

Bridging Futures

*Rebuilding International Higher Education
in Gaza and the Middle East
after October 2023*



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Introduction

[**Erasmus Student Network \(ESN\)**](#) is the largest organisation representing and supporting student mobility in Europe and beyond. ESN works on every aspect and stage of the mobility experience, from promoting mobility opportunities to integrating mobile learners after their experiences abroad by creating vibrant alumni communities that give back to their societies.

ESN is more than an alumni engagement and advocacy organisation. [**ESN's key activities**](#) across its 45 countries and more than 500 local student associations are dedicated to the support of current, future and prospective mobile learners. Every year, ESN's local volunteers support more than 350,000 students on mobility, working closely with all the institutions and stakeholders involved in international exchanges.

Moreover, through its research and policy activities, ESN has become a key actor in Europe and abroad in the discussion of internationalisation of higher education and student mobility. In particular, ESN has a dedicated internal structure focused on supporting global mobility, with Liaison Officers for each world region (i.e., the Americas, Asia, Africa and the Middle East, the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries), working closely with local actors on the ground to promote the Erasmus+ programme and student mobility abroad. In this endeavour, ESN collaborates with the European Commission's Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC), the European External Action Service (EEAS), its EU Delegations, the Erasmus+ National Focal Points (ENFP), the National Erasmus Offices (NEO) and International Contact Points (ICP).

For more than 35 years, ESN has been and is at the heart of the Erasmus Generation, bringing people together through the power of student mobility. **We believe that every exchange is an opportunity to build bridges, break down barriers and foster understanding.** We are committed to ensuring that every student, no matter their background, has the chance to shape the future of mobility. ESN believes in international opportunities for all and views student mobility as a tool to create bridges across world regions.

This document initially explores the current situation within Gaza's higher education sector, examining the impact of the conflict on universities, students, faculty, and the local academic environment. It then proposes a framework for rebuilding efforts that focuses on the role of international organisations in fostering resilience and reconstruction in education through cross-border collaborations, mobility programmes, and student-driven initiatives.

The escalating crisis in Gaza has severely impacted the sector of higher education. ESN's focus remains aligned with its role in education, as champions of inclusive education and youth empowerment, ESN emphasises the need for the European Union and European universities to support Gaza's academic sector. By addressing the urgent needs of Gaza's academic community and fostering its integration into global educational frameworks, this policy recommendation outlines actionable and tangible measures to aid Gaza's higher education system and community-focused solutions to the educational challenges arising from the crisis.

ESN in the Southern Neighbourhood Region

ESN, as the voice of the Erasmus Generation, opened the umbrella of its National Organisations to the Middle East with the [inclusion of ESN Jordan in 2023](#). Since then, and with the dedicated Liaison Officer for Africa and the Middle East, ESN has been opening its doors to foster collaboration and associations with relevant stakeholders, institutions and national organisations in the region.

In 2019, ESN took a significant step by voting to extend its support to countries beyond the European Higher Education Area. This decision led to the establishment of the Regional Liaison Office, tasked with ensuring ESN's engagement and presence outside the European Union.

In the first instance, ESN focused its presence and action towards the Mediterranean region with its association with the Mediterranean Universities Union (UNIMED) and the

Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). [Since 2022](#), we have been jointly organising the [Mediterranean Student Summit](#). In this multiplier event where students from both shores of the Mediterranean gather for four days to construct the future of the region from the youth and student perspectives.

From ESN's view, we firmly believe that access to education is a cornerstone of societal development, fostering stability, opportunity, and long-term progress. However, in the context of a [humanitarian crisis](#), where immediate survival and basic needs take precedence, the critical role of education is often overlooked. In this sense, it's vital to emphasise that the absence of accessible and functioning education systems exacerbates vulnerability and hinders recovery, making **it imperative to address educational disruptions as part of a comprehensive crisis response**. In this context, the Middle East is a ridden-conflict region, which makes **the sector of international education extremely fragile**. The geopolitical landscape, after October 7th, 2023, has intensified the challenges higher education institutions face in the region, especially marking an unprecedented momentum for the field of international education in Gaza and its universities.



