



Student Participation and Well-Being Charter

A MANIFESTO FOR A BETTER FUTURE
BY
BLENDI HODAI AND VIKTORIJA POSTOLOVSKA



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Author:

Blendi Hodai & Viktorija Postolovska

Lector:

Bisera Atanasova

Design:

Rina Abdullai

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CONTENT

PREAMBLE	4
1. Introduction	5
STUDENT PARTICIPATION	7
1. Organizing the Finances in Favor of Students	8
2. Securing the Student Bodies and Representatives from Political and Foreign Influence	11
3. Encouraging Regular and Transparent Communication with the Student Bodies and Representatives	13
4. Establishing legally binding frameworks that define and protect student participation in academic governance and decision-making processes	15
5. Involving Student Representatives in all Higher Organs of the Academy and Encouraging their Right to Vote and Contribute During Staff Meetings and University Senates	17
STUDENTS' WELL-BEING	19
1. Mental and Emotional Well-Being	20
2. Physical Well-Being	21
3. Social Well-Being	23
4. Student Standard	25
FINAL CONCLUSIONS	27

Preamble

"EDUCATION IS NOT THE FILLING OF A PAIL, BUT THE LIGHTING OF A FIRE"

-Plutarch

Higher education in the Balkan region is a vessel on the verge of overflowing. Blinded by corruption and revenge politics, Balkan academies have become breeding grounds of incompetence, feeding into the Balkan system, its politics, and its deeply ingrained mentality—pillars of a society unlikely to see a bright future.

Now, you may find these statements rather pessimistic, but please take into consideration that these thoughts are expressed by two representatives of a generation that has borne witness to the rise and fall of questionable political installations, shocking verdicts for sexual exploitation of female students by professors, the eruption of mass protests fueled by devastating tragedies, and unbearable frequency of corruption in the academic communities. It would be natural for anyone reading this foreword, especially students, to adopt a sense of uneasiness and skepticism. After all, as many students today struggle to find their place in a system that often excludes them from decision-making, it is no surprise that they might already be reluctant to believe in better days. However, the generations of the past behold the generations of the present as the only harbingers of change, believing that the only people who can shift the narrative are those who are still learning it. Learners are the ones who will shape the path of this region's future; it is through their choices that our countries will either progress or remain stagnant. While the tunnel may not have been their choice, the light at the end of it is entirely within their control.

Hence, the Forum for Educational Change in the voices of Blendi Hodai and Viktorija Postolovska gives the students this Charter as a manual for a better future. This Student Participation and Well-Being Charter is a declaration that students must no longer be passive observers in their education but active participants. Student assemblies, meant to represent their interests, are too often influenced by outside forces. Dormitories, meant to provide safe and dignified housing, are frequently neglected. Mental health support, which should be a priority, is treated as an afterthought. Instead of feeling empowered, students are left navigating an education system that does not always serve them. Hence, this Charter is a commitment to ensuring that

every student in North Macedonia has a voice in governance, access to safe and decent housing, and the right to an education that prioritizes both academic success and personal well-being. Above all, it recognizes that any system which ignores students is a system destined to fail. This charter is not merely a document; it is a turning point. It is a promise that students will no longer be overlooked. It is a challenge to universities, policymakers, and student leaders to take responsibility for building a fairer, stronger, and more student-centered higher education system.

1. Introduction

The primary purpose of this Student Participation and Well-Being Charter is to understand the most pressing issues that the academic communities in the region face, as well as their trigger points and propose strategies for their overcoming. These issues, however, are rather systemic and do not necessarily depend on particular agents or entities, so our strategy is to address the issues as parts of a whole, not as isolated matters whose overcoming will save us from the mass destruction of higher education. The issues that students face are the same issues that their children will face; the problem here is rather societal and it is the awareness of the entire society that will finish the story on a positive note. Repetition should no longer be allowed.

Student housing, where dormitories intended as functional spaces for young academics are instead places of neglect, overcrowding, and in some cases, unlivable conditions, is one of the most glaring issues in the academic community. Students are forced to live in decaying infrastructure, occasional heating, unsanitary living spaces, and inadequate security, creating an environment that is not only physically but also mentally challenging. For many students, the financial burden of renting private housing is extremely hard to bear, leaving them trapped in a system that sees housing as an afterthought rather than a fundamental right. The impact of these conditions extends beyond mere inconvenience—unstable housing situations lead to chronic stress, affecting students' ability to focus, engage, and succeed academically.

The Western Balkans are also particularly lacking in the understanding and treatment of mental health. Students in universities face not only academic

challenges but also economic and personal difficulties which often go without any support. Even when students are willing to ask for help, the deeply embedded stigma means that little to no assistance is sought out. The neglect becomes extraordinarily worse as patterns that suggest a drastic rise in anxiety, depression, and even burnout are treated as personal failures instead of systematic ones. Success in education is often measured by how much is endured instead of how developed the mind is, leading to many students being pushed to their limits with no regard for their mental health.

