

## 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, will we 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 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. 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 National Unions of Students (NUSes) that have local knowledge about problems and solutions. A direct consequence is that ESU should not involve itself in domestic issues

without consulting and seeking approval from 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, whom we appear together with, as well as our partners and sponsors. A guideline is that ESU representatives should not appear together with high-level representatives of countries that are currently perpetrating aggressive and oppressive actions 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 by the EC 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.

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 take the following precautions when deciding whether to host statutory events in these countries. As a defining rule, every ESU event should live up to the freedom of speech and expression. 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. It is ESU's responsibility that all participants at events can act and speak freely within the limits of the [Code of Conduct](#) and that the values stated within ESU's [Anti-Discrimination statement](#) are upheld. Furthermore, if there are genuine concerns for the safety of participants after the decision to host the event was taken, the EC should investigate the issue and decide if the statutory event should or should not take place in this country. The board should be informed of all the details.

The Board should be presented with a summary of the latest available UN Universal Periodic Review and on present and relevant information related to human and students rights within the proposing host country, compiled by the Human Rights & Solidarity Coordinator before deciding on any Board Meeting hosts, so as to create an informed decision-process. The summary should outline the country's human rights,

covering aspects such as equality, legal frameworks, progress, violations, compliance with international human rights law and standards representation, and minority rights. All unions applying to host statutory events, must present comprehensive information about the autonomy of the event and the security of the delegates, including but not limited to, how they will ensure safe access of marginalised groups and groups targeted in local conflict.

## **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.

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 and student 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 through advocacy and training.

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. , but more partners should be added to the 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. ESU should engage actively with UNHCR Europe and its EARIN network to promote the rights of displaced and refugee students, and students seeking asylum, and students in refugee-like situations. In addition, ESU should promote the existing Students at Risk programs, and encourage the establishment of other programs for protection of student activists.

Currently, the European Union is also increasing its work with development and

presence within human rights. In a realisation of this, ESU should 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 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.

An increase in armed conflicts around the world sadly sees 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. ESU should engage itself more in promoting "The Global Guidelines to Protect Education from Attack", formerly known as the Lucens Guidelines, so that education and ultimately democratisation will be able to continue with the least possible impact.

Discrimination in education on the basis of personal characteristics such as political conviction, religion, race, ethnic or cultural origin, gender, sexual orientation, age, socio-economic standing, health (physical and mental), language or any disability remains a significant challenge in higher education. ESU recognizes the importance of combating it as it undermines the principles of equity and diversity essential for a thriving academic community. ESU should engage in promoting the Convention against Discrimination in Education (CADE), a UNESCO convention that serves as a framework for eliminating discrimination in education, so that education can be accessible and equitable.

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.