

May 2026



Circle U.
Student Union

Political stance.

Freedom of Expression within Circle U.

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Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to articulate a clear and common position on Freedom of Expression, Academic Freedom, and the right to peaceful protest for students within the Circle U. alliance. It seeks to outline the fundamental principles that must guide universities when addressing student expression, particularly in contexts of political tension, protest, and dissent. By defining minimum standards and shared responsibilities, this paper aims to strengthen the protection of students' rights across alliance institutions, while ensuring that Freedom of Expression is upheld as a core democratic and academic value.

Furthermore, the paper intends to provide guidance for Circle U. universities on how to respond proportionately, consistently, and transparently to student expression and protest. It emphasizes the role of universities not only as educational institutions, but as civic actors with a responsibility to foster open dialogue, critical engagement, and democratic participation. Through this position, the Circle U. Student Union calls for a unified alliance-wide commitment to safeguarding Freedom of Expression in both policy and practice.

Motivation and Problem Background

Across Europe and beyond, universities are operating in an increasingly polarized political environment, where Freedom of Expression and Academic Freedom are facing growing pressure. Students are encountering a widening range of constraints, from restrictive protest regulations and unclear disciplinary procedures to direct academic penalties and intimidation linked to their engagement in political or social causes. These developments raise serious concerns about the ability of students to participate freely and safely in university life and in broader democratic processes.

Historically, universities have been spaces where protests and critical reflections on societal developments emerge. They have often been among the first institutions to identify and challenge social and political shortcomings, reinforcing their role as spaces of democratic engagement. However, freedom of expression at universities has been and continues to be influenced by the political and governmental developments and other societal actors.

A prominent example of this is the student-led protest in Serbia which started out by demanding transparency and investigation from the government following the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy in November 2024 which killed 16 people. The students began occupying university buildings ("Studenti u Blokadi") with their protest

evolving into one of the biggest in recent Serbian history led by students. They have since faced severe repressions and violence from the government. Initially, their demands were closely related to the tragic accident, e.g. they demanded the publication of all documents concerning the renovation of Novi Sad railway station.¹ However, the government did not respond to the students' demands. The university and most of its staff stand in solidarity with their students, also facing cuts in funding, and infringement on academic freedom. At this stage in the protest, the students are demanding fair and extraordinary parliamentary elections in order to achieve systemic change and transform democracy in Serbia.

While cases vary in severity, such examples reveal a broader trend that warrants collective attention: the normalization of limitations on student expression under the guise of order, neutrality, or institutional reputation. In a multinational alliance such as Circle U., these challenges are further complicated by differing legal frameworks, protest cultures, and administrative practices.

In another context, the case of a student at King's College London, Usama Ghanem, raises questions about how regulations and student activism intersect. It is yet to be judicially determined whether Ghanem was acting within the United Kingdom's legal framework in his protests in solidarity with the Palestinian cause in 2025.² Yet, this example highlights the potential impact that university decisions can have on individual students' academic trajectories, especially when student visas and residence permits are affected. Furthermore, it prompts reflection on how universities can support students when external regulatory measures affect their ability to continue their studies.

This paper is therefore motivated by the need to address these disparities, to prevent the erosion of students' rights, and to reaffirm the university as a space for free inquiry, debate, and democratic engagement.

Freedom of Expression for students

The Circle U. alliance has publicly supported the largely student-led protests in Serbia and underscored the importance of protecting academic freedom and the participatory role of students in university life and society at large as a critical voice. The events in Belgrade illustrate a wider pattern of escalating constraints: restrictions on academic research, disciplinary measures directed at students for protest activity, and other

¹ Associated Press. 2024. "Protesters Demand Arrests over Train Station Roof Collapse That Killed 14 People in Serbia." AP News. November 3.

<https://apnews.com/article/serbia-roof-collapse-protest-corruption-241a51e273970d7a8fd85b807210fdf7>.

² Haq, Sana Noor. 2026. "An Egyptian University Student Lost His Visa after Pro-Palestinian Protests. He Could Be Deported within Days." CNN. January 23.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2026/01/23/europe/usama-ghanem-kcl-visa-revoked-intl-cmd>.

measures that curtail expression. While Serbia represents a particularly severe case, these developments prompt a reassessment of policy across alliance institutions regarding students' rights to protest and speak freely, and the need to recognise students as essential contributors to the university's intellectual and civic community, and how best to preserve their rights.

Not only governments, but also universities themselves directly influence students' freedom of expression with regulatory measures and reaction to protest movements at university facilities. Every Higher Education institution has the duty to protect and uphold freedom of expression. This includes treating peaceful political events equally to allow for the representation of diverse opinions. Across some universities, there are differences in how Pro-Palestinian protest is treated compared to other political protest, as perceived by students. Universities should proactively encourage best practice, allowing students to understand and collaborate on building appropriate measures, to address concerns related to student activism and the space it should be able to take up in university culture.

For example, the University of Oslo has experienced a significant student movement that originated as a grassroots political movement known as «Studenter for Palestina». An encampment was established on campus outside the rectorate building and remained in place for half a year. In May 2025, more than 50 students occupied the rectorate building.³ The situation was ultimately resolved after the rector met with representatives of the student movement to discuss possible solutions. Students from the same movement also formed a political list in the University of Oslo Student Parliament, through this platform, they continuously advocated and influenced university policy. This example shows how universities can support freedom of expression by allowing space for protest and dialogue, and by providing institutional channels for students to express their positions and influence university policy.

