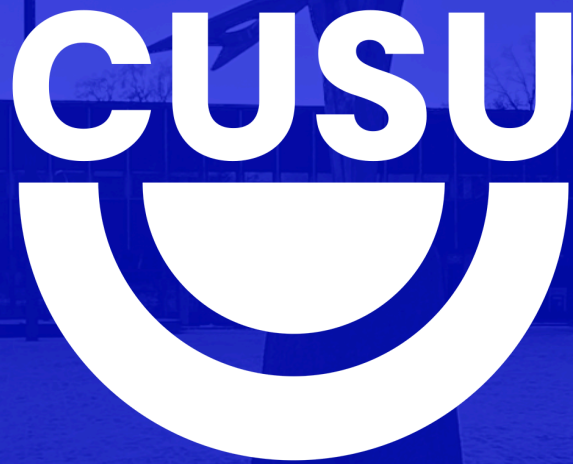


April 2025



Circle U.
Student Union

Political stance.

Addressing ideological threats at Circle U.
campuses

Intro

With the rise of political division and extremism across Europe, the effect can especially be felt in the educational sector, at the universities, and by the students. This paper intends to lay out these effects, students' derived issues and worries, and how we should act upon them. The paper aims to focus on current issues that include, but not limited to; the funding of the educational sector, student life, and student mobility, and student spaces.

Funding

A common theme among politically extreme ideologies and programmes is cutting budgets, both generally and targeted. Generally, there is an increasing under-prioritization of the university sector as a consequence of the current global political landscape. Rather than sufficiently funding the higher education sector, the general focus lies on the economy, businesses and even the military.

We in CUSU strongly oppose politically targeted budgeting and believe it should be up to the universities and student unions to allocate their funding in ways that are deemed reasonable. The value proposition of education goes far beyond profit and production, which is a fact that is often overlooked by governments. It is important that universities and students work together on opposing the narratives of extremist ideologies on both a local and european level. Also, bureaucracy should not make it harder to realise funding, instead ethical guidelines for funding in the higher education sector are needed.

Furthermore, we see an increasing political movement to force courses to be made in the native languages. Higher education and most of its applications are international in nature, through either research or their subject. While the intention of making universities accessible to students with insufficient language skills could be seen as empathetic, it is however often both a detriment to the educational value and primarily used as a tool to limit the accessibility of exchange students. The same goes for project funding, in that more and more projects are supported if they are in the native languages. We encourage universities, rectors and staff to launch, support and invest in more international

projects and courses to elevate internationalism and international cooperation across our campuses.

Furthermore, some extremist movements might see certain degrees as 'useless' or a 'waste of budget', ranging from sociology over gender studies to the teachers' education programmes to name a few examples. Many students from affected studies are already facing consequences like unpaid internships or dated infrastructure in their institutes.

Free speech and hate speech

Free Speech: "The freedom to express one's opinions without censorship, legal penalty, etc.; freedom of expression".

Hate Speech: "A speech or address inciting hatred or intolerance, esp. towards a particular social group on the basis of ethnicity, religious beliefs, sexuality, etc."

(both from Oxford dictionary).

CUSU is a strong defender of academic freedom, and freedom of expression – therefore we strongly oppose the hate speech that is being echoed by many extremist movements. Students have always been on the forefront of social movement and progress, and academic freedom, as well as freedom of expression and speech are cornerstones of higher education. However, no expression should go at the expense of others, and people should be free to express opinions, gender, sexuality and identity, without fearing for their lives and/or safety.

Exercising the right to free speech comes with the responsibility to ensure that one's words are used thoughtfully. This includes refraining from the misuse of free speech to spread hate or make threats against others. This also includes vandalising existing spaces when free speech is exercised: the destruction of property should not be the result of freedom of speech and expression.

Campuses should be a zone of free speech where all people are included, and hate speech and/or extremism is not tolerated. Safe space is a word one could use, but it limits where we expect these values and morals to be upheld, both at our universities, and in society in general.

We in CUSU believe that there is not a strong enough reaction to extremist ideologies and policies. Even if it might not happen in each of our respective countries at the moment, this scares us as a student union. We have noticed fear of other people's reactions, and a lack of counter-reactions.

Student life

A second factor we have noticed amongst the political extreme is the general ignorance towards the well-being of students, and the student life. Generally, we recognize an under-prioritization of the academic value, and the over-prioritization of completed degrees. We believe that neither your status as a student, nor any social security support or visa confirmation should be affected by the amount of ECTS points you make in one year or semester. This is especially crucial since there are so many students working alongside their studies, or having care responsibilities and who thus cannot do the full course load as fast as students without those responsibilities.

Furtheron, us students have noticed that extremist ideologies generally intend to reduce the budget for student representation and completely restructure it **without** any student consultation. Therefore, we must protect our student democracies, and student representation. Lastly, us students have noticed that there are certain extremist student movements that have been welcomed on our campuses and that their presence has been used to attempt to discredit student representation and student democracy, in addition to feminist movements, LGBTQI+ movements, and anti-discrimination movements generally. These extremist student groups have also promoted a strong anti-science rhetoric. This includes but is not limited to rhetoric involving climate change denial, anti-vaccine rhetoric, and buzzwords that symbolize anti-progressiveness.