Students are nevertheless denied meaningful participation in decision-making processes, even when they make an effort to express their concerns. Instead of serving as democratic forums for advocacy, student organisations and assemblies have turned into havens for political manipulation. These organizations are frequently infiltrated by outside forces, including political parties, university administrations, and other interest groups, rather than acting in the best interests of the student body. This effectively silences any genuine resistance or reform initiatives. Students are not represented in this environment; instead, their demands and movements are repressed or co-opted to preserve the status quo. Attempts to question this system are met with bureaucratic obstacles, intimidation, and occasionally open retaliation.

The most disastrous outcome of all of this is a reduction in the standard of education itself. Universities are burdened by outmoded curricula, insufficient funding, and a culture of academic stagnation rather than encouraging critical thinking and creativity. Research possibilities are limited, professors are overworked, and academic integrity is undermined by corruption in administration and grading. Many graduates feel unprepared for the workforce and are compelled to rely more on their connections than their skills in order to get work. Higher education stops being a means of achieving opportunity in such a system and instead serves as a vehicle for maintaining inequity and discouragement.

To solve these problems, a thorough rethinking of what higher education ought to be is necessary, not just cosmetic changes. Prioritizing student accommodation, integrating mental health services into educational institutions, removing political influence from student governance, and reviving the standard of education through real investments in research and instruction are all necessary. In the absence of these adjustments, the system will keep failing the people it was designed to help, depriving generations of

students of their agency, their voice, and the resources they need in order to direct their own lives.

STUDENT PARTICIPATION

To understand the urgency of reinventing the concept of “Student participation” in the Western Balkans academies, we first need to define what that concept consists of, the need for its initiation, and the importance of its sustainability. Students' active involvement in the educational process, both within and outside of amphitheaters, is referred to as their participation. It involves taking education into their own hands both formally and informally. When speaking of formal student participation, we consider the work and the influence they exercise in the formal academic circumstances, whether that’s defending their rights, asking for transparency from the academic authorities, or asking for quality justification from their professors and the material that is being presented to them as relevant, as well as how that material is being presented. When talking of informal student participation, it is worth considering all extra activities students undertake outside of the academic spaces, no matter if those activities are connected with their studies or are based on their critical thought development. Participation can take various forms, including acting as organized bodies, verbal contributions, written reflections, project-based work, and involvement in extracurricular activities. There are several forms of formal student participation which will be the key topic of scrutiny in this Charter. There are several ways in which the students can participate formally, one is through student bodies and civil society organizations, and the other is through voluntarily or professionally contributing to other organizations that work. Many influential thinkers throughout history have argued that education should not be a passive process of knowledge transfer but rather an interactive, democratic, and transformative experience. For example, the American philosopher and psychologist John Dewey viewed education as the foundation of democracy, where students learn not just subject matter but also the practice of democratic engagement¹. According to Dewey, participation is an ethical imperative; students who engage in their academic environment develop critical thinking, collective responsibility, and the ability to challenge structures of power.

¹John Dewey (Democracy and Education, 1916)

WHEREAS, student participation in the Balkan academies is insufficiently active, spread, and supported, leading to unsynchronized academic and student action;

WHEREAS, systemic obstacles prevent students from fully expressing their rights in both formal and informal capacities, even if student engagement is theoretically acknowledged as a key democratic principle;

WHEREAS, many students feel unmotivated to participate due to the rigid hierarchies in the academies, lack of institutional support for student-led initiatives, and insufficiently developed channels for meaningful dialogue between students and the faculties;

WHEREAS, the mistrust of the academic staff to student-led initiatives, personal remarks, and suggestions for improvement and the student right of appeal;

THEREFORE, the Forum for Educational Change calls upon academic institutions across the Balkans to implement concrete measures that ensure the enhancement of student participation, including but not limited to:

1. Organizing the Finances in Favor of Students

It is commonly known that most Universities in the Western Balkans struggle with financial autonomy and are partially under the credentials of the Ministries for Education when it comes to their financial functioning and organization. However, they still do enjoy a dose of self-sustainability since the fees and taxes that students pay for their studies go directly into the Universities' accounts. By that, it is safe to say that no matter how fragmented the dialogue between the ministries and the universities gets, there will always be an objective feeling of certainty when it comes to the financial sustainability of Universities and Faculties. However, how universities manage their financial resources, allocate income, and prioritize investments remains a significant concern. Currently, more than 75% of university budgets are allocated to professor salaries and contractual services, leaving limited financial resources for student support, infrastructure improvements, and academic development. This imbalance raises serious questions about financial efficiency and whether universities are prioritizing student needs in their spending decisions. A student-centered financial model must emphasize transparency, affordability, and resource efficiency to ensure that university

finances serve students' best interests. Introducing transparent budgeting processes that actively involve students in financial decision-making is a crucial step toward ensuring that funds are allocated responsibly and that financial mismanagement and inefficiencies are minimized. To reduce the economic barriers students face, *higher education should be free* and recognized as a *fundamental human right*, rather than a privilege or luxury accessible only to those who can afford it. Universities must operate on the principle that education is a public good, ensuring that financial constraints do not prevent students from accessing quality learning opportunities. Additionally, expanding on-campus employment opportunities and paid internships will provide students with greater financial security, reducing their dependency on external financial support. Investing in digital libraries and open educational resources will further alleviate financial burdens by minimizing the costs (hidden fees) associated with textbooks and academic materials.

