

Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of the United Nations

Human Rights Council 4th Cycle – 49th Session

Academic Freedom and Cadets



Submitting Organization

Feel Humanity

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Content

I. Introduction	2
II. Brief Overview Last UN – UPR Cycle	3
III. Access to Education	3
IV. Quality of Education	4
V. Academic Freedom & Government Interference	4
VI. Life Sentence Imprisoned: Cadets	5
VII. Recommendations	5
VIII. References	7

I. Introduction

1. Feel Humanity has drafted the following report as a stakeholder contribution to the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review [UPR] for Türkiye. Feel Humanity primarily focuses on the educational front within Human Rights; hence, this report and its recommendations will centre on the Right to Education.
2. Turkey's Constitution recognises education as a fundamental right for all citizens. Article 42 states explicitly that "no one shall be deprived of the right to education," emphasising the importance of universal access to education.ⁱ
3. Türkiye recently introduced its "Turkey Century Education Model". This model aims to modernise the curriculum across various educational stages and simplify course content by 35% to enhance student accessibility.
4. The introduction of this model marks the fourth significant curriculum change under the ruling AKP government, which has faced criticism for not addressing core issues within the education system, such as teacher shortages and educational inequalities.ⁱⁱ
5. Feel Humanity would also like to pay attention to the unjust life – sentences being carried out by former military cadets while following protocol due to the attempted coup on July 15, 2016.
6. Türkiye has faced many challenges in recent years, particularly in the context of the 2016 coup attempt. One concerning issue that warrants attention is the life sentences imposed on former military cadets, many of whom were simply following orders during the coup attempt on July 15, 2016. The Turkish government has attributed the coup to the Gülen movement and has prosecuted individuals linked to it, including these cadets.ⁱⁱⁱ
7. While dozens of cadets have been released for a retrial following the Supreme Court of Appeal's decision to overturn their sentences, 60 former cadets remain imprisoned without the opportunity for retrial.^{iv} These cadets, aged 18 to 21 at the time of the coup, were burdened with unjust life sentences for actions that were part of their military training and protocol.
8. This report will address this issue alongside other significant educational and human rights concerns while providing specific recommendations to secure these students' freedom. Feel Humanity emphasises the importance of fair treatment in line with international human rights standards and calls for urgent attention to this case.
9. Additionally, this report will analyse the progress made since the 3rd cycle and the country's efforts to improve the education sector, provide qualitative data to highlight the challenges and make recommendations to improve access, quality, and education inclusivity.
10. The remainder of this report will present relevant findings on Turkey's current situation, allowing for an evaluation of its efforts to foster the Right to Education. Ultimately, this paper will propose recommendations to ensure this Right remains respected, protected, and fulfilled.

II. Brief Overview Last UN – UPR Cycle

11. During the previous cycle, several recommendations have been made to Türkiye concerning equitable access to quality education. These include vital themes such as universal access to education, with particular emphasis on marginalised groups, including minorities and displaced children. The improvement of a legal framework protecting freedom of expression within educational institutions was also highlighted.
12. Furthermore, the last Review also pointed to concerns around the post-2016 suppression of educators, particularly those involved in the Gulen-movement, and the closing of schools affiliated with or connected to it.
13. Turkey's education system is centralised and controlled by its Ministry of National Education. The Ministry continues to set its policies and oversees the administration of all schools under the "Law of Unification of Instruction (LoUoI)" of all stages and types of pre-tertiary education. These policies and the educational system have been continuously criticised for constructing neoliberal programs and conservative religious ideology, limiting critical thinking in schools.
14. While Türkiye has accepted some previous UN-UPR Country Review recommendations, specific nuances and commitments to these recommendations have not been fulfilled.

