

30 years of ELFA: legal education between traditions and modernities

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Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed colleagues,

It is a profound honour to stand before you today as we commemorate the 75th anniversary of the European Convention on Human Rights. This milestone is not just a celebration of a historic document, it reaffirms our unwavering commitment to the principles of justice, equality, and human dignity, which we should not take for granted.

Seventy-five years ago, in the aftermath of the Second World War, the European Convention on Human Rights, a landmark document, was adopted in Rome. It was a beacon of hope, a testament to the collective agreement of European nations to ensure that the horrors of the past would never be repeated. The Convention established a comprehensive framework for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms across Europe.

Central to the Convention's success is the European Court of Human Rights, based in Strasbourg. With its numerous judgments, called to address a lot of contemporary challenges, the Court turns the Convention into a living instrument which should be read in the light of the present day. Over the decades, the Court in Strasbourg has delivered landmark judgments that have shaped the legal landscape of Europe, reinforcing the principles of democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights.

As a judge at this prestigious court, I am extremely happy to be the keynote speaker for such an excellent audience about a topic that is not only fundamental to the practice of law but also to the very fabric of our society. As we navigate the complexities of the modern world, the role of legal education

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in upholding and advancing human rights has never been more critical. As we gather here, we are reminded of the profound impact that legal education has on shaping the minds and hearts of future legal professionals. Today, I will discuss how integrating human rights into legal education not only enriches the curriculum but also fortifies the very foundation of justice and equality in our society.

The concept of human rights has evolved significantly over the centuries, from the Magna Carta to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Legal education has always played a crucial role in this evolution, serving as the bedrock upon which the principles of justice and equality are built. By embedding human rights into the core curriculum, we ensure that future legal professionals are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to uphold these fundamental principles.

Human rights are not granted by any government, institution, or authority; they are inherent to all human beings by virtue of their humanity. Humanism, as a philosophical and ethical approach, has contributed a lot and was pivotal in shaping the trajectory of human rights. It has transformed law from a mere tool of governance into a means of safeguarding human dignity and upholding individual rights. In its essence, humanism emphasises the central value of the individual and the moral responsibility of society to protect the well-being and rights of every human being. This philosophical approach is directly linked to the development of human rights as we know them today. For Aristotle, for example, the law should reflect the nature of human beings and their capacity for reason, morality, and social cooperation. According to him, the rule of law is better than the rule of any individual.¹ As these philosophical traditions evolved, humanism contributed significantly to the development of legal systems that prioritise the protection of human dignity and the recognition of inherent human rights. Humanism emphasises that law should not simply serve as an instrument of power, but rather be a mechanism for safeguarding the dignity and freedom of individuals.

This is why human rights have, and should have, a special place in legal education.

¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, Books III and IV.

Human rights are the cornerstone of justice, equality, and dignity. They are the universal principles that protect individuals from abuses and ensure that everyone can live with freedom and respect. Legal education plays a paramount role in entrenching these values in future legal professionals.

The evolution of human rights protection underscores the need for a deeper understanding of these principles within legal education. Modern human rights principles are foundational to the international legal instruments that govern our societies today, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the UN Covenants on human rights and the European Convention on Human Rights (1950), which enshrine fundamental rights like life, liberty, security, and equality before the law. Though legal positivism often stands in contrast to the natural law school of thought, contemporary legal scholars and practitioners increasingly view the concept of human rights as an intersection of both approaches - on one hand, as a moral and philosophical imperative, and on the other, as a practical legal reality embedded in both national and international law.

Human rights education in universities plays a crucial role in bridging these philosophical perspectives together and preparing future legal professionals to defend and uphold human rights in their practice. Law students must be equipped not only with technical legal expertise but also with a deep understanding of the values underpinning human rights and their central role in the justice system. Through the study of human rights, law students are introduced to concepts of equality, social justice, and the protection of vulnerable groups: values that are integral to modern legal practice. Human rights education, therefore, is not merely an academic pursuit for its own sake but a vital foundation for cultivating socially responsible and ethically grounded legal practitioners.