Our latest research on the **Student Consumption Basket**² revealed that, on average, a student attending a public university in North Macedonia requires approximately **€10,535** to complete their 4 years of undergraduate studies. This estimate encompasses essential expenses such as tuition fees, study-related costs, housing, food, recreational activities, and other necessities. These findings highlight the **significant financial burden** placed on students and underscore the urgent need for policies that enhance affordability, transparency, and financial support mechanisms within universities.

Universities should also direct funds toward improving mental health services, offering free or low-cost counseling and wellness programs, and equipping students with financial literacy skills. To sustain these efforts, institutions can implement cost-saving measures such as energy-efficient campus operations and streamlined administrative processes, redirecting those savings toward student-focused initiatives. By adopting these strategies, universities can create a more inclusive and supportive academic environment without compromising financial stability. Furthermore, universities must cease exploitative financial practices that treat students as revenue sources, including unjust fines, excessive tuition, and predatory fees disguised as “service charges”. By focusing on affordability and accountability, universities can create a fairer financial system that prioritizes student success over institutional profit. It is quite easy for one to feel discouraged when it

²Ramadani, A (2024) Student Basket, Forum for Educational Change:
<https://fech.mk/publikohet-hulumtimi-per-harxhimet-studentore-shume-harxhime-pak-ose-aspak-ndihma-shteterore/>

comes to financial organization and nurturing the will to help and assist the process of adapting that system to the needs of students and their benefits. However, by putting effort and showing willingness to discuss complex matters from both sides, any problem could be easily overcome. While the complexities of financial management within higher education institutions may seem daunting, meaningful reform is achievable through constructive dialogue, institutional commitment, and policy-driven solutions. Universities and policymakers must demonstrate a genuine willingness to engage with students, address their concerns, and develop sustainable financial structures that serve the interests of the academic community.

Therefore, the Forum for Educational Change demands:

- Establish an Independent Higher Education Investment Fund to enhance university financial autonomy, funded by the Ministry of Education and Science, endowments, alumni, businesses, and projects, with resources redistributed based on needs assessments and student enrollment.
- Legalize student employment by allowing regular students to work part-time or full-time while studying, ensuring financial stability and reducing dependence on external financial sources.
- Diversify university infrastructure investments by securing funding from the World Bank, European Commission, and other sources to modernize campuses and enhance energy efficiency, making them greener and sustainable buildings.
- Make higher education free as a fundamental human right, ensuring public universities are fully state-funded and accessible to all students regardless of financial background.

UNTIL THEN, THE CHANTING CONTINUES...

UNIVERSITIES OUGHT TO STOP STEALING FROM THE STUDENTS.

UNIVERSITIES OUGHT TO START INVESTING IN THEM.

UNIVERSITIES OUGHT TO STOP STEALING FROM STUDENTS.

UNIVERSITIES OUGHT TO INVEST IN THEM.

2. Securing the Student Bodies and Representatives from Political and Foreign Influence

Universities must ensure that student bodies and representatives remain independent from political and foreign influence to protect academic integrity, student interests, and the democratic principles that underpin higher education. Too often, external actors – whether political parties, governmental institutions, organizations, or private interest groups, specifically Rectorate and Deans – attempt to manipulate student governance to serve their agendas, compromising the autonomy of student participation and decision-making. This interference threatens the legitimacy of student representation, erodes trust in university institutions, and distracts from pressing student concerns such as academic policies, financial aid, and campus well-being. To prevent this, universities should establish strict policies that prohibit political funding, lobbying, or coercion in student elections and decision-making processes. Any financial support or sponsorship of student organizations should come with full transparency and accountability, ensuring that funds are used exclusively for student-driven initiatives rather than external interests. There have been documented instances where rectors and deans have withheld student-designated budgets due to personal or political conflicts with student representatives. Such actions not only undermine the financial autonomy of student bodies but also set a dangerous precedent where University management can obstruct student initiatives based on personal disagreements. Furthermore, there are clear violations of student autonomy in decision-making, as seen in cases such as the University of Tetovo and the University of Saint Apostol Pavle in Ohrid, where the rectorate unilaterally decides who will serve as the student leader, completely disregarding democratic election processes. This practice of "**rectorization**"³ of student governance fundamentally contradicts the principles of student representation and participatory democracy, turning student bodies into rubber-stamp institutions that serve administrative interests rather than advocating for student needs. Such authoritarian interventions discourage activism, suppress independent student voices, and create a climate where dissent is met with retaliation. This must be unequivocally condemned and prevented through strict regulatory safeguards and institutional mechanisms that protect student governance from rectorate or political influence. Universities exist to serve students, and without them, they cease to fulfill their fundamental purpose.

³Rectorization refers to the practice of university rectorates exerting control over student governance by directly appointing student representatives, manipulating elections, or obstructing the autonomy of student bodies.

As the largest and most critical constituency in higher education, students must have unimpeded access to resources allocated for their development, participation, and leadership.