Freedom of speech, the right of association, and the right to peaceful protests are the fundamental principles that dictate our participation in society. Here universities have a special role to play as the Magna Charta Universitatum (2020) states, *as a site for free enquiry and debate, distinguished by its openness to dialogue and rejection of intolerance. Student engagement – and engagement of the university community members at large – is a key condition to the realisation of this principle. Any action that undermines student engagement goes against our core mission.*

The range of challenges confronting students, from the most serious violations to more subtle constraints and pressures, offer a revealing measure of the condition of our

³ Mohn, Dagny Mathilde, Rostami, Iliad. 2025. "Demonstranter Har Tatt Seg Inn I Lucy Smiths Hus." Universitas, May 5.
<https://www.universitas.no/demonstranter-har-tatt-seg-inn-i-lucy-smiths-hus/388029>.

universities and carries implications beyond the university campus. A thorough appraisal of present circumstances and the directions institutions are taking is essential to ensure that any interventions are proportionate and serve society's broader interests.

Rights, responsibilities, and minimum standards for students

Students across European universities enjoy strong protections for Freedom of Expression and Academic Freedom, supported by national laws and the European Convention on Human Rights. These rights allow students not only to voice personal opinions but also to explore, question, and debate ideas freely within their academic work. While universities may apply codes of conduct to ensure respectful and safe environments, such rules must be balanced with the fundamental principles of open inquiry and free expression. Together, these freedoms form a core foundation of student life and the broader academic culture across Europe. To ensure this, universities must protect their students from academic persecution and from academic penalties, when students exercise these rights to pursue their educational goals or promote their respective academic field.

Just as students' rights, Freedom of Expression must be ensured so must their right to peaceful protest. This includes the right to organize and participate in peaceful protests and demonstrations. These activities ensure that students can voice concerns, advocate for change, and engage in public debate without undue interference. While universities may set reasonable guidelines to maintain safety and prevent disruption of academic activities, such measures must respect students' fundamental freedoms. As a result, peaceful protest remains a legitimate form of student participation in democratic life and an important way for students to influence their societies. These activities must therefore be protected by the universities in the same way as the right to academic freedom.

Barriers and how to remove them

1. **Multinational alliance barrier:** different protest cultures and legal restrictions
Suggested method: Use the alliance to support students facing more restrictive measures, communicate on best practices and develop minimum standards for our alliance

2. **Administrative barrier:** slow, unclear or inconsistent protest rules and decision-making

Suggested method: Have and make accessible clear and easily applicable protest rules promoting safety and civil disagreement; apply sanctions consistently across departments and campuses

3. **Safety barriers:** intimidation and targeting of student activists

Suggested method: Provide students with wellbeing and legal support as well as an academic retaliation-free environment by avoiding academic penalties for peaceful protests

4. **Communication/Awareness barrier:** misinformation about what is authorized and students' rights

Suggested method: Provide student-friendly guidelines on Freedom of Expression and efficiently disseminate them; make sure student representatives are frequently briefed on the topic

The Role of Circle U. Institutions, going forward

Moving forward, Circle U. institutions must play an active role in ensuring that Freedom of Expression is protected in practice, not only in principle.

- **Monitor** violations and **respond** to them **efficiently** at a local level
- **Guarantee safe spaces for student protests** and have personnel trained for **deescalation processes**
- **Offer legal support for students** being confronted with ongoing academic sanctions
- **Offer wellbeing support for students** after harassment or acts of violence
- **Make Freedom of Expression an institutionalized democratic practice** by making sure they are included in all levels of governance, locally and alliance-wide
- **Promote and facilitate open debates and safe disagreements** by organizing panels and fostering a tolerant and open-minded classroom environment
- **Share best practices and document challenges between universities** of the alliance
- **Use Circle U.'s collective voice to support sensitive cases** by having joint statements and calling out excessive disciplinary measures
- **Establish minimum standards at an alliance level** by having clear rules protecting academic freedom, transparent protest guidelines that also protect students from penalties

Conclusion

Freedom of Expression, Academic Freedom, and the right to peaceful protest are essential pillars of democratic societies and core principles of higher education. Universities must remain spaces where students can think critically, express dissenting views, and engage actively in societal debates without fear of retaliation or academic consequences. When these freedoms are weakened, the role of universities as democratic institutions is fundamentally undermined.

This paper has demonstrated that students across Europe are increasingly confronted with barriers to exercising their rights, ranging from unclear administrative procedures to direct intimidation and academic sanctions. While the intensity of these challenges varies across national and institutional contexts, their cumulative effect points to a broader and deeply concerning trend. In a multinational alliance such as Circle U., these disparities risk creating unequal conditions for student participation and expression, making a shared commitment and coordinated response both necessary and urgent.

The Circle U. alliance has a responsibility to ensure that freedom of expression is protected consistently and effectively across all member institutions. This requires more than symbolic support; it demands clear minimum standards, transparent procedures, and concrete institutional safeguards that protect students in practice. By monitoring violations, supporting affected students, fostering open and respectful debate, and using its collective voice to respond to infringements, Circle U. can play a decisive role in strengthening academic freedom and democratic engagement.

The Circle U. Student Union therefore calls on all alliance institutions to reaffirm their commitment to freedom of expression as a lived and institutionalized democratic practice. By actively involving students in Governance, protecting the right to peaceful protest, and ensuring that no student faces academic or personal repercussions for exercising their fundamental rights, Circle U. universities can uphold their mission as spaces of free inquiry, dialogue, and democratic responsibility, both within the university and in society at large.