This is why modern law schools are rethinking curricula to integrate human rights law as a core subject rather than an optional one. And I am happy that Bulgaria is among them. Today it would not be exaggerated to say that the integration of human rights into the core curriculum is at the heart of modern legal education. This includes the development of specialised courses, interdisciplinary seminars, and empirical learning opportunities that connect theory with practice. Law schools around the world are ensuring that students are well-versed in international human rights treaties and conventions, as well as the mechanisms for their enforcement. This foundational knowledge is

essential for any legal professional who aims to advocate for justice and equality. Through the study of landmark cases and real-world scenarios, students gain a deep understanding of how human rights are protected and challenged in various contexts.

The growing emphasis on human rights within law schools is a recognition of the fact that law is not merely a set of technical rules, but a tool for advancing human dignity and social progress. Human rights education, therefore, plays an indispensable role in ensuring that legal professionals remain deeply attuned to the ethical implications of their work, ensuring that justice is not merely administered but is done so in a manner that respects and upholds the dignity of every individual.

Universities have the capacity to serve as hubs for human rights advocacy. Through legal aid clinics, public lectures, and collaborative projects with non-governmental organisations, law schools can extend the benefits of human rights education to the broader community, reinforcing the connection between academic learning and societal impact.

Effective human rights education within legal institutions demands substantial institutional commitment. Adequate funding, targeted faculty training, and strategic partnerships with international organisations are foundational to this integration.

The Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers further underscores this necessity, advocating for comprehensive human rights training in legal education to improve compliance with international standards and minimise human rights violations at the national level.² Institutional support not only ensures proper resources but also legitimises human rights as an indispensable component of professional training for all legal professionals.

It could be argued that human rights education not only provides knowledge of international protection mechanisms, but also develops analytical thinking, critical judgement, and a sense of social responsibility. This form of education equips future lawyers with the tools they need to engage with the broader issues

² See Julian Lonbay and Katerina Spanou, 'The Council of Europe's Programme on Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals (HELP): Its Utility for University Teaching' [2024] *European Journal of Legal Education* 191.

of justice that shape the legal system as more effective, compassionate, and just.

Therefore, it will not be exaggerated to argue that profound human rights education for legal professionals at the universities is a must.

Since the individual is the central subject of law, the question of human rights is not merely an academic issue but a fundamental pillar of legal science and practice.

Without a strong foundation in human rights principles, legal professionals may interpret laws narrowly or in ways that fail to protect vulnerable individuals. A human-centred legal education ensures that future judges and lawyers approach cases with an awareness of justice, fairness, and the broader social impact of their rulings.

As society evolves, so do challenges to human rights. Issues such as privacy in the digital age, artificial intelligence, environmental rights, and refugee protections require legal professionals to apply human rights law to new and complex situations. Without a deep understanding of human rights principles, lawyers and judges may find it difficult to interpret laws in ways that protect human dignity in an evolving legal landscape.

Therefore we should be aware that education on human rights in the universities offers numerous benefits, however we should be aware that today it confronts many serious challenges.

On the level of benefits we should mention first its role in the protection of **the rule of law and preventing abuses of power.**

History has demonstrated that legal systems can be used as tools of oppression when detached from human rights principles. Authoritarian regimes often manipulate the law to justify discrimination, censorship, and repression. Legal professionals with a profound education in human rights are better equipped to resist legal manipulation, advocate for justice, and uphold the rule of law, ensuring that legal systems serve people rather than oppress them.

In the second place an important asset of education in human rights is the building of public trust in legal institutions.

A legal system that fails to prioritise human rights loses legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Legal professionals trained in human rights law are more likely to engage in transparent, ethical, and socially responsible legal practices, fostering trust between citizens and the legal system. When people believe that the law serves justice rather than power, democratic institutions are strengthened.