The **National Student Body** should also introduce a **Task Force** for overseeing and monitoring the student governance of its university student assembly members within the country, ensuring that representatives are elected fairly and without undue pressure from political or foreign entities. To further protect student autonomy, student leaders must be equipped with the knowledge and tools to resist external manipulation.

This can be achieved through comprehensive training programs on ethical leadership, media literacy, and political neutrality, enabling students to identify and counteract coercive tactics that threaten their independence. Fostering open, democratic dialogue among students – without external interference, will reinforce a culture of self-governance, critical thinking, and active citizenship. Additionally, universities must take a firm stance against any attempts to infiltrate student organizations through disguised funding, or unofficial political interference that seeks to sway student leadership in a particular direction. By safeguarding student governance from political and foreign interference, universities uphold the principles of academic freedom, foster independent leadership, and ensure that student organizations remain focused on advocating for the genuine needs of their peers. A truly autonomous student body is essential not only for protecting student rights but also for maintaining an environment where diverse perspectives can thrive without the distortion of external interests. **Thus, the Forum for Educational Change demands:**

- Adoption of strict policies that prohibit political funding, lobbying, or coercion in student elections and decision-making processes, ensuring that student governance remains independent and representative of student interests.
- Implementation of regulatory safeguards and institutional mechanisms that protect student governance from rectorate or political influence, preventing external actors from interfering in student-led decision-making structures.
- Ensuring financial autonomy of the designated budget for University Student Assemblies (USAs) to reduce dependency on the Dean and Rectorate, allowing student bodies to function independently and allocate resources based on student priorities.

- Establishment of the NSB Task Force to oversee, monitor, and enforce the integrity of student governance across universities, ensuring that elections are conducted fairly, transparently, and free from undue pressure.

UNTIL THEN, THE CHANTING CONTINUES...

STUDENTS ARE NOT YOUR PAWNS.

THEY ARE YOUR FUTURE LEADERS.

STUDENTS ARE NOT YOUR PAWNS.

THEY ARE YOUR FUTURE LEADERS.

3. Encouraging Regular and Transparent Communication with the Student Bodies and Representatives

Universities must prioritize regular and transparent communication with student bodies and representatives to foster trust, accountability, and effective decision-making. A lack of open dialogue between university administrations and students often leads to misunderstandings, dissatisfaction, and disengagement from institutional processes. When universities actively involve students in discussions, they create a more inclusive and responsive academic environment. However, many institutions fail to implement structured communication channels, leaving students unaware of key policy changes that directly impact their education, financial aid, and campus life. To address this, universities should establish clear mechanisms for continuous dialogue, such as regular town hall meetings, student forums, and digital platforms where students can voice concerns and receive timely responses. Transparency should be a fundamental principle, ensuring that students have access to financial reports, policy drafts, and decision-making processes that affect their academic experience. Universities in North Macedonia and the region must also follow the example set by many EU countries such as Estonia, France, Sweden, and Finland, where university senate meetings are live-streamed to ensure full transparency. By making decision-making processes publicly accessible, students can directly follow discussions, understand institutional priorities, and see how policies impact them in real time. Adopting live-streaming practices eliminates the culture of secrecy and allows students to witness firsthand how decisions are made by the highest

governing bodies within their institutions. This level of openness ensures that students are not passive recipients of university policies but active participants who can hold decision-makers accountable. Furthermore, universities should provide mechanisms for students to submit questions or feedback before major policy votes, ensuring their voices are considered in the governance process.

As digital transformation in education advances, universities must modernize communication channels to ensure continuous and accessible engagement. This can be achieved by creating dedicated student portals where key policies, financial reports, and university decisions are regularly updated, utilizing AI-driven chatbots and engagement apps to streamline real-time responses to student concerns, and developing social media channels, email newsletters, and student bulletins that provide frequent updates on tuition changes, academic policies, and campus developments. These digital tools not only make communication more efficient but also ensure that students remain informed about institutional decisions without barriers to accessibility.

Beyond structural reforms, universities must embrace a culture of openness where students are treated as equal stakeholders in the governance of their institutions. This means providing clear justifications for policy decisions and responding to student concerns in a timely and constructive manner. Without transparency and direct communication, student participation becomes symbolic rather than substantive, weakening institutional trust and engagement. Universities that fail to address this gap risk alienating their student communities, reinforcing bureaucratic detachment, and ultimately compromising the quality of education. Universities that prioritize transparency and inclusivity create more engaged, satisfied, and academically successful student populations. Therefore, the Forum for Educational Change demands:

- Live-streaming of Senate Meetings in Public Universities to allow students to directly observe decision-making processes, financial discussions, and policy changes that impact their education. This will ensure full transparency and prevent secrecy in university governance.
- Universities must establish regular town hall meetings between deans, rectors, and students at every faculty, providing a structured platform to discuss institutional priorities, address student concerns, and collaboratively shape the future of their university or faculty. These meetings should be mandatory and publicly documented to ensure accountability.

- Universities must create and enforce robust whistleblower protections to ensure that students feel safe and empowered to report cases of professors misusing their authority, engaging in corruption, or violating academic integrity standards. Clear anti-retaliation policies must be established to protect students who expose misconduct.
- Universities must establish accessible, secure, and anonymous digital platforms where students can report academic misconduct, institutional failures, infrastructure issues, and student welfare concerns, and file Student Ombudsperson complaints. This ensures transparency, accountability, and an impartial resolution process for student grievances.

