

Vienna Declaration on the Human Right to Quality Education (2021)

Introduction and background

A global conference on the human right to quality education took place at the University of Vienna from 21 to 23 September 2021. The occasion was the 100th anniversary of World University Service (WUS). WUS began in 1920 as European Student Relief to address the plight of students and teachers at the University of Vienna and quickly spread to other war-torn universities in Austria and beyond. This concern for the right to education continues to this day as exemplified by the centenary conference.

The Conference was organized by the WUS committees of Austria, Canada and Germany together with the Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Research, the University of Vienna and the Central European University (CEU) and brought together educators and policy-makers as well as experts from international agencies like UNHCR, OHCHR, UNESCO, IOM, the Council of Europe and the European Union, civil society and students from different countries of all five continents.

Human rights and democracy are suffering a backlash. At the same time, facing existential global threats and the ambitious demands of the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development (hereafter Agenda 2030), only more holistic and dedicated approaches can successfully contribute to educating a new generation of engaged citizens who are able to successfully develop comprehensive and sustainable solutions. Therefore, we need a reconfirmation and new impetus also in the realization of the human right to quality education. This needs to be done in a step-by-step approach in cooperation of all actors with a twofold focus: on the needs of students and educators as well as on the responsibility of educational institutions and of political decisionmakers on all levels.

This Declaration addresses itself to all stakeholders, starting from the participants of the conference, academics, ministries of education, international organizations, civil society and the private sector.

The Declaration

Accordingly, the Global Conference on the Human Right to Quality Education in Vienna on 23rd September 2021 adopts the following declaration:

Not only is the human right to education part of many binding universal and regional agreements such as the UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the European Convention on Human Rights, quality education is indeed indispensable for achieving sustainable development, including the universal commitments within the Agenda 2030 and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Education is notably enshrined in SDG 4, which aims at ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all – as an end in itself as well as a strong lever in reaching the other goals.

In particular, SDG 4 urges to ensure that everyone completes free primary and secondary equitable and quality education and for everyone to have equal access to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including access to universities. Gender disparities in education are to be eliminated and equal access to all levels of education and vocational training is to be provided for everybody, in particular the

vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, and in particular children in vulnerable situations. Para. 7 of SDG 4 specifically requires to ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

Recognizing and underlining that the Sustainable Development Goals are a challenge and an opportunity for all organizations, institutions and citizens, the Global Conference considered how they can be achieved as early as possible, with particular reference to higher education. In doing so it followed a three-step approach of first identifying the problems and opportunities at stake, then analyzing the suitability of ongoing efforts to address them and finally making pertinent proposals for an agenda of action for the future. General access to quality education is a human right and also a matter of global justice. This is more important than ever as COVID-19 has potentially wiped out 20 years of education gains.¹ As underlined by a conference of European Ministers of Education organized by the Council of Europe in October 2020, we must not allow the health crisis to turn into a crisis of democracy. Education is key to any endeavor to make our societies sustainable and resilient.

Inclusive Quality Education for Persons in Vulnerable Situations and Disadvantaged Groups

Vulnerability often is not the result of natural conditions but of policies which need to be transformed. The resultant inequalities affect life-chances of individuals, groups and even entire nations in a globalized world. They are perpetuated either deliberately or through ignorance and inaction by those responsible. Within a right to education framework, disadvantaged groups can be supported in gaining entry to inclusive and equitable quality education through special consideration and assistance, though ultimately the systemic barriers to access and full participation must be addressed.

Quality education as defined in SDG 4.7 can provide economic and social benefits, foster cohesion and reduce inequality. Throughout its 100-year history, WUS has been committed to providing education to vulnerable groups, and in 1968 became the first NGO to sign an agreement with the UNHCR to support education programs in Africa. The growing number of refugee and migrant children, and related groups worldwide has increased the need for more determined efforts to provide them with access to quality education, particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels where enrollment rates of refugee children are only 34% and 5%, respectively. The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in significant impacts as large numbers of students and teachers were unable to continue the educational work. Vulnerable learners, including refugees, have been hit the hardest. They are at a higher risk of negative impacts on child protection and education outcomes, including dropping out of school. The pandemic's impact on the mobility of international students has been severe. Students have been stranded both at home and at school, many have interrupted their education, and many have seen international student exchanges cancelled.

Disruption of schooling or learning opportunities is not only an interruption to education, but also disconnects individuals from protective networks which can make them more vulnerable and at a higher risk of violence and exploitation. Girls remain in a dire situation of frequent discrimination, sometimes taken to the extreme, like in the case of Afghanistan. Also, girls might be forced into early marriage or trafficking. Access to quality education for the poor and specific vulnerable groups like marginalized minorities as exemplified by Roma children, children with disabilities or children living in poverty remains inadequate. Education in a child's own language can be crucial for successful learning outcomes.

