



**ECOSOC
YOUTH FORUM**

YOUTH2030

Economic and Social Council Youth Forum

**“Youth shaping sustainable and innovative solutions:
Reinforcing the 2030 Agenda and eradicating poverty in
times of crises”**

SIDE EVENT AT THE 2024 ECOSOC YOUTH FORUM

Supporting the Right to Higher Education of Students with Disabilities

[18 April 2024, 9:30-11:00 AM EST Time]

Doha CR, UNOSSC Office, 304 E 45th Street, FF-11th FL

Online: On zoom

Organized by:

- UNESCO IESALC - [UNESCO IESALC](#),
- Queen’s University (Canada) [Queen’s University \(Canada\)](#)

In collaboration with:

- Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities [Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities](#)
- Office of the High Commission for Human Right [OHCHR](#)
- Global Student Forum [Global Student Forum](#)
- UNESCO SDG4 Youth and Network - [UNESCO SDG4 Youth & Student Network](#)
- University of Gondar (Ethiopia) [University of Gondar \(Ethiopia\)](#)

Background on the side-event

This side event aimed to address the right to higher education for youth with disabilities as a fundamental stepstone to put an end to inequalities and poverty. By highlighting the contribution of SDG 4 to achieving SDG 1, while counting on expanded collaboration by activating SDG 17 with partnerships targeted at youth with disabilities, the debates were focused on good practices, obstacles and further solutions to enhance access, permanence and graduation of students with disabilities in higher education institutions across the world. Stakeholders from different backgrounds were expected to investigate together on opportunities and avenues for collaboration, creating a conducive space for knowledge sharing, resource mobilization, data collection, and innovation in assistive technologies and innovative pedagogies and techniques catered for the diverse needs of students with disabilities.

Key Issues discussed

- **Fundamental right to higher education for all individuals and the importance of inclusive practices as well as its impacts in realizing this right:** It is important to address the inclusivity gap that affects students with disability in higher education. Not only by adapting the infrastructure of the campuses to improve physical accessibility but also changing institutional cultures and mindsets to create a safer environment, since discriminatory practices still happen, even when inclusive policies are in place.
- **The need for a holistic approach to inclusive higher education:** There must be substantial support to enable accessibility, financial support and adequate facilities to fight structural discrimination. Soft skills, holistic approach and technological resources to individualize the attention to every student's needs are essential.
- **Institutional efforts to ensure rights for students with disabilities and its relevance to institutional efforts towards the realization of SDGs:** Youth with disabilities face limited access to higher education which directly translates into less opportunities for their future. Besides, intersectional identities constitute a source of overlapped forms of marginalization who multiply the challenges when it comes to being effectively included in educational practices. There is a pressing need to understand disaggregated data and monitoring and evaluation systems to create responsible measures and move stronger in advocacy.
- **Participation of students with disabilities in decision-making processes:** Often the voices of students with disabilities are excluded from the room where decisions are made. There is a need to bring students with disabilities into decision-making processes, following the guiding principle of “nothing about us without us”. Having a saying at all levels of Higher Education policy and delivery is essential to create supportive, inclusive equitable systems to support students with disabilities.
- **Strike to create an educational landscape for the development of every student with disability:** There is a need to ensure that all stakeholders in Higher Education promote diverse

representation of leadership, encourage institutional support for intellectual or mental disabilities and address personal and institutional biases. Technology can play an enabling role in expanding participation and integration of students with disabilities and all students as a learning community.

- **Opportunity for cooperation:** There is a pressing need for the participation of a wider group of stakeholders that include the public and private sector, academia, civil society, etc. as Higher Education does not stand by itself.
- **Educators have a key role to create an inclusive environment for students with disabilities:** To address marginalization, educators must rely on good practices promoting innovation and creating meaningful partnerships as well as keeping an open mind to adapt and learn from the unique experience of each student. We need to make sure there is adequate institutional support and guidance to train teachers to accommodate their classrooms for supporting youth advocacy and using the institutions for action.
- **Showcasing different pathways to inclusion:** The Disability Framework Law in South Africa is the result of extensive consultations with different stakeholders supporting the rights of students with disabilities. In Brazil, the Federal Government is financing inclusion quotas in Higher Education to ensure that a percentage of students with disabilities and other marginalized groups are included in Higher Education. Other examples shared by the speakers were the investment in resources to bring classroom equipment and resources and the creation of companion student programs to promote sign language literacy.
- **Comprehensive training to relevant stakeholders to enhance both policy making and project implementation:** There is a need to adapt of current educational practices to individualize the student needs. There was an acknowledgement of UNESCO's responsibility to improve capacity building and training for students with disabilities to achieve decision-making and policy negotiation spheres.
- **Impacts of technology and innovations:** Technology can break down barriers. Online platforms and virtual classrooms can improve the experiences for students with disabilities. Both educators and students need upskilling to meaningfully incorporate these tools into learning experiences. Data protection, lack of access to assisted technologies and biases against AI and emerging technologies need to be addressed as possible challenges.

