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YOUTH AS AGENT OF CHANGE IN HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

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- I am speaking from the point of view of law students, and more specifically from the point of view of the European Law Students' Association (ELSA).
- When human rights education differs in the 40 member countries of ELSA, it is of course hard to generalize the state of the education when it concerns all the law students; I will draw some general lines one hand regarding the role of the law students' associations in human rights education, and on other hand, of the specifics concerning law students compared to other students in connection to human rights education.
- As I think of the European Law Students' Association as a platform for human rights education, it brings me to the origins of the association. It leads me to think of the five law students from Poland, Hungary, West Germany and Austria who met in a train somewhere in Poland back in 1981 and started discussing the legal education and the legal systems in their countries. From this discussion in the early 80's the European Law Students' Association has developed into a network of 30.000 law students and young lawyers that is represented in 40 European countries. In the minds of those five students Europe was heading towards unity and their idea was to bring European law students together in order to share cultural experiences and legal knowledge – sharing, and also respecting.
- ELSA has a commitment to human rights awareness, human rights education and the respect of the rule of law. According to its philosophy, ELSA has the vision of striving towards “a just world in which there is respect for human dignity and cultural diversity”. Even if lawyers would stereotypically be considered as cold or analytic, I find it a healthy sign that the world's largest association for law students and young lawyers emphasizes human rights in its vision, in its purpose of existence and in its activities.
- A challenge for law students regarding human rights is the quest for impartial approach. Also in the human rights statement of ELSA it is acknowledged that “ELSA shall strive to be recognized for a strictly legal, academic and impartial approach towards human rights”.
- What makes it a challenge for law students is that often the funds granted to human rights education are allocated to projects that offer something concrete for the people concerned and to projects that concern human rights in action, rather than to projects that focus on the academic approach. This is a somewhat narrow perspective, since a scientific human rights education serves as a means to make the law students socially responsible, thereby also contributing to the promotion of human rights. We do need skilled human rights lawyers, but even more we need socially responsible corporate lawyers, judges and advocates.
- What can law students' associations – and more specifically ELSA – then offer to the promotion of human rights education?

- Firstly, it is clear that our activities complement the traditional curricula of universities, whether they include human rights education or not in the specific universities. However, the approach that ELSA has is that the commitment towards human rights education should not show only as having human rights as a topic of our events, but also in the point of view of which the topic is examined. A good example is an international conference that will be held in Helsinki, Finland in two weeks with the topic of Intellectual Property Law and Human Rights. Traditionally, the human rights are covered in legal education from the point of view of treaties and conventions in connection to international law. As ELSA brings together law students and young lawyers that are interested in a wide range of the legal sphere, we are also able to offer them a human rights approach that is connected to the various aspects of law. Human rights should be studied as a part of the essence and principles of different areas of law, with a horizontal approach.
- Secondly, our activities as such promote the culture of human rights. When bringing together law students from different parts of Europe, and also through the cooperation that we have with the law students' associations in other continents, the connections between law students are strengthened. When working with students with different backgrounds it is unavoidable to run into different points of view. For the sake of the project or task at hand, it is necessary to step over the hurdle of cultural barriers and reach mutual understanding. The first hand information and experiences one gains through the personal connections with students from various countries makes the individuals more sensitive to the human rights protection – or the lack of it – in different countries. Through personal contacts and cooperation the human rights protection is no longer a statistic or a lesson of legal history, but the background of a person, the background of a family, the background of a friend.
- Thirdly, the associations of law students offer their members the possibility to get in closer contact with the international institutions that deal with human rights, such as the Council of Europe or the United Nations. Through our activities, such as Study Visits to institutions, the legal procedures and decision-making are brought to life. For example ELSA has a Human Rights Partnership with the Council of Europe, the results of which can be seen as promotion of human rights education.
- As such, the association offers a platform for the human rights education. During decades the association has built up knowhow on organizing events and projects, and therefore these themes can reach the new generations of law students in the most efficient way. Because our activities are organized by students themselves, they gain the valuable knowledge and skills in order to have the means to defend their own opinions, starting from language skills to management and cultural understanding.
- By these activities, firstly by offering a human rights point of view on the legal area, secondly by bringing law students together and thirdly by cooperating with the international human rights organizations, the European Law Students' Association can contribute to human rights education. With these means we hope to make tomorrow's lawyers – tomorrow's decision-

makers – sensitive to human rights issues and socially responsible. With these means we wish to create a culture of human rights.