UNTIL THEN, THE CHANTING CONTINUES...

WE DON'T NEED CLOSED DOORS.
WE NEED OPEN DIALOGUE.

WE DON'T NEED SILENCE.
WE NEED ACCOUNTABILITY.

WE DON'T NEED CLOSED DOORS.
WE NEED OPEN DIALOGUE.

WE DON'T NEED SILENCE.
WE NEED ACCOUNTABILITY.

4. Establishing legally binding frameworks that define and protect student participation in academic governance and decision-making processes

The Ministry of Education and Science conjointly with the National Student Body must establish legally binding frameworks that define and protect student participation in academic governance and decision-making processes to ensure their voices are formally recognized and safeguarded. Without clear legal protections, student involvement in institutional decision-making is often inconsistent, subject to administrative discretion, or easily disregarded in times of conflict. A well-structured legal framework guarantees that student representatives have an institutionalized role in shaping policies related to academic affairs, financial management, campus life, and broader university

governance. The new law on Student organization drafted by the National Student Body should be approved in the Parliament to institutionalize the first-ever National Student Body formed in April 2024.

To achieve this, universities and educational policymakers should develop and enforce regulations that mandate student representation in key decision-making bodies, such as university senates, faculty boards, and budget committees. Moreover, most important is the institutionalizing of the newly founded National Student Body into the legislation. These regulations should clearly outline the rights and responsibilities of student representatives, ensuring they have equal access to information, voting power where appropriate, and protection from retaliation for advocating student interests. Additionally, student participation must be recognized within the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), ensuring that students engaged in governance, university organizations, or student assemblies receive academic credit for their contributions, encouraging greater involvement. Accountability mechanisms must be implemented to prevent university administrations from undermining student participation rights, ensuring independent oversight committees and legal recourse options for students whose rights are disregarded. Moreover, universities must uphold full transparency in student governance, making all meeting minutes, policy drafts, and financial reports publicly accessible, reinforcing institutional trust and legitimacy between students and university leadership.

Beyond policy and legislative changes, universities must also equip student representatives with the skills and knowledge necessary for effective governance. Regular training programs on governance, negotiation, and advocacy should be provided to student representatives to strengthen their ability to engage effectively in decision-making processes. Additionally, universities should promote transparency by ensuring that all student governance structures operate openly, with meeting minutes, policy drafts, and financial reports made publicly accessible. This helps build trust between students and university leadership while reinforcing the legitimacy of student representation. By establishing legally binding frameworks that protect student participation in governance, universities can move beyond symbolic engagement and ensure that students are active partners in shaping their academic environment. A system where student voices are structurally embedded leads to better decision-making, stronger campus democracy, and a higher education system that truly serves its students. Therefore, the Forum for Educational Change calls for:

- Approval of the Law on Student Organization, which will institutionalize the National Student Body as the sole representative structure of all University Student Assemblies within the country, ensuring formal recognition, autonomy, and legal protection for student governance.
- Integration of student activism into the institutional framework by recognizing student participation in governance, advocacy, and organizational engagement through the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), ensuring that activism is formally valued as part of academic and civic development.

UNTIL THEN, THE CHANTING CONTINUES...

WE ARE NOT GUESTS AT THE TABLE.
WE ARE HERE TO DECIDE.

WE ARE NOT GUESTS AT THE TABLE.
WE ARE HERE TO DECIDE.

5. Involving Student Representatives in all Higher Organs of the Academy and Encouraging their Right to Vote and Contribute During Staff Meetings and University Senates

According to the Law on Higher Education of North Macedonia, Article 93(9) stipulates that *"student representatives shall constitute not less than 10%, and not more than 15% of the members of the university senate."*⁴ While this provision formally guarantees student representation in the highest university governing body—the Senate—in practice, student participation often remains symbolic rather than meaningful.

Far too frequently, student representatives are handpicked based on political loyalty or their willingness to remain silent and obedient in meetings, rather than being selected for their ability and readiness to represent the diverse and evolving interests of the student body. This practice turns the Senate into a performative body where student voices are present but muted, and student needs are overlooked or underrepresented.

The Senate is the highest decision-making body within universities, where policies related to academic affairs, financial planning, university development, and student life are decided. Therefore, ensuring that student

⁴Ministry of Education and Science (2018), Law on Higher Education:
<https://mon.gov.mk/stored/document/Zakon%20za%20visokoto%20obrazovanie%20NOV.pdf>

voices are both present and empowered within this space is not only a democratic right—it is a necessity for transparent, inclusive, and accountable academic governance.

To safeguard against the continued cycle of appointing obedient or politically aligned student representatives, the Forum for Educational Change proposes a structured mechanism of democratic accountability. Specifically, every two months, student members of the University Senate should be required to participate in “Accountability Hours”—a public reporting session held in front of the University Student Assembly (USA). These sessions would function similarly to MP question sessions in parliamentary systems, allowing the student senators to present their activities, positions, and contributions within the Senate.