In the third place, education in human rights enhances analytical and critical skills

Incorporating human rights into legal education significantly enhances students' analytical abilities and critical thinking skills. Human rights education moves beyond theoretical tuition, emphasising 'practical exposure' that develops students' ability to critically evaluate laws within broader moral, ethical, and international contexts.

Then, we can also argue that human rights education can be seen as the foundation of legal excellence as it improves the quality and efficiency of legal practice.

No legal professional can be truly competent without an in-depth education in human rights. More than just a specialised field, human rights law is the foundation of all legal practice, guiding legal professionals to interpret laws ethically, apply justice fairly, and protect human dignity above all else. Human rights can be found in all branches of law today – civil, criminal and administrative. As legal challenges continue to evolve, those who understand and internalise human rights principles will be best positioned to shape the future of justice, democracy, and the rule of law.

In addition, education in human rights enhances international and cross-cultural legal competency

In an era of globalisation and international legal cooperation, legal professionals must navigate international treaties, transnational cases, and human rights frameworks. Profound human rights education enables lawyers and judges to engage in international legal discourse, collaborate with global institutions, and advocate effectively in cases involving cross-border human rights violations.

It should be noted that education in human rights contributes to ethical and professional responsibility

Human rights principles lie at the heart of legal ethics and professional responsibility.

For example, the European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly noted the importance of adequate human rights training in ensuring impartiality, ethical decision-making, and resistance to undue external influences of judges. I am citing here the case of *Kaçiu and Kotorri v. Albania*.³ According to this case legal education must embed human rights principles at its core, shaping a professional ethos committed to human dignity, fairness, and justice.

Moreover, the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (2011)⁴ asserts that human rights education is not just about imparting knowledge but about developing the skills and attitudes necessary for legal professionals to uphold human rights in their work. The declaration highlights that education and training in human rights contribute to the prevention of human rights violations and abuses, promote equality and sustainable development, and enhance participation in democratic decision-making processes. Legal professionals trained under these principles are better equipped to uphold these standards in their daily practices.

Last, but not least, human rights education actively promotes diversity and tolerance by exposing students to different legal traditions, cultural values, and social perspectives. This broadens students' intercultural competence, essential for legal professionals operating in an increasingly pluralistic and interconnected world. Such education challenges biases, breaks down prejudices, and contributes significantly to a more inclusive and culturally sensitive legal system.

And finally, university education in human rights strengthens the role of academia

Human rights education significantly empowers academia, transforming universities from passive institutions into active participants in human rights advocacy, research, and policy formulation. Academic institutions increasingly

³ 33194/07 – Chamber Judgment, [2013] ECHR 586, 33192/07.

⁴ Resolution 66/137, A/RES/66/137, 19 December 2011.

collaborate with civil society, government entities, and international organisations, fostering a comprehensive, integrated approach to human rights challenges.

As we speak about the benefits of human rights education, we should not neglect the numerous challenges it meets today.

On the one hand, it is important that human rights education **overcomes traditionalism**.

One significant challenge in integrating human rights education within legal studies is the entrenched traditionalism that marks many legal education systems. Conventional methods such as lecture-based instruction and a narrowly domestic legal focus often resist integration with broader, interdisciplinary human rights content. Legal education should transform to embrace international perspectives, which fosters intercultural competence and promotes universal respect for human rights principles. Educational institutions, therefore, must proactively adapt curricula, incorporating global exchanges and diverse pedagogical methodologies to prepare students for an increasingly interconnected legal landscape. Overcoming this challenge requires sustained institutional leadership and advocacy from educators committed to pedagogical innovation.

On the other hand, legal education in human rights is called upon to bridge theory and practice.

One of the most pressing challenges in legal education is the disconnect between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Many legal professionals receive formal instruction in human rights law but lack the practical skills required to apply these principles effectively in real-world settings.

