

The Students at Risk (StAR) Program – a protection mechanism for student activists internationally

SAIH's position papers are documents adopted by SAIH's board, intended to further concretize, and explain existing SAIH policy on topics that are key to SAIH's work. They also seek to provide some background information on those topics for interested readers throughout SAIH's structures. The papers are grounded in already adopted steering documents and can only elaborate new political positions in specific areas where a gap has been identified.

Background

Student activists worldwide continue to face persecution due to their activism advancing human rights, democracy, and the right to education. Due to this, there is an urgent need to ensure that there are protection mechanisms available to them to counter the attacks that they suffer. These necessary protection mechanisms can entail local or international measures with varying degrees of action (e.g., providing safe houses, offering digital security courses, securing legal counseling, etc.).

Among these mechanisms, the StAR program established in Norway in 2014 has demonstrated the positive impacts of providing student activists with a temporary shelter whenever the risks they are facing force them to leave their own home. Based on this, **SAIH believes that all student activists facing persecution should have access to a safe haven, whenever needed, without considerations to their academic performance, in order to safeguard their lives, secure their right to education, and mitigate the risks they have taken by advocating for social justice and human rights.**

Therefore, it is SAIH's priority for the StAR programs to focus specifically on the **protection of students who face risk due to their activism.**

The Students at Risk Program in Norway

The StAR program should be a permanent program run by the Norwegian government, in close collaboration with civil society organizations, with sufficient funding and staff to answer to the global trends of attacks against student activists. The program should be inclusive and take concrete steps towards overcoming barriers when it comes to language, economic status, travelling restrictions and discrimination. Additionally, Norwegian universities should expand the number of English study programs available in order to increase their capacity to accommodate StAR students.

Prior to a StAR candidate's arrival to Norway, but only in those cases where candidates face situations which require immediate help, StAR should be able to provide rapid response and / or emergency assistance without conditionalities.

During the admission process, students need to be given as much liberty as possible to choose which academic field they want to pursue in Norway. To achieve this, special considerations need to be made regarding academic accreditations. The accreditation requirements to enter a Norwegian university should be flexible and StAR cases where individual students have a relevant academic background, even from universities lacking accreditation, should still be considered for admission based only on the recognition of those prior studies. These are required exceptions due to the latent risk of authoritarian regimes using national accreditation procedures as a political tool to exclude certain groups from higher education and/or university staff sanctioning students through unfair grading or expulsions.

Upon arrival, all students should be offered close psychosocial support and continuous follow-up from the beginning until the end of their studies. Additionally, the program should include within its structure a mandatory human rights, activism, or resilience element. These could be offered via supplementary courses at a Norwegian university, weekend seminars or camp gatherings.

Upon completion of their academic degree, students must receive support to elaborate an after-studies life-plan. The program should establish partnerships (with civil society organizations, universities, private companies, etc.) for them to have a wide range of opportunities to fulfill those plans. Some after-studies opportunities could be, for example, work internships, one semester studies, academic career counseling.

The flexibility in the academic offer and the complementary human rights training in the StAR program seeks to strengthen students' capacities and enable them to return and resume their activism back home after completion of studies. However, due to the risk they might face and the unpredictability of politics, students should not be forced to return or sign any commitments in that regard.

To ensure long lasting connections among StAR students, an independent alumni network should be established. This network's goal should be to actively contribute to the strengthening of the program and serve as a support mechanism to their own members. SAIH will support initiatives related to establishing this network.

Finally, the StAR program in Norway should never be perceived as a protection mechanism isolated from the international community. The Norwegian government should at all times collaborate with relevant actors internationally to fulfill the aforementioned vision. Consequently, the StAR program should be an essential part of Norway's foreign policy experience sharing.

The Students at Risk Program Internationally

Internationally, StAR should be recognized globally as a protection mechanism for student activists whose right to education is at risk of being denied due to their activism and students at all levels (bachelor, master, and PhD when relevant) should have access to this protection mechanism.

Having a variety of national programs, which respond to diverse needs, is an advantage due to how heterogeneous the student movement is across continents. Therefore, SAIH will work to establish more national StAR programs by collaborating with local student unions, universities, and politicians in other countries. It is not SAIH's vision to advocate for a streamlined international program across countries but instead to advocate for the creation of national programs and the successive establishment of

collaboration channels that would enable efficient and timely coordination between the different national StAR programs.

When advocating for the creation of more StAR programs, it should not be forgotten that regional diversity is needed and there is a clear need for StAR programs that would enable students to stay within their own region. This would facilitate students' integration in the receiving country and make it easier for them to further their advocacy efforts if desired.

Lastly, the creation of new StAR programs should also aim to increase the variety of study languages available to possible candidates. This would make the programs more inclusive, ensuring no student who faces risk is left behind. Due to the lack of English proficiency in Latin America and the vibrant student movement we see in the region, it is a priority to support the establishment of StAR programs for Spanish-speaking student activists.

The goal for establishing a network of national StAR programs is to ensure that all student activists worldwide who face risk due to their activism can promptly find a safe haven to secure their right to education. We are aware that the establishment of these programs can open for the creation of wider schemes to protect students facing other, not activism-related, risks and even though that is not our main goal, SAIH can support such initiatives since it supports students in realizing their right to higher education.