

European Students' Union (ESU)

Fighting for students' rights since 1982

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Student Unions collectively withdraw from the UNESCO SDG4Youth Network

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The European Students' Union, together with the Global Student Forum, All-Africa Student Union, Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions and other national student unions representing students from secondary and tertiary education, announces its withdrawal from the UNESCO SDG4Youth Network.

After months of attempts to establish a respectful and constructive collaboration, we regretfully conclude that the opaque internal structures and the arbitrary, top-down facilitation of the network by the SDG4Youth Secretariat do not allow the creation of a meaningful space for student representation.

Students and their unions have always been instrumental in social progress and safeguarding democratic principles in their effort to build a better future for themselves and others. By definition, students are the driver and core benefactor of activities related to the SDG4: Quality education, and therefore need to be represented in associated processes on all levels of governance, including global education policy-making spaces such as UNESCO.

Despite our aspiration to co-shape this network in the interest of learners worldwide, the respect for our membership base and fundamental principles of democratic participation does not allow us to further engage with SDG4Youth.

Following extensive lobby efforts by a coalition of civil society actors to strengthen the participation of representative student unions in UNESCO's structures and to establish a student seat on the UNESCO SDG4 High-Level Steering Committee, students unions were after months of ignorance by UNESCO's Education 2030 department finally directed to the emerging SDG4Youth Network. This body, established in the fall 2021, would serve as a mechanism to elect the student and youth representative into the UNESCO SDG4 HLSC.

In conversations held with the SDG4Youth Secretariat prior to the network establishment, it was agreed that the SDG4Youth Network would become a democratic space for both

student and youth organisations, respecting the different demographics and ensuring a fair representation of both groups. These conversations led to UNESCO changing their initial plan to open the network to individuals and not organisations and resulted in the abolishment of the idea that candidates for the network should apply through TikTok videos.

Having secured the SDG4Youth Secretariat's commitment to let the network members decide on the network's structures, internal democracy and processes, the Global Student Forum launched a mobilisation effort to have regional and national student unions join the space. The SDG4Youth network Secretariat then proceeded with selecting the network members and rejected membership status to the European Students' Union, the All-African Student Union and the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions alongside countless other national unions representing millions of learners worldwide, while a great majority of youth representatives were admitted. Only after heavy pressure from partners in the education sector were the oldest and largest student unions in the world granted membership.

In March 2022, after months of deliberations and discussions addressing the need to recognise a distinction between the youth and student demographic and the organisational structures in place to represent the interests of the respective constituencies, a voting system was agreed upon that foresaw a fair division between youth and student seats. Two seats of the Executive Committee were reserved for youth representatives, two seats for student representatives and one seat was left as a neutral position that could be taken up by either youth or students. To greenlight this decision, the membership of the network participated in a survey that confirmed the network's wish for a separation of the student and youth constituency and separate elections for both, with a clear majority of 80 per cent of respondents in favour.

While the first round of elections was conducted as agreed upon, the SDG4Youth Network Secretariat then proceeded to unilaterally change the rules of the game during the second round of elections, announcing in regional meetings with the candidates that the quota is "not fair towards youth representatives" and therefore will no longer apply. Attempts by the student union members to resolve the unjustified and arbitrary interference of the Secretariat through an urgent meeting remained unsuccessful.

Unfortunately, this has not been the first time that the SDG4Youth Network Secretariat has confused the role of neutral facilitation with top-down political interference and added to a series of severe incidents over the past four months. SDG4Youth Network Secretariat members have been actively involved in omitting important questions, suppressing relevant political discussion between network members and within the interim council, frequently closing discussions prematurely to not allow critical voices to be heard, skipping student network members on the speakers list and pressuring network members to take down critical postings in the SDG4Youth Network communication group.

Needless to say, democratic and inclusive spaces, alongside elections without interference and disruptions are essential for us as student unions. Following this unfortunate string of

events and a wide range of negative experiences made, we collectively decided to withdraw from the SDG4 Youth network.

Participating in the network's mostly bi-weekly activities for almost 5 months, we made our best efforts to be proactive, civil, and resolve our differences with dialogue. However, dialogue is only possible if the parties involved listen to and respect each other's positions.

We look forward to continuing the fruitful cooperation with UNESCO on different projects and initiatives where student unions are being met the eye to eye, as equal partners, on the basis of reliable agreements that utilise the potential of mutual cooperation in respect to furthering the aims of SDG4.

We will continue to demand space and agency in UNESCO for the independent, democratic and accountable voices of learners, as practised on the institutional, national and regional levels, where democratic student unions and their representatives speak to policymakers and education leaders on behalf of their peers.