Measures undertaken by national governments, international organizations, civil society, private sector and initiatives from educational institutions themselves to counter these challenges require continued support and

¹ Based on evidence gathered in the UN's 2021 Sustainable Development Report.

attention. Much still needs to be done to provide quality education to vulnerable groups around the world so that no one is left behind. This includes ramping up vaccine access around the world so that students can safely access learning opportunities.

There are existing practices that can be leveraged and built upon in order to accelerate progress. For example, ongoing efforts are being made by IOM and partners to provide practical guidance and tools to development practitioners in the education sector to integrate migration into their work. This helps to ensure that interventions uphold the rights of migrants, leverage the potential of migration, and contribute to policy coherence and sustainable development more broadly. There has been increasing innovation and global attention to digital/online learning as a result. Still, the digital divide remains a crucial barrier to achieving online education's full potential to include migrants and refugees.

The Global conference emphasizes the key principle of Agenda 2030 that “nobody must be left behind”, which also is of particular relevance for the human right to education. It recommends additional and concerted efforts of all stakeholders to implement the SDGs, including SDG 4, in its entirety with a particular focus on persons in vulnerable situations. New opportunities from partnerships between all humanitarian, development and government actors involved need to be identified and put in action to strengthen national education systems so they are able to include refugee and migrant children into public schools.

Shrinking Civic Space and Academic Freedom

Recent years have shown a trend of shrinking civic space which has also affected educational institutions, in particular universities. Students and teachers protesting against authoritarian regimes as in Afghanistan, Belarus, Hong Kong, Myanmar or Turkey have been dismissed from their universities. Certain states like Hungary have forced universities to give up (part of) their autonomy. Teachers and students face obstacles from authoritarian interference. Academic freedom and the autonomy of institutions of higher learning as well as student rights are under attack again as in the 80s when WUS responded with the Lima Declaration on Academic Freedom and Autonomy of Institutions of Higher Education.² International academic solidarity remains as important as ever. However, also the commodification of education may lead to restrictions of academic freedom. Universities should not be forced to accept research contracts for unethical purposes.

These threatening developments have been denounced by civil society and NGOs as well as by international and European institutions. At the UN level the Report on academic freedom and the freedom of opinion and expression of 2020 calls for stronger monitoring mechanisms on the state of academic freedom in the different countries. The recently created “Academic Freedom Index” provides much needed data on the situation in an increasing number of countries. Higher education institutions under pressure have resisted or relocated experiencing important international solidarity. NGOs like Scholars at Risk have created an international network of universities providing opportunities for scholars who had to leave their universities. Some opportunities have also been created by interested governments for persecuted students, but they cannot by far meet the growing demand.

Building on World University Service's and other institutions like Scholars at Risk or the Global Campus of Human Rights long and deep engagement in these areas, the Global Conference emphasizes that academic freedom is part of human rights and also necessary to achieve the objectives of the human right to education. It recommends all interested actors to join forces to develop stronger tools of international solidarity against authoritarian interferences, but also restrictions for profit purposes. Quality assurance of education is to be ensured in order to provide students with quality education as a right. The human right to education also includes the right to human rights education for all, as enshrined in the UN Declaration on Human Rights

² [wus-lima-englisch.pdf \(wusgermany.de\)](#)

Education. Existing networks supporting academic freedom should be strengthened and action taken in international fora as well as locally to counter violations of academic freedom.

Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship

Education as a fundamental human right is indispensable for the achievement of sustainable development and the necessary transformation of our global society according to the Agenda 2030. Education is not only essential for all individuals to maximize their capabilities and livelihood opportunities, but it is also important for building peaceful and prosperous societies.³ Sustainable development, having been identified by Agenda 2030 as a key to the future of our planet, has gained increasing attention globally, but still is not recognized in its importance everywhere. Efforts undertaken to include it in the educational process in a holistic way are still insufficient. This is partly due to a lack of international awareness and cooperation, but also to cultural factors. For example, indigenous knowledge would need much better recognition. The global citizenship approach offers a common identity as citizens of this world with a responsibility to preserve it for future generations. It thus can make an important contribution to creating higher awareness and capacity for action towards sustainable development.

Efforts have been undertaken by many actors ranging from international organizations to civil society, from academic networks to student and also children's and youth initiatives like Fridays for Future to create a higher awareness of the need for a more sustainable development which will leave nobody behind. Science is providing clear indications for the need for imminent change of patterns of life for the sake of our and future generations. However, in practice the commitments by states are insufficient and sustainable development education not generally established. There are examples of good practice but these are often of limited extent and dependent on a few committed individual educators. Much more needs to be done, and on a more systematic basis.