Key recommendations for action

- **Bridging the Inclusivity Gap:** Advocate for concerted efforts to bridge this gap, with an emphasis on the recognition and targeting of the unique challenges faced by students with disabilities; Drive progress on inclusivity and accessibility for students with disabilities, promote increased awareness, learning from successful initiatives, and expand capacity

building are some of the actions Mr. Eugenio Ciarlandi (Student Activist for Equity Deserving Groups) and Ms. Julliette Gudknecht (PhD student in Special Education, Columbia University) called for. Other demands are the inclusion of facilitators in higher education classrooms, diverse leadership representation, and the active fight against biases in learning.

- **Ensuring Fundamental Rights and Holistic Approaches:** Drawing from UNESCO IESALC's Right to Higher Education project, Mr. Francesc Pedró (Director of UNESCO IESALC), shared the results of consultations identifying that around 80% of students with disabilities reported dissatisfaction with the inclusion measures at their educational institutions. Despite infrastructural improvements aimed at accessibility, these students still lack genuine inclusivity from peers and faculty. In the same line, Mr. Rio Hada (Chief of Equality, Development and Rule of Law Section, OHCHR) highlighted the need for a holistic approach to inclusive education, beyond merely providing physical access, but ensuring full integration, respectful learning environments and active participation in educational systems.
- **Institutional Efforts, Inclusive Decision-Making Processes and Relevance to SDGs:** Ms. Heather Aldersey (Associate Professor, Queen's University, Canada & Co-Director, the University of Gondar/Queen's University Mastercard Foundation Scholars program) shed light on the role of institutional spheres to join efforts and ensure the rights of students with disabilities in broader institutional objectives such as achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Mr. Jacob Blasius (Executive Director of the Global Student Forum, Denmark) further emphasized the importance of inclusive decision-making processes in higher education and advocated for the active participation of students with disabilities in shaping policies, with GSF holding a particular responsibility to integrate these voices into their advocacy efforts.
- **Visibility, recognition, and promotion of diverse leaderships of persons with disabilities:** Persons with disabilities are already leading by example, by being self-advocates and conducting multilevel advocacy and action to shape discussions and mainstream disability rights within the broader framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These efforts deserve visibility and recognition, as well as further support. Ms. Lydia Vlagsma, Youth Representative at the European Disability Forum and Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities, specifically noted the importance of the International Disability Alliance (IDA) and the 2022 Global Disability Summit in this sense. She also invited event's participants to check the ten-point action plan for disability inclusive development, led by the International Disability Alliance and Sightsavers, to make the Summit of the Future negotiations more inclusive and attentive to the voices of young people with disabilities.
- **Leveraging Technology and Inclusive designs for Accessibility:** Assistive technology has revolutionized accessibility as it has supported the inclusion and promotion of diversified learning styles. Mr. Molalign Adugna (Assistant Professor, University of Gondar, Ethiopia & Co-Director, the University of Gondar/Queen's University Mastercard Foundation Scholars program) and Ms. Juliette Gudknecht (PhD student in Special Education, Columbia

University) highlighted the potential of technology to enhance accessibility and foster a supportive learning environment for students with disabilities, while acknowledging challenges such as access to technology and data protection, especially in marginalized communities. Assuring compatibility and useability across different platforms can close technical burdens. Mr. Molalign Adugna and Mr. Francesc Pedró (Director of UNESCO IESALC) both advocated for adopting principles of universal design from all education stakeholder, including the software industry to guide the transformation of teaching practices, making educational content universally accessible and ensuring it reaches everyone effectively.

- **Translating Policies into Action:** Ms. Heather Aldersey (Associate Professor, Queen's University, Canada & Co-Director, the University of Gondar/Queen's University Mastercard Foundation Scholars program) and Mr. Jacob Blasius (Executive Director of the Global Student Forum, Denmark) emphasized the importance of translating policies into actionable initiatives within academic settings, with a focus on high-level institutional guidance and ongoing training for all staff levels in higher education institutions to understand and address diverse forms of disabilities and promote reasonable accommodation. Mr. Francesc Pedró (Director of UNESCO IESALC) acknowledged that the UN system, particularly UNESCO, has a greater role to play in the development of capacities, for leaders from groups with disabilities. He stresses the importance of providing substantial training opportunities that enable these individuals to influence policy effectively at institutional, national, and international levels to drive meaningful change across the educational landscape.
- **Strategic funding:** Mr. Francesc Pedró (Director of UNESCO IESALC) pointed out the growing numbers of students attending universities, which naturally results in an "economy of scale" requiring increased funding. However, he emphasized that more funding alone is insufficient. There is a need to fundamentally change how educational content is planned and delivered to meet the diverse needs, abilities, and capacities of all students, which requires strategically planned and targeted funding for transforming education.
- **Promoting Multistakeholder Partnerships:** Collaborative efforts among all stakeholders is essential to create a more inclusive educational environment, that not only supports the educational trajectories of all individuals, but also provides them with comprehensive support systems adapted to their needs. Joint efforts among educators, youth and students with disabilities and their organizations, academia, private sector, public sector, civil society, NGOs, intergovernmental organizations, and other interested parties is necessary to implement effective strategies to turn policies and guidelines into effective actions.

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The event recording in English with Sign language interpretation can be found [here](#).

The event recording in Spanish will soon be available on UNESCO IESALC's YouTube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@iesalcunesco>.

For more information on UNESCO's work on the Right to Higher Education, please refer to: <https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/right-to-higher-education/>