III. Access to Education

15. Considering the acceptance of the recommendations on the educational front, the Turkish government has taken the initiative to mirror these commitments through its official brochures and action plans. These emphasise the inclusivity of its policies, enabling all children, including refugees, to access equitable education.^v At the same time, there are signs of integration efforts; remaining gaps and challenges persist, as evidenced by Human Rights Watch's latest submission to the Committee on the Rights of the Child.^{vi}
16. This research indicates serious breaches of Turkey's promise to uphold the non-refoulement claim and obstacles within Turkey's Temporary Protection Regulation. The recent suspension of the country's registration for refugees, which hinders freedom of movement between provinces, has resulted in unlawful deportations and the denial of access to education and healthcare.^{vii}
17. This situation should also be viewed alongside the identified poverty-related educational barriers, particularly for asylum seekers.
18. OECD's *PISA 2022* results reflect Turkey's improvements in mathematics and science, yet the country still faces significant socioeconomic disparities. While 33% of Turkish students are among the most disadvantaged socioeconomically and score higher than similarly disadvantaged peers globally, they still significantly lag in overall performance compared to their more advantaged counterparts.^{viii}

IV. Quality of Education

19. Minority rights in education remain a significant challenge in Türkiye, particularly for ethnic and religious minorities such as Kurds and Alevi. According to a 2020 article in the Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, the Turkish government continues to restrict the use of minority languages, such as Kurdish, in educational settings. Despite domestic and international pressure to offer education in mother tongues, Turkey maintains strict regulations that limit Kurdish-language instruction to elective courses rather than integrating it into core curricula.^{ix}
20. Furthermore, ethnic minorities face structural barriers to accessing equitable education. For example, Kurdish children in south-eastern Turkey are often subjected to systemic inequalities exacerbated by socio-economic disparities and the ongoing conflict between the state and Kurdish populations. The lack of culturally relevant educational content and limited opportunities for mother-tongue education alienates minority students from the education system, contributing to higher dropout rates and lower academic achievement compared to their Turkish counterparts.
21. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) highlighted that discrimination against the Alevi community in Turkey remains widespread and deeply entrenched.^x According to a statement released on the 28th anniversary of the Sivas Massacre, the situation has only deteriorated under President Erdoğan's leadership. The report emphasised that Alevi continue to face growing challenges, with the state showing limited commitment to improving their conditions.
22. As the educational system of Turkey is a centralised one, this raises the question of equitable education amongst its citizens, as religious classes in Turkish schools are predominantly based on Sunni Islam, with no exemptions offered to religious minorities such as Alevi.^{xi}

V. Academic Freedom & Government Interference

23. The Turkish government's policies since 2016 have undermined academic freedom, significantly impacting educational institutions and intellectuals nationwide.^{xii} The restrictions, particularly on Gülen-linked schools, represent a broader trend of stifling dissent and controlling academic discourse.
24. Since the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, academic freedom has been significantly curtailed, with widespread purges targeting educational institutions linked to the Gülen movement. In the aftermath of the coup, the Turkish government launched a large-scale crackdown on institutions suspected of ties to the movement, which it blames for orchestrating the coup.
25. News reports show that as of 2024, the government has seized 232 schools associated with the Gülen movement across 21 countries.^{xiii} These closures represent a broader effort by the government to suppress any perceived threats to its authority, especially within the education sector, where Gülenist schools were once prominent.^{xiv}

26. Moreover, Turkish academics have increasingly faced restrictions on their freedom of expression, with many being dismissed or prosecuted for expressing critical views of the government. Reports show that since 2016, thousands of academics have been dismissed under state-of-emergency decrees, many without clear evidence of wrongdoing. The government's targeting of educators has raised alarm internationally, particularly regarding the stifling of intellectual freedom in higher education.^{xv}
27. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has also addressed the issue, ruling that Turkey's actions against academics violated the right to freedom of expression.^{xvi}

