and ultimately democratisation will be able to continue with the least possible impact. "The Global Guidelines to Protect Education from Attack", formerly known as the Lucens Guidelines, has already presented an answer to this challenge, and it is something that ESU should engage itself more in promoting in the future.

ESU's advocacy work should be based on its adopted policies, the Human Rights Strategy and the Students' Rights Charter, so as to ensure that the NUSes are ultimately in control of what is being advocated. In a realisation of this, ESU should also initiate a process with OBESSU that aims at evaluating the existing students' rights with specific attention given to areas that the Charter currently does not address such as the right to safe learning environments. ESU is committed to addressing human rights violations and supporting students and organisations in need.