In addition, because these extremist groups have generally been welcome at our campuses, us students have noticed an increased amount of physical attacks to our fundamental value of academic freedom. These have mostly been attacks on student representation in decision-making bodies. And while universities have had to develop more policy on it, for example solidarity programmes, and offering study spots for students oppressed by extremist groups, we are convinced there is still more to be done.

Mobility and Internationality on our Campuses

The third theme we have noticed amongst extremist groups is a consistent under-prioritization of student mobility and international students. We have observed that non-national students are increasingly subjected to higher university fees than national students. This affects not only Non-EU students, but also students from other member states, thus fundamentally violating Art. 18 TFEU, which prohibits any discrimination on grounds of nationality.

Stricter immigration laws will eventually make universities less attractive for foreign students and researchers alike, which would cause brain drain and a lack of diversity on our campuses, both of which are crucial in higher education.

Extremist movements intend to cut budgets for student mobility. The degree of internationalisation happening during mobility, be it for students, staff or researchers, should not be taken for granted. On the contrary: CUSU firmly believes that student mobility and internationalisation should be actively pursued by our universities, as it contributes to a higher degree of cultural and academic exchange. We also believe that universities should set up or keep up funding for programmes that help students and scholars at risk due to the situations in their home countries. Such programmes have proven quite successful in the past.

Lastly and in connection to that, universities should strive to offer student housing for international students, offering full coverage for their needs. Some universities, for example Oslo and Louvain, already offer housing like that, and other universities should strive to do the same. We are aware that the prices for housing are rising continuously, but such offers are especially crucial for internationals, as proof of housing might be required for visa application, student funding or other things.

Student Spaces

The last factor we have observed is the deliberate undervaluing of student spaces. The political landscape and resolutions have massively impacted both the physical and psychological spaces of students. Some of the effects that have been seen is consistent downscaling of student areas and third spaces, such as

libraries and study rooms. Having study spaces on campus, outside the classrooms, increases the productivity and thereby graduation probability of students, through having a work space for both independent and cooperative work. Student areas are also simultaneously being turned into office spaces for professors and administrative workers, which in turn creates a scary development of under-prioritization and lack of third spaces in addition to removing the current third spaces that currently exist.

While we understand the fact that universities have budgets to balance, student spaces are an essential component of student well being and efficiency. Another trend, that especially can be seen in extremist movements is to constantly reform universities. That, among other effects, has the consequence that students find themselves in an unpredictable landscape, where they are unsure of what their future holds even within the universities. These all in turn create a sense of a 'vicious cycle' where the first is the consistent under-prioritization of new student spaces, and the second being the removal of existing student spaces. These in turn make students less present on campus, starting this cycle all over again.

Conclusion

Students have always been, and will always be at the forefront for social movements. Our respective universities should work with us in furthering these ideas and movements, and should not hinder us, or work against us. We are trying to achieve a broader understanding of the effects of the funding for the educational sector in Europe. Spending on research is crucial for the competitiveness of Europe and the EU. In 2023, expenditure for research and development in the EU stood at EUR 381 billion, or 2.22% of EU GDP, falling short of the 3% target.¹ The target should be fulfilled in the next few years and research, university fundings, and the Erasmus + programme should not be cut and instead play a key role in the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028–2034.

We also encourage our universities and rectors to think critically on these things:

- *What role do universities play in democracies?*

¹ Draghi, M. (2024), The future of European competitiveness. Part A – A competitiveness strategy for Europe.

- *What is their mission?*
- *Where are they positioned?*

The Circle U. Student Union believes that universities have to take their role as progress pushers seriously. We want the rectors of our respective universities to consider the student point of view, and to confront these scary and democracy-threatening developments that we are experiencing.

While each university has its own responsibility in defending democratic values at the local level, we as student representatives strongly believe that our alliance, Circle U., also has a crucial collective role to play in safeguarding democracy across Europe. To this end, the Circle U. Knowledge Hub on Democracy should actively respond to the increasing threats to democracy by empowering a new generation of students equipped to identify, resist, and counter extremist ideologies. Regularly organized Winter and Summer Schools focusing on contemporary democratic challenges will help foster critical thinking, civic awareness, and active participation among students. These initiatives should reinforce academic freedom as an essential foundation of democratic societies, preparing students to actively oppose authoritarian trends, extremist rhetoric, and disinformation. Extremist ideologies, particularly anti-sciences ideologies, frequently target science and research through censorship, threatening academic freedom. For example, under the Trump administration, governmental agencies, including the Environmental Protection Agency, faced censorship and suppression of scientific research, notably on climate change and public health. These actions triggered significant protests among scientists, including recent demonstrations on March 7, 2025, highlighting the necessity to protect research integrity against political interference². Circle U.'s Knowledge Hub on Democracy must address such threats, affirming academic freedom as an essential democratic value. By emphasizing international dialogue, solidarity, and student involvement, Circle U. can become a significant force in safeguarding democracy on campuses and beyond.

² <https://www.science.org/content/article/thousands-gather-across-u-s-stand-science-events>
<https://eos.org/articles/crowds-stand-up-for-science-across-the-united-states>
<https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/scientific-research-getting-cut-and-should-scare-all-americans>