The Global Conference emphasizes that this is a key issue for the future of our world, where all actors have a responsibility to take serious measures. Education for Sustainable Development must lay the ground for the changes needed which require a transformative approach shaping knowledge, skills, values and attitudes. It needs to be included in all forms of education. Future education needs to follow an interdisciplinary and cross-curricular approach, for learners to understand sustainability challenges, its inequalities and their complex interlinkages, to be able to explore disruptive ideas and alternative solutions, from different perspectives. Global inequalities have to be addressed transparently in order to achieve a more just burden-sharing and international solidarity. It must strive for equity of access and social inclusion and actively counter all forms of discrimination and alienation.

Global problems require global solidarity, the lack of which is one of the main problems of today's polycrisis. Global Citizenship Education (GCED) can help to take off the glasses of "methodological nationalism" and teach students to act as competent citizens of the world. At the same time, it criticizes the false cosmopolitanism of a neoliberal "business globalization". It helps to recognize that we form a human community of destiny in the "homeland Earth" (Edgar Morin). GCED teaches solidarity *on* and *with* this planet. This means solidarity among all humans as well with the entire biosphere, on whose flourishing our lives depend. It also means combating global injustice as well as post-colonial dependencies in knowledge production and transmission.

Agenda of Action - Common Commitments

1. Quality education needs to be implemented on all levels of education, starting at early care and pre-primary education, including quality primary and secondary education, technical, vocational and tertiary education. It needs to encompass a social dimension, including equal access. All actors need to

³ This framing is taken from the forthcoming Toolkit for Integrating Migration into Education Interventions (IOM, 2022).

recognize that the human right to quality education is key for the development of the human personality and the achievement of the purposes of the United Nations, in particular a global transformation in terms of the Agenda 2030. There is no better investment in the future than in education. We support efforts to monitor progress on these objectives, by multilateral organizations, national governments and civil society networks.

2. Several factors make changes urgent, like the authoritarian threats to the human right to quality education and academic freedom in several parts of the world, the health pandemic or the scientific findings on climate change. Strengthening of resilience of educational institutions is needed to counter such trends.
3. In view of the social function of higher education institutions, in particular universities there should be an intensified dialogue of educational institutions with society as to how education can best contribute to address global problems, in particular achieving positive transformation in terms of the Agenda 2030. As a consequence, these institutions and all actors working in them need to be open for necessary transformations.
4. There is a need for education to be transformative, to empower learners. This also requires educators and policy-makers alike to better listen to and address the needs of learners. Quality education and science should strengthen interdisciplinary approaches needed to deal with cross-cutting problems. Quality education should involve and strengthen interdisciplinarity. Simple solutions to critical problems are increasingly inadequate.
5. Additional efforts are needed to counter racism and all forms of discrimination in education, including disinformation or exclusions based on a “cancel culture”; a “right to provoke” should be recognized as part of the freedom of expression and academic freedom within the limits of ethical considerations. Human rights education must be an essential part of the human right to quality education, which includes education for sustainable development.
6. Educational services need to work better for all persons in vulnerable situations, in particular women and girls, refugees and migrants, the disabled, minorities, people suffering mental illness, and the poor - in an inclusive way. Governments and post-secondary institutions need to ensure that digital means, psychological support, and COVID 19 safety measures are provided to all who still lack access. Teachers need to be supported with the skills and knowledge, learning materials and technologies that enable students to thrive in these contexts.
7. In response to threats against the right to education and academic freedom there is a need for international academic solidarity and political support, and the creation of alternative educational opportunities like study opportunities, grants and scholarships. The enriching role of foreign students and internationalization of education in general for the sharing of knowledge and promoting international understanding should be better recognized.
8. To address the educational needs of exiled scholars, consideration should be given to the establishment of a Digital Exile University that offers accredited study programs in cooperation with partner universities and offers corresponding degrees as double degrees. Other possibilities are the offering of specific study programs on a digital basis by competent universities and educational institutions. Similar consideration should be given to the creation of durable resettlement and educational pathways to displaced students.
9. International academic cooperation and cooperation of educational institutions with all others actors in society, from international organizations to civil society and the private sector should result in joint action for a more effective response to the problems identified.
10. The task before us is immense. Achieving sustainable development requires an effort that must engage us all. To achieve change that will avert global disaster while protecting and enhancing human rights will require inclusive quality education for all as an urgent necessity.