Theoretical knowledge alone is insufficient. Legal education must provide students with practical training opportunities that allow them to apply their knowledge in real-world settings. Moot courts, internships, and legal clinics focused on human rights cases, internships, interdisciplinary courses, and research projects can create a more human rights-oriented learning environment to offer invaluable hands-on experience. These programmes not only enhance students' legal skills but also instil a sense of responsibility and commitment to human rights advocacy. They provide students with the

opportunity to apply their knowledge in real-world scenarios, preparing them to tackle human rights issues effectively in their professional career. Therefore, real-world engagement enriches student understanding, allowing them to critically evaluate and practically implement human rights standards.

Another significant challenge for contemporary education in human rights is the need to adapt to a globalised legal landscape

Traditional legal curricula often focus narrowly on domestic issues. However, globalisation demands that law graduates possess a multinational perspective. Today's legal professionals must navigate a globalised legal environment characterised by complex cross-border human rights issues. Exposure to human rights law encourages intercultural competence and a broader understanding of diverse legal traditions, preparing students to navigate legal disputes that transcend borders.

In our interconnected world, a global perspective on human rights is indispensable. Legal education must teach students about the universal nature of human rights and the importance of international co-operation in protecting these rights.

Additionally, but importantly, new legal challenges emerge, such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, environmental justice, digital privacy and refugee protection. They require a more dynamic and interdisciplinary, even intercultural, approach to human rights education. The contemporary development of international law and transnational legal norms requires a new generation of legal professionals trained in human rights law, capable of addressing complex and evolving global challenges”.

And, let's face it, we live in a world of AI which deeply marks contemporary education, including education in human rights in the universities. We should never turn a blind eye to this. For the moment AI will not replace humans as educators, but it will influence the way human rights are taught. If we take good advantage of AI it will create more immersive, personalised, and data-driven learning experiences but we have to ensure that ethical considerations remain at the forefront of technological advancement in education: universities must teach students about the ethical use of AI. Today, it is our primary task as university professors but also as human beings. In a best-case scenario, AI-powered platforms can bring more life to human rights education - they can

connect students, activists, and scholars from different parts of the world, enabling cross-cultural discussions on human rights. AI-driven discussion forums can analyse debates and provide insights, helping students to engage in more meaningful conversations. AI can create role-playing exercises where students act as human rights lawyers, activists, or policymakers, providing real-life experience. AI can analyse student learning patterns and tailor educational materials accordingly. Interactive AI-driven platforms can provide additional explanations, case studies, or quizzes to enhance comprehension. Virtual mentors can guide students based on their specific interests in human rights law, activism, or policy-making. Speech-to-text and text-to-speech technologies can assist students with disabilities, making learning more inclusive. Chatbots and AI tutors can provide 24/7 assistance, ensuring no student is left behind due to time or geographical constraints.

While AI offers incredible benefits, we must also recognise and address the ethical threats such as lack of transparency and bias in AI algorithms, privacy concerns, and the potential misuse of AI in mass surveillance and discrimination. As we integrate AI into human rights education, universities must also teach students about responsible AI development and use and about its ethical implications. Students will need to understand how AI can be both a tool for justice and a potential threat if misused.

In conclusion, it could be said that comprehensive human rights education in legal curricula is not merely advantageous but imperative. It strengthens ethical reasoning, enhances analytical skills, and equips future legal professionals to address complex human rights challenges. As globalisation evolves, this education becomes crucial for fostering justice and protecting human dignity worldwide. Law schools must, therefore, prioritise human rights education as foundational, empowering legal professionals to contribute positively and effectively to global justice and societal equity.

The imperative for comprehensive human rights education in legal training is clear: without it, legal professionals risk misapplying human rights law, leading to systemic injustices and violations of fundamental freedoms.

As global legal challenges become more complex, the demand for well-trained, ethically grounded, and globally competent legal professionals continues to grow. Institutions must ensure that human rights education is not an afterthought, but a core element of legal training, equipping future lawyers,

judges, and policymakers with the knowledge, skills, and ethical commitment required to uphold justice and human dignity in an increasingly interconnected world.

Ultimately, integrating human rights education represents a profound investment in the future of legal practice and the broader protection of human dignity, reinforcing the fundamental values of justice, democracy, and human rights globally.