Sustaining higher education goes beyond mere academic operations; it is about fostering resilience and nurturing the intellectual and social capital necessary for the future recovery and rebuilding of Gaza.

Declared Dr. Kherieh Rassas, Vice President for International and External Relations at An-Najah National University and President of UNIMED in July 2024, during the Scholars at Risk Global Congress in Vilnius.

Indeed, in the Mediterranean region, one of the EU's priority Neighbourhood zones, the ongoing crisis in Gaza has severely restricted students' ability to participate in mobility opportunities abroad, including within the Erasmus+ programme. This is a direct consequence of extensive infrastructural damage, disruptions to the academic calendar, and the emotional and psychological toll on students.

These challenges highlight the urgent need for rebuilding and reforming Gaza's higher education system, ensuring that students are not excluded from opportunities that promote global integration and empowerment. Clear, realistic and actionable measures are essential to bridge this gap and reaffirm the transformative power of education, even under the most challenging circumstances.

Furthermore, since 2024, the European Commission has taken significant steps to support Gaza's reconstruction, recognising the importance of this issue. Henrike Trautmann has been appointed as the Principal Adviser for Reconstruction in Gaza within the Directorate-General for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf (MENA). This appointment underscores the EU's commitment to addressing the multifaceted challenges in Gaza, including the critical area of education.

By focusing on the reconstruction of educational infrastructure and the resumption of academic programmes, the EU aims to restore and enhance educational opportunities for Gaza's youth, thereby contributing to the region's long-term stability and development.

1. Higher Education in the Middle East: actual balance and realities

1.1. State of play

Higher education in the Middle East has experienced **significant growth and transformation in the last ten years**, especially after the Arab Spring Uprising, reflecting the **region's commitment to advancing academic excellence and research capabilities**.

In this context, the Middle East has become a pivotal region in global higher education, evolving from a source market to a burgeoning academic and research hub. This progress is evidenced by the **inclusion of 81 Middle Eastern universities in the QS World University Rankings 2024**, marking an increase in ranked institutions across six countries since 2022.

One of the most significant trends in the education sector in the Middle East is the growing demand for education. The population in the region is young: the average age is **26,8** (Statista, 2022). In **Palestine**, the average age is **19,9** (Worldmeter, 2024). These numbers highlight a significant need for quality education at all levels. Governments and private investors are investing heavily in the education sector to meet this demand (OCO Global, n.d.).

On the other hand, tertiary education enrollment rates vary across the region. For instance, in 2022, Lebanon reported a gross **enrollment ratio of 62%**, while Morocco had 46%. These figures highlight the diverse participation levels in higher education among Middle Eastern countries (World Bank Group, 2024). Indeed, the education sector in the Middle East is projected to reach a market **value of USD 175 billion by 2027**, with an anticipated compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of **8.5% between 2022 and 2027**. This substantial investment underscores the region's dedication to educational development (OCO Global, n.d.).

To summarise, we can affirm that the Middle East's higher education landscape is characterised by **rapid expansion**, **increased global recognition**, and **significant economic investment**, positioning the region as an emerging leader in the international academic arena.

1.2. Consequences on higher education in Gaza in the aftermath of the Israeli attacks

The escalation in Gaza on 7 October 2023 and Israel's ensuing offensive response in Gaza, have hit the country's higher education sector hard, with roughly a quarter of all students, as well as faculty, called up to the armed forces, while budget cuts are expected as more money is allocated to the military (Cochrane, 2024). This has profound implications for academic exchanges, institutional collaborations, and the global integration of Gaza, especially, and Palestine's general higher education system.

Students in Gaza face significant challenges in accessing international mobility programmes, including political restrictions, financial constraints, and logistical difficulties. These barriers, therefore, limit their participation in international mobility initiatives. The internationalisation of higher education in Gaza, already limited by structural constraints, has been further destabilised by the ongoing war.

According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, the conflict has led to a complete suspension of all schooling in Gaza, depriving children and young adults of essential educational opportunities (UNESCWA, 2023). Moreover, 90.000 Higher Education Institutions in Gaza were destroyed, and 625,000 primary and secondary school students are out of school (Le Monde, 2024). Since the beginning of the strikes over Gaza on October 7 2023, at least 10,490 students and 500 educators in Gaza have lost their lives, with 16,700 students injured, leading to a significant loss of human capital (Quinlan and Khan, 2024).