If, after these sessions, the USA members find that the student senators have failed to represent student interests, have been inactive, or have acted in a manner contrary to the values of independent representation, they should be able to initiate a motion of no confidence. Upon a successful vote of no trust, the student senator would be discharged and replaced through a transparent and democratic process. This measure would not only ensure accountability and transparency but also act as a deterrent to university leadership attempting to influence or co-opt student representatives.

This approach transforms student representation from a passive seat at the table to an active, empowered, and monitored role, reinforcing the values of participatory democracy and student-led governance within university structures. **Therefore, the Forum for Educational Change demands:**

- Student Senate members are to be democratically elected through an open, transparent, and participatory process, and not handpicked by university officials or politically-affiliated groups.
- Establishment of “Accountability Hours,” where student Senate members report every two months on their work and engagement in front of the University Student Assembly, allowing for ongoing evaluation and, if necessary, a vote of no confidence.

UNTIL THEN, THE CHANTING CONTINUES...

NO MORE SEATS WITHOUT A SAY.

????WE??DECIDE??WE??LEAD??WE??STAY??

????NO??MORE??SEATS??WITHOUT??A SAY??

????WE??DECIDE??WE??LEAD??WE??STAY??

STUDENT WELL-BEING

We must first clarify what "Student Well-Being" is, why it should be prioritised, and how crucial it is to stick to its principles in order to appreciate how urgent it is to put it at the forefront of higher education reforms in the Western Balkans. Within the academic environment, students' general physical, mental, intellectual, financial, and social well-being is referred to as student well-being. Students can flourish when there are holistic circumstances present, not just when there is no disease or stress in their lives. Support for mental health, safe housing and effective transportation, financial stability, healthy living, social inclusion, and fulfilling educational opportunities are all included in this. In addition to being learners, students are also citizens with emotional needs, difficulties in their personal lives, and responsibilities in the real world. Therefore, it is quite problematic to focus solely on the quality of education they receive, because in that way we forget that students pay taxes, plan for their living, and undergo complex processes that require stable and alert emotional intelligence. However, well-being continues to be a neglected and underfunded area in the current academic environment throughout the region. Students' capacity to achieve is frequently burdened by excessive work, anxiety, loneliness, a lack of mental health resources, and unstable housing or transportation. Academic achievement and student well-being are inextricably linked. As scholars like Nussbaum⁵ (2010) and Noddings⁶ (2005) have emphasized, education must be rooted in care, dignity, and agency. When student well-being is supported, institutions cultivate environments of creativity, resilience, and democratic engagement. Neglecting it, on the other hand, results in passive learning, dissatisfied youth, and high dropout rates.

WHEREAS, the importance of the students' well-being in Balkan universities is overlooked, and there are no organised plans or structures in place to foster it;

WHEREAS, without proper institutional response, many students continue to face housing insecurity, financial difficulties, and mental health issues;

WHEREAS, student well-being is often treated as an individual responsibility, rather than a systemic priority;

⁵ Nussbaum, M. C. (2010). *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton University Press.

⁶ Noddings, N. (2005). *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*. Teachers College Press.

WHEREAS, long-term effects on academic performance, democratic engagement, and the social worth of education result from disregarding students' well-being;

THEREFORE, the Forum for Educational Change calls upon academic institutions, national education authorities, and student unions across the Western Balkans to implement concrete and coordinated measures to ensure the improvement and safeguarding of student well-being, including but not limited to.

1. Mental and Emotional Well-Being

Mental and emotional well-being is a key factor in the process of achieving one's goals. It is an integral part of one's daily life, especially when that life involves responsibilities that require focus, productivity, and meaningful engagement. For students in higher education, maintaining mental and emotional well-being becomes even more crucial as they navigate academic pressures, personal growth, life transitions, and fear and uncertainty about the future. From following lectures and attending exams to navigating life and all its costs in foreign places (especially common for Balkan students, considering that Higher Education is available only in more developed cities), the students subscribe to everyday life which is complex and hectic and requires a lot of managing skills, survival instincts and multitasking. Each of these segments requires stable mental and emotional health.

According to the Council of Europe (n.d.), emotional well-being encompasses the ability to be resilient, manage one's emotions effectively, and foster positive feelings. This includes feeling safe, valued, and supported within one's environment—factors that are essential in the often high-pressure settings of universities. A healthy emotional state enhances students' ability to concentrate, make thoughtful decisions, and recover from setbacks, all of which are fundamental to both academic performance and personal development.

The Council further emphasizes that well-being should be cultivated through a whole-school—or in this case, whole-campus—approach, involving educators, support staff, and peers in creating an environment that nurtures trust, inclusion, and emotional safety. Such environments not only promote mental health but also empower students to take an active role in their own

learning and social engagement. When students feel emotionally secure and mentally well, they are far more likely to thrive, contribute meaningfully, and lead with confidence. (Council of Europe, n.d.)⁷

However, the Western Balkan Higher Education system lacks both strategic and financial planning of programs and instruments that support the students' emotional and mental well-being. **Therefore the Forum for Educational Reforms demands:**

- Free training of faculty staff in mental health first aid.
- Free peer-support programs, workshops on stress management and workshops on maintaining mental and emotional health on a regular basis at the campuses, dormitories, and universities' public spaces.
- Funding the Office for Mental Health at the Faculty of Philosophy, University "Ss. Cyril and Methodius", Skopje, and supporting its working and promotion among students⁸.