VI. Life Sentence Imprisoned: Cadets

28. With the State of Emergency Decree Laws, Military High Schools and hundreds of schools and universities affiliated with the Hizmet (Gülen) Movement were closed. All of the students studying in these schools were subjected to emergency decrees. They were also subjected to discriminatory treatment, such as verbal abuse and isolation, by teachers and students at the schools they attended. The diplomas given to students studying at cadets schools were inscribed with sentences emphasising that they were subjects of Decree Laws. As such, these children were directly aimed at and victimised by the decree laws.
29. Students of military high schools closed down by the State of Emergency decrees are banned from entering science or social sciences high schools that offer good education¹
30. Some of the students of the closed military high schools are also charged with membership in an armed terrorist organisation on the assumption that they are in contact with or affiliated with the Hizmet (Gülen) Movement. The justification for this is the allegation that before entering military high schools when they were 12-13 years old, they had dialogues with people connected to the Hizmet (Gülen) Movement. Moreover, those dates date back years before July 15, 2016. The justification for the allegation is that they went to study centres affiliated with the Hizmet (Gülen) Movement or to the homes of university students, where they studied and participated in religious congregations. Based on this, it is assumed that the children were the Hizmet (Gülen) Movement members at the time. Even if this assumption is correct, this is the children's way of expressing themselves. Because participating in a civil movement within the limits of the law and adopting the values of that movement falls within the scope of freedom of religion and conscience.

VII. Recommendations

31. Feel Humanity calls for the Turkish government to prioritise fair treatment of the remaining cadets imprisoned after the 2016 coup attempt, ensuring their cases are reviewed by

¹ https://www.crossborderjurists.org/turkey-child-rights-report-the-khk-children-the-little-victims-of-turkeys-state-of-emergency-laws/#_ftn27

- international human rights standards. The government should urgently release these young individuals and work toward restoring their freedom and dignity.
32. We urge the Turkish government to clear the reputations of these students (imprisoned cadets after the 2016 coup attempt), recognising the unjust circumstances that led to their imprisonment. The state must provide adequate moral and legal reparations, allowing them to reintegrate into society without the stigma of wrongful conviction.
 33. Feel Humanity urges the international community to advocate for a fair review of these cases and to ensure that justice is served in line with human rights standards.
 34. Furthermore, we recommend that the Turkish government extend moral and psychological support to these students (imprisoned cadets after the 2016 coup attempt) and take compensatory measures that acknowledge the harm they have endured. Efforts should be made to assist them in rebuilding their lives and reputations and reinforcing their rights to education and personal freedom.
 35. Feel Humanity urges the Turkish government to uphold the right to education for all children, including asylum seekers, regardless of their registration status. All schools should be instructed to allow child asylum seekers to enrol without facing bureaucratic barriers.
 36. Sufficient resources are also recommended to ensure the infrastructure is in place to support the education of these vulnerable populations.
 37. Feel Humanity recommends that the Turkish government recognise the diverse cultural backgrounds within Türkiye's ethnic composition. Therefore, we call for developing comprehensive multicultural education programs within education faculties.
 38. We recommend that these programs and teachers be sensitive to diverse cultural backgrounds to effectively educate individuals from various communities and ensure that every student feels represented and valued in their learning environment.
 39. Feel Humanity recognises the necessity of Kurdish-Turkish bilingual education and emphasises the urgent need to implement this model in public schools and universities.
 40. Feel Humanity strongly recommends granting greater autonomy to local governments, enabling local authorities to tailor educational programs to meet the specific needs of their communities, particularly in terms of language education and cultural relevance.
 41. Feel Humanity advocates for government organisations, media outlets, and academic institutions to actively promote tolerance and respect for students from diverse backgrounds.
 42. We urge Türkiye to recognise and safeguard the rights of Kurds and other minority groups as integral components of a multicultural society. Acknowledging their contributions and fulfilling obligations under international law will help preserve minority identities while promoting social cohesion.
 43. Feel Humanity recommends the establishment of laws and policies that protect schools and universities from military use during armed conflict, considering the threats to academic freedom and the integrity of educational institutions.

44. We further advise Training programs to be developed for educators and administrators to ensure they are prepared to uphold these protections and advocate for their rights in times of crisis.
45. The Turkish government should stop trying to illegally seize educational institutions in other countries known to be close to the Gülen movement.

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