**90,000 students in the Gaza Strip
have lost access to higher education
as a result of Israel's ongoing
military attacks on universities
that started in October 2023.**

According to a senior West Bank university official.

As mentioned previously, many academic partnerships with international institutions have been put on hold or ended in light of the conflict.

Higher education institutions operating in the territory ahead of the 7 October attacks included

- Al-Azhar University,
- Al Quds Open University,
- Islamic University of Gaza,
- Al-Aqsa University,
- Gaza University,
- Israa University,
- University College of Applied Science,
- University College of Science and Technology,
- University of Palestine,
- Hassan University,
- Palestine College of Nursing, and
- The Palestine Technical College

(Cocharane, 2025).

These partnerships have historically provided Gazan universities with access to research funding, joint publications and capacity-building projects. Such isolation prevents the sharing of knowledge and resources critical to academic development. Without joining global academic networks, Gaza's institutions risk losing their stature and relevance in the broader international academic community. Previously not that visible around the world, **Gaza's Higher Education just seems to be completely collapsing.**

Furthermore, students in Gaza and Palestine are encountering travel restrictions as one of the barriers. **Suspension of the right to mobility** became a highly critical issue for Palestinian students. Indeed, the continuing blockade and destruction of vital infrastructure have rendered travel for academic purposes all but impossible. This means **fewer scholarships, exchange programmes and opportunities for professional development abroad**. The war has placed strict limits on travel, keeping students and faculty from attending international programmes, conferences and exchanges.

This limitation reduces one's exposure to varied academic settings and chances for collaboration. Additionally, many students who received international scholarships are **unable to leave Gaza to pursue their studies**, effectively isolating them from opportunities to acquire global perspectives. Due to the lack of information, we can not give an exact number of students who couldn't attend their international mobility.

On the other hand, **damage to infrastructure** has disrupted internet and communication services, limiting access to online educational resources and virtual collaborations. With internet services severely compromised, faculty and students face barriers to accessing online journals, e-learning platforms, and global academic events. This technological gap hinders the ability to achieve Erasmus+ programme goals in partner countries in the Mediterranean, Palestine mainly, and its neighbours (Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt).

Finally, consequences on **students' mental health** are expected to increase. The conflict has inflicted psychological trauma on students and academic staff, affecting their capacity to engage in academic activities and pursue international opportunities; this emotional burden undermines the motivation and focus required for academic success. Coupled with the **lack of hope for a better future**, the trauma from conflict significantly affects motivation and academic performance.

An entire generation of students may graduate without the benefit of international exposure, weakening their global competency, employability and intercultural skills.

2. The Future of International Higher Education in Gaza after October 2023

2.1. Higher Education during a conflict and warfare

Savo Heleta and Samia Chasi (2022), distinguished scholars, international education practitioners and researchers from South Africa, defined the internationalisation of higher education as:

“A critical and comparative process of the study of the world and its complexities, past and present inequalities and injustices, and possibilities for a more equitable and just future for all. Through teaching, learning, research, and engagement, internationalisation fosters epistemic plurality and integrates critical, antiracist, and anti-hegemonic learning about the world from diverse global perspectives to enhance the quality and relevance of education”.

This definition is useful because it recognises the complexities inherent in the internationalisation process. In this context, experts acknowledged the **urgency of promoting peace education to strengthen social justice** as universities confront attacks on liberal values and double standards.

Moreover, the **role of universities in fostering peace and hope**, and their capacity to serve as safe havens for millions of young people displaced by ongoing conflicts around the world, came under the spotlight during discussions by international higher education leaders at the recent **International Association of Universities (IAU)** conference held in Tokyo from November 22nd to 24th of 2024 (Kakuchi, 2024). Contrary to the generally held assumption of higher education as a luxury in contexts of instability, **for Palestinians under occupation, higher education is existential**, giving Gaza strength and hope for a better future as soon as the war ends (Naidu, 2024).

