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Students an important focus at big UN sustainability event

Keith Nuthall 27 July 2025

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Higher education students have been a key focus of this year's meeting of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, or HLPF 2025, the United Nations' main political body following up and reviewing implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. However, some delegates have argued that access to events could be widened.

Students participated (again) in this year's HLPF at United Nations headquarters in New York, run by the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) from July 14 to 23 under the theme "Advancing sustainable, inclusive, science- and evidence-based solutions for the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs for leaving no one behind".

Student representatives use the HLPF platform to advance student interests, Jacob Blasius, executive director of the Global Student Forum – the worldwide umbrella organisation for university and secondary school student unions – told *University World News*.

"At HLPF 2025, we see valuable opportunities to elevate student perspectives," he explained. "The education sector is a powerful force for sustainable change, and we are advocating for its role to be fully recognised."

Expanding access to education

One key event was an Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) event hosted by the **Education and Academia Stakeholder Group**, which brings together human rights-based education and civil society organisations and academic groups focused on expanding educational access.

It included a key session on policy advocacy around education in emergencies, including wars, instability, and violence that have harmed student access to universities and colleges.

The meeting also assessed the need for climate change education, helping to build resilient education systems and communities. Blasius noted how the meeting discussed "placing best practices and education as the main drivers for progress".

A HLPF **Major Groups and Other Stakeholders (MGoS)** coordination mechanism – which includes the Global Student Forum – has launched a **new handbook** on effective civil society engagement in the HLPF.

"I think it is clear that higher education already offers strong traditions of student youth engagement that deliver real-world impact. These practices should inspire international policymaking," said Blasius.

The handbook stressed how MGoS organises educational side events at the Multi-stakeholder Forum on Science, Technology, and



Innovation for the SDGs (STI Forum), staged annually to discuss science, technology, and innovation cooperation to help implement SDGs, for example.

Sustainability challenges in HE

Students see a range of sustainability challenges in higher education, from fossil fuel divestment and curriculum reform to climate justice and equitable international mobility, noted Blasius.

“Students want universities to practice what they preach and become part of the solution.”

He welcomed an apparent growing appetite for engaging young people in UN processes, noting: “UN institutions are increasingly involving students and young people in more structured and purposeful ways.”

That said, some wings of the UN system are “still learning, and others engage only under pressure, but overall, a shift is underway,” he told *University World News*.

Indeed, governments and international bodies are starting to realise that it makes no sense to talk about the future without student participation, said the Global Student Forum leader.

He argued that the creation of the UN Youth Office in 2022 has added new energy and legitimacy to calls for more consistent and impactful youth engagement in UN decision-making processes.

And while several UN member states are actively pushing for this change, civil society – including student and youth movements – “faces growing barriers to participation”, Blasius said.

“One troubling trend is the individualisation of youth engagement, where selected individuals are invited to participate rather than working through democratic youth structures. This often leads to one-off, tokenistic events dominated by more privileged voices, without building long-term systems for representation,” he warned.

The Global Student Forum has been working to counter such risks by offering participation by representatives grounded “in mechanisms of democratic student representation”, so that “young people are not just present but genuinely involved”.

He said: “Our goal is to build inclusive systems that connect global institutions with the wider student community and localise participation in a sustainable way.”

Youth voice is important

Katrin Kohl, co-chair of the UNESCO Chair in Reorienting Education towards Sustainability at York University in Toronto, Canada, said: “Students at the HLPF bring an important youth voice to the discussion to advance intergenerational dialogue.

“The HLPF gives students a unique window into how global sustainability decisions are made. They experience the complexity of policy processes and the urgency of interconnected challenges through firsthand conversation and can connect classroom learning with real-world debates.

“This strengthens key sustainability competencies that higher education aims to foster, such as systems thinking, critical reflection, futures literacy, and intercultural collaboration.”

Kohl added that for some students, the opportunity to participate in the HLPF “expands what is imaginable in their academic and professional futures, encouraging deeper engagement with sustainability pathways in both study and practice”.

Young Diplomats of Canada

Higher education student delegates have attended a wide range of meetings at this year's HLPF. *University World News* spoke to three



students from Young Diplomats of Canada (YDC), an NGO that recruits, prepares, and sends delegations of young Canadian leaders to international summits and multilateral fora.

They and another colleague – Esther Nnorom, a master's graduate from the University of British Columbia – were selected to travel to New York after an extensive selection procedure.

Being included in the Canadian government delegation gave the youth delegates access to more meetings than NGO-only accredited visitors, including formal ECOSOC sessions as well as side events. Another potential way for delegation is through the MGoS system, which can also accredit young people to attend and cover HLPF sessions.

From their access, YDC delegates will write a report for the NGO to be published on its website. A YDC report will also be sent to the Canadian government as input for its own HLPF briefing.

Sarah Leshob, a medical student at the Université de Montréal, said the YDC report would be a useful source of information, including for future delegates. "We also share information and inside knowledge and all the stakeholders we met and what we learnt from them."

While participating in HLPF events was possible, the Canadian delegates said, this was sometimes limited to side events, and even then, under tight time constraints.

Catherine Ampleman-Duchesne, a masters in international studies student at Université Laval in Quebec City and Sciences Po Bordeaux in France, said: "I have raised my hands once, but there are 20 to 30 hands raised, and since the side events are only an hour and 15 minutes usually and use the last five to 10 minutes for questions from the floor – if your hand is not seen fast enough, you're not chosen."

Nathanael Ip, a bachelor physiology and anthropology student at the University of Alberta, has in the past spoken at a UN Association of Canada event, and in April he panelled and intervened at a UN event.

Despite being part of the Canadian delegation, the young diplomat members' travel costs were not covered. While he fundraised to cover his costs, Ip recognised this might be difficult for student delegates from smaller or less well-resourced countries, saying:

"It really is a privilege. Access is not always easy, and a lot of youth aren't able to be in this space. This is something that needs more work," although he stressed the UN does offer support for visiting delegates from some countries.

Should they visit, networking opportunities are vast. Said Ampleman-Duchesne: "We're very lucky as youth to be here and meet youth from other member states. It's good PR for us. We're giving our *LinkedIn* to everybody. In the future, maybe the person I met from Italy will be the next prime minister...."



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