UNTIL THEN THE CHANTING CONTINUES...

NO MORE SILENCE, NO MORE DELAY
OUR MENTAL HEALTH, WE WILL PREPARE!

NO MORE SILENCE, NO MORE DELAY
OUR MENTAL HEALTH, WE WILL PREPARE!

2. Physical Well-Being

A student's general health, personal safety, and ability to lead a sustainable and balanced lifestyle are all components of their physical well-being. It has a significant impact on how they succeed academically and grow personally. Students' ability to focus, retain information, and actively participate in academic and social environments can be seriously hampered when they face issues like chronic sleep deprivation, irregular or unhealthy eating habits, and limited access to necessary health services—both physical and mental. Furthermore, long-term effects including stress, exhaustion, and compromised immune systems might be exacerbated by these problems. In addition to increasing awareness, promoting physical well-being in educational settings entails putting in place support networks, such as wholesome food options, mental health services, and secure, welcoming environments that allow students to succeed academically and psychologically. In the Western

⁷ Council of Europe. (n.d.). Improving well-being at school. Campaign Free to Speak, Safe to Learn. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/campaign-free-to-speak-safe-to-learn/improving-well-being-at-school>

⁸ <https://www.radiomof.mk/otvorena-kancelarija-za-mentalno-zdravje-na-mladi-pri-skopskiot-filozofski-fakultet/>

Balkans, corruption is a major obstacle to the advancement and defense of students' physical health. The distribution and administration of public monies are compromised by systemic corruption, particularly in fields like healthcare and education which are essential to guaranteeing the well-being of students. Students lack access to essential resources that promote a balanced and healthy lifestyle when funds intended for school infrastructure, feeding programs, healthcare services, or sports facilities are embezzled or siphoned off through dishonest means.

For example, because funds were misappropriated through favoritism or opaque procurement, public schools may not have adequate heating, sanitation, or medical personnel. Policies intended to incorporate mental health treatments or physical health instruction into schools may potentially be postponed or blocked by corruption. Furthermore, political influence and nepotism in public administration frequently lead to underqualified staff overseeing school health programs, which causes inefficiency and neglect.

Vulnerable populations, such as minority communities, low-income families, and kids from remote regions, are disproportionately impacted by this systemic dysfunction, which exacerbates inequality and makes it more difficult for these pupils to get safe learning environments, wholesome meals, and mental health care. In the end, corruption erodes the underlying support that students require to preserve their physical health and succeed academically by undermining public institutions. Therefore the Forum for Educational Change demands:

- Transparent and accountable allocation of public funds in the education and healthcare sectors, with regular audits and citizen oversight to prevent misuse and ensure resources reach schools and students directly.
- Implementation of national programs that guarantee basic health services in schools, including regular medical checkups, mental health counseling, and the presence of qualified health professionals on school premises.
- Urgent investments in school infrastructure, including heating, sanitation, clean water, and safe recreational spaces.
- Affordable, healthy food options at the faculties' buffets.
- Encouraging physical activity through clubs and wellness challenges in collaboration with the Universities Student Assemblies.

UNTIL THEN THE CHANTING CONTINUES...

STUDENTS DESERVE HEALTH, SAFETY, AND CARE,
WE DEMAND BETTER RESOURCES, IT'S ONLY FAIR!

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WE DEMAND BETTER RESOURCES, IT'S ONLY FAIR!

3. Social Well-Being

For students to succeed intellectually and personally, they must feel included, accepted, and a member of a caring community. One of the most important pillars of student development is social well-being, which includes access to peer or institutional support, a sense of belonging, and meaningful interpersonal interactions. However, loneliness and a lack of social support continue to be issues, especially for people who are living far from home, are international students, or come from marginalized backgrounds. Students' motivation and academic performance frequently decline when they feel alienated or ostracized, and they may be more susceptible to anxiety, despair, or dropout. A student's capacity to focus on their academics, make plans for the future, and lay a solid basis for adulthood depends critically on their financial and professional well-being in addition to their social well-being. While career well-being comprises having access to good career counseling, internships, skill-development opportunities, and a fair labor market, financial well-being entails having access to reasonably priced education, housing, food, and other necessities.

Systemic obstacles like nepotism, corruption, and political meddling seriously hinder students' financial and professional opportunities in the Western Balkans Six (WB6). Students from low-income households frequently struggle to pay for tuition, transportation, or even necessities due to a lack of governmental funding and an unfair allocation of scholarships and grants. Deserving students are sometimes left behind when money and scholarships are given out based more on personal connections or political affiliation than on merit or necessity.

Many WB6 colleges lack or have inadequate funding for career services, and internships and entry-level jobs are typically found through unofficial networks rather than transparent and competitive procedures. This erodes

students' faith in educational institutions and deters them from making long-term career plans. Furthermore, a culture of favoritism and opaque job markets fuels brain drain as more young people look for chances elsewhere where meritocracy is more likely to be the norm.