***“Current developments give the higher education community an opportunity and a requirement to reassess and reimagine internationalisation as being composed of socially responsible and inclusive actions, both in the Global North and the Global South. Undoing is not the solution but the problem”* (De wit, 2024).**

Undoubtedly, there is a **call for extra efforts to be made to widen access for the Palestinian academic community**, including both those who remain in Gaza and those who are abroad and for the creation of an inclusive space at universities that addresses the needs of students and staff from war-torn zones and conflict-affected areas (Jebril, 2024).

Dr. Rassas, President of UNIMED, as a Palestinian living in Jerusalem, during [the third edition of the Mediterranean Student Summit](#), stated that student organisations, such as ESN, must keep advocating for the reconstruction and support of higher education in Gaza. From the student perspective, we need to keep our voices heard through true human interaction and efficient time management.

2.2. Initiatives that exist to support Higher Education in Gaza after the war

- The [TESI Initiative \(Technology-Enabled Support for Inclusion\)](#), launched in February 2024, is an international project raised by UNIMED in collaboration with An-Najah National University and the Palestinian Student Scholarship Fund (PSSF). This initiative aims to provide virtual learning platforms for students in Gaza unable to attend in-person classes, alleviating the educational burdens caused by the recent conflict. The initiative focuses on developing an innovative e-learning system dedicated to university students in the Gaza Strip, ensuring that there are no financial costs associated with this opportunity
- [UNIMED's Dual-Mode Learning Approach](#): Combines online resources and in-person sessions in neighbouring regions, allowing students to continue their education despite infrastructural challenges.
- [Palestinian Scholarship Initiative](#): The Palestinian Scholarship Initiative (PSI) is calling for applications from eligible Palestinian students whose education has been interrupted by conflict. This initiative offers full scholarships for undergraduate and master's programmes at Singapore's top universities, beginning in the 2025 academic year. The scholarships cover all expenses, including tuition, accommodation, living costs, and miscellaneous fees.

- [**Institute of International Education \(IIE\) Emergency Student Fund**](#): IIE provides rapid response grants to international students from Gaza, Israel, and the West Bank who are studying in the U.S. and have been impacted by the war. Each \$2,000 grant assists with essential needs such as tuition, housing, and medical expenses.
- [**Palestinian Student Initiative by the New University in Exile Consortium**](#): This initiative aims to rebuild human capacity in Gaza by connecting students with universities, delivering vital online programmes, and advocating for institutional pathways to support Palestinian scholars.
- [**Birzeit University's "Rebuilding Hope" Initiative**](#): Launched in March 2024, this programme seeks to provide resources to support Gaza's educational institutions and students, focusing on rebuilding and enhancing the resilience of the higher education sector.
- [**Education Above All \(EAA\) Foundation Programmes**](#): EAA has empowered youth in Gaza through initiatives related to education, psychological first aid, health, food, and clean drinking water, aiming to support the overall well-being and educational prospects of young Palestinians.

3. ESN's recommendations

3.1. Establish an Emergency Education Fund for Gaza

Following the escalation of hostilities in October 2023, the EU increased its humanitarian support to Palestinians in Gaza, allocating over **€103 million in 2023**. This funding aims to address basic needs, including education, as over 625,000 students have lacked access to education since the conflict's onset (European Commission, 2025). Moreover, on January 16, 2025, the European Union announced a **new €120 million humanitarian aid package** for Gaza, reinforcing its commitment to supporting civilians affected by the ongoing crisis. This funding aims to address urgent needs such as access to food, water, shelter, and healthcare, particularly for vulnerable populations including children and women (European Commission, 2025).

We believe this humanitarian assistance should be completed with an additional **Emergency Education Fund under the Erasmus+ programme** to address the immediate and long-term challenges facing Gaza's higher education sector. A similar initiative was launched after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the EU allocated €100 million for the rehabilitation of damaged Ukrainian schools and donated €14 million for purchasing and transporting school buses. By December 2022, 240 buses were en route to Ukraine, ensuring safe transportation for children to educational institutions (Ibid.,).

