

WUS Vienna Conference on Universal Human Right to Quality Education

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World University Service (WUS) is celebrating its centennial from 14 to 16 May 2020 in Vienna, organized by WUS Austria, WUS Germany, WUS Canada and WUS Alumni. The central theme of the conference is 'Human Right to Quality Education for All' also reflecting on WUS history, and the experiences of Alumni among other related matters. The importance of the theme is not limited to WUS community or committees, but to people at large in all countries from school teachers to university academics, from all students to education administrators, and from educational planners to civil society activists.

Importance of the Conference

The theme of the conference also related to and based on the UN declared Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, and more particularly on SDG4 on the Right to Quality Education with the objective of achieving it by 2030. But even after five years, many of the interim targets are not achieved by most countries or lagging behind. The concepts, the purposes and objectives are also not properly understood or explained, and most importantly the mechanisms and necessary resources are not identified or utilized. Only ten years are left for the final targeted year.

Thus is the importance of the conference to possibly accelerate the process by motivating the policy planners and policy makers both at the international and national levels, and educate the people and particularly the children and youth on their universal human right to quality education. The conference is also a determination on the part of WUS community, committees and Alumni to make their own contributions to enhance the human right to quality education through projects, scholarships, activities and advocacy. In this respect, WUS aspires and intends to work with other international and national civil society organizations, academic and student unions, and call for all countries, the UN and donor organizations to support these efforts in the coming future.

The World University Service has always been a voluntary organization of academics, students and university administrators with the commitment to serve the society and people, particularly the poor, the vulnerable and the discriminated, while defending academic freedom and autonomy of universities and other higher educational institutions. WUS has always appreciated the contributions and funding from members, committees and donor agencies to undertake projects, activities, scholarships and advocacy. WUS is open to other likeminded civil society activists, and has always been working in cooperation with organizations with the objectives of justice, peace, reconciliation, anti-discrimination, solidarity, cooperation and human rights.

Some Lessons from History

Initiated by a group of academics and social workers led by Ruth Rouse in 1920 affiliated with the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), aftermath of the First World War, the initial organization was named as the European Student Relief (ESR). In 1925, it was renamed as the International Student Relief (ISR) to reflect the international scope of its activities, and it is the same organization which become reorganized as the World University Service in 1950. By this time, the organization wanted to highlight the role of the university and academic communities (teachers, students and administrators) in society and particularly progressive social change. Since then WUS has pursued a strong advocacy role, as it is doing today, in respect of human rights, academic freedom and quality education and many other relevant social issues.

Further going back to the origins, the reason for the new organization in 1920 was not only to address the pressing humanitarian needs of students affected by the war in food, clothing, books, housing, health etc. but also to address them and assist the students irrespective of their religion or non-religion, ideological affiliations, country of origin or ethnicity/race. However, there was a particular attention to disadvantaged or discriminated sections of the society like women and the poor. In this sense, ESR or WUS was the first human rights organization in the world in a practical sense.

Those students who were assisted by ESR, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, not neglecting Asia Minor, were virtually refugees. It is ironic that WUS celebrating its centennial today at a time where there is a similar or a larger refugee crisis in Europe and other parts of the world. Therefore more action is called for on those lines and other related matters such as conflict resolution, peace and international cooperation.

Resurrecting WUS International

This article is only an introduction to the Conference Programme published by the organizers, explaining the conference theme and its rationale, the draft agenda, and giving contact details and other information. A link to those details are given at the end of this article. As any other organisation, WUS has been going through very many trials and tribulations, ups and downs and controversial periods. However it has always survived, fought back and became resurrected. Last two decades have not been quite promising particularly to WUS International while some national committees have survived and even thrived as can be seen from the organizing committees.

There was a time when there were over 50 active national committees throughout the world including Asia/Pacific. However, some of them are now defunct, inactive or functioning with difficulties particularly in Asia, Africa and Latin America. There are however many thousands living today who have benefitted from WUS assistance directly or indirectly for their education, employment, training, survival and migration to safe countries. There is a duty on their part as Alumni to come forward and contact the organizers of the conference and keep in touch, if they are not in a position to participate at the event. Most importantly, their financial contributions are equally appreciated.

WUS has always been in touch with and acted in cooperation with student unions and academic associations in different countries. These unions and associations also can benefit through such links and cooperation. Here is an important story for that objective.

It is known history that the forerunner of WUS, the European Student Relief was formerly established on 7 August 1920 at St. Beatenberg, Switzerland. Thereafter, it continued to function from Geneva. However less formal beginning or precursor started in Vienna, Austria, initiated by student unions and student activists, drawing the attention of WSCF office in London on their plight as a result of the war and then famine. For example, in December 1919, Herbert Petrick, a student leader/activist wrote to Ruth Rouse at WSCF headquarters in London, urging her to visit Vienna and see the famine and kindly address the situation.

The reason to relate this story is not only to highlight the importance of having the 100 year celebrations in Vienna, but also to emphasise that student leaders in needy and interested countries could and should write to the organizers of the Vienna conference or/and WUS and seek affiliation and cooperation. Most important eventually is to form their WUS committees and organizations in their own countries.

For more information on the Conference from WUS-Austria, see:

<http://www.wus-austria.org/30/pages/46/wus-100--global-conference-on-human-right-to-quality-education>

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