A comprehensive strategy is needed to address financial and career well-being, including professionalizing university career services, establishing equitable and transparent funding mechanisms, forming alliances between academic institutions and labor markets, and making sure that all students, regardless of socioeconomic or political background, have access to internships and employment pathways. **Therefore the Forum for Educational Change demands:**

- A national-level audit and reform of scholarship distribution processes to ensure transparency and eliminate political or personal bias.
- The professionalization of university career centers, with dedicated staff, budgets, and monitoring mechanisms.
- A national internship portal that guarantees transparent, merit-based access to internships for all students.
- Anti-corruption policies criminalize favoritism and nepotism in scholarship, hiring, and internship processes and decriminalize the victims of corruption in Higher Education.
- A regional strategy among WB6 governments to address youth brain drain through meritocratic job markets and fair employment practices.

UNTIL THEN THE CHANTING CONTINUES...

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL, NO MORE DECEIT,
WE DEMAND FAIR SCHOLARSHIPS AND CAREERS THAT TREAT US AS COMPLETE!

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4. Student Standard

Accessible, safe, and reasonably priced accommodation as well as transportation are necessities for guaranteeing students' rights to an education and general well-being; they are not extras. However, the standard of living for students has dropped to an alarming level throughout the Western Balkans, threatening thousands of young people's physical and mental well-being in addition to their academic performance. The majority of WB6 nations have dilapidated, crammed, and badly maintained dorms. Many institutions have not undergone major renovations since they were constructed decades ago. Frequently, basic necessities like the internet, hot water, heating, and hygiene are not provided. Many students are forced to turn to private rentals since there are just too few beds available for the expanding student body in cities with dorms.

Long daily trips become essential for students from rural areas or those whose families cannot afford the high cost of rent in cities. However, public transportation is frequently nonexistent, poorly funded, and unreliable. Students in smaller towns or cross-border areas, where connectivity is limited and transit options are scarce or prohibitively expensive, are most impacted by this. First-generation students, women, and people from low-income homes are disproportionately affected by these everyday logistical constraints, and they may have to choose between their education and basic survival. The Forum for Educational Change has actively addressed the issue of inadequate student transportation in North Macedonia through a concrete policy proposal for subsidized student transport. Their research highlights the financial burden of daily commutes—especially for students traveling between cities like Skopje, Tetovo, Štip, and Bitola—and its impact on attendance, equity, and access to education. The initiative suggests a public-private partnership model, inspired by Slovenia's example, to make inter-municipal transport affordable and equitable for all full-time students.⁹

In addition to undermining equal access to higher education, institutional neglect of student housing and movement also fuels wider social inequality. It also widens educational differences by limiting students' access to all aspects of university life, such as extracurricular activities, networking, and academic help. Improving student standards is an issue of fairness as much as infrastructure. When students are sleeping in cramped quarters, studying in dimly lit rooms, traveling for long hours, or worried about how they will pay

⁹ Forum for Educational Change (2024), Policy Proposal: Subsidized Student Transport
fech.mk/предлог-мерка-за-субвенциониран-студ/

their next rent, it is impossible to expect them to perform well academically. Restoring dignity and equity to the WB6 student experience requires an immediate, concerted national and local response. **Therefore the Forum for Educational Change demands:**

- Urgent renovation of the student dormitories in North Macedonia and a state-supported expansion of housing facilities in the entire region.
- Mechanisms for assigning students to dorms that are open and equitable, giving preference to students from low-income families, those residing in rural areas, and those studying far from home.
- Depending on socioeconomic conditions and distance from the university, national subsidies for student public transit may offer reductions or free admission.
- Prioritising student mobility through strategic investments in regional and urban transport infrastructure, particularly in underserved or isolated locations.

UNTIL THEN, THE CHANTING CONTINUES...

NO MORE CRAMPED DORMS, NO MORE LONG RIDES,
STUDENTS DESERVE BETTER — WITH EQUAL ACCESS TO ALL STRIDES!

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FINAL CONCLUSIONS

This Charter is not a request. It is a declaration.

The Student Participation and Well-Being Charter stands as a bold rejection of the silence, apathy, and institutional complacency that has long defined higher education across the Western Balkans. It is a response to a system that too often sees students as passive recipients rather than active architects of their futures. With this Charter, we affirm that students are not burdens on the system—they are the reason it exists.

Each chapter of this Charter, from student governance and financial justice to mental health, housing, and academic integrity—lays out not only the failures of current institutions but the concrete pathways to renewal. These are not vague aspirations, but actionable demands rooted in lived realities, research, and the voices of thousands of students who refuse to be treated as footnotes in decisions about their futures.

The Forum for Educational Change offers this Charter to universities, ministries, parliaments, and student bodies alike as a compass for reform and as a challenge: Will you continue managing decline through cosmetic adjustments? Or will you meet this generation's call with the courage to rebuild?

Because no system that sidelines its students can claim to be democratic. No university that tolerates injustice can pretend to offer knowledge. And no future built without students will ever belong to them.

Let this Charter be the beginning of a movement—not only to reform higher education but to reclaim it.

Until then, the chanting continues to get up and stand up for our rights!

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