Furthermore, this fund should:

- Provide financial assistance for the reconstruction of educational infrastructure, including libraries, laboratories, and digital learning platforms.
- Support scholarships and mobility opportunities for Palestinian students and academics to pursue higher education and research in European institutions.
- Facilitate the procurement of technological resources and internet infrastructure to enable access to remote learning and international collaboration.

Current fundraising calls for higher education in Gaza after the October 7:

- [UNRWA Educational Recovery Fund](#): Focused on rebuilding schools and universities destroyed during the conflict and providing mental health support for students.
- [Global Education Emergency Partnership](#): A coalition of NGOs working with UNESCO to secure emergency funding for conflict-affected regions, including Gaza.
- [EU Horizon 2020 Solidarity Calls](#): Targeting collaborative research projects that include Gaza-based academics and institutions.

3.2. Promote an Erasmus+ Initiative Responsive to Conflict Contexts

European universities, in partnership with the European Commission, should adapt Erasmus+ frameworks: their values and core missions, to ensure inclusivity for students and institutions from conflict-affected regions like Gaza.

Let's take back the example of how Erasmus+ was a pioneer project in the aftermath of the Russian aggression in Ukraine. The European Commission opened the Erasmus+ programme to Ukrainian pupils, **vocational education and training (VET) learners, adult learners, teachers, trainers, and other educational personnel**. This initiative enabled Ukrainian educators and students to spend periods at hosting institutions in EU Member States and associated countries, facilitating continuity in education despite the conflict (European Trade Union Committee for Education, n.d.).

In the case of Gaza and Palestine, this comprehensive effort could be achieved through:

- **Hybrid Mobility Models**: Incorporating online and short-term physical mobility options tailored to the mobility restrictions faced by Gaza's students and academics (Dias et al., 2024). International organisations could focus on providing Gaza's students and faculty access to online learning platforms and virtual academic networks to compensate for physical mobility challenges. According to the results of the [XV edition of ESNsurvey](#), it is concluded that short-term and hybrid mobility also offer Higher Education Institutions a way to diversify their internationalisation offerings to better suit the needs and interests of their entire student community.

- **Capacity-Building Projects:** Prioritise partnerships with Gaza-based universities to support curriculum development, staff training, and the establishment of robust academic management systems. This includes facilitating academic exchanges, supporting innovative teaching methods, organising capacity-building workshops for staff, and assisting in the development of efficient academic management systems. Furthermore, more awareness should be raised about the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) and Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters. This includes actively promoting ESC opportunities, providing information and guidance on the application process for Erasmus Mundus programmes, and establishing partnerships with European universities to create specific tracks or scholarships for students from Gaza.
- **Flexible Eligibility Criteria:** Universities need to enhance their understanding of Gaza and Palestine applicants' circumstances and make the necessary adjustments that would encourage applicants who remain in Gaza to apply for scholarships on offer. These scholarships could include full or partial tuition waivers, living stipends, travel grants, and additional support for housing, mental health, and academic resources. Given the unique challenges faced by students in Gaza, such as restricted mobility, limited access to resources, and the impact of conflict, scholarships could also include flexible application deadlines, remote interview options, and tailored support for visa processes and relocation.

3.3. Forge Institutional Partnerships for Reconstruction

European universities should actively engage in **bilateral and multilateral partnerships with Gaza-based institutions** to support their recovery and integration into global academia.

In this context, Dr. Rassas has also **urged governments to allocate sufficient and sustainable support to increase exchange programs across diverse geographic areas**. She highlighted the pressing need to develop a global educational model that embraces technology while retaining the invaluable human-centric aspects of the learning process. Addressing the educational and developmental disparities between the northern and southern regions of the Mediterranean, she emphasised the necessity of joint efforts to ensure every student's right to education, regardless of location.

These partnerships could include:

- **Knowledge Exchange Programmes:** Hosting academic staff from Gaza for professional development and research collaborations. Creating an inclusive context at universities by implementing changes on governance, academic and administrative levels that aim to enhance academic credibility, freedoms and the flexibility of admissions processes and practices, thus encouraging participation from those who come from contexts of war, occupation and siege such as Gaza.
- **Rebuilding Expertise:** Offering technical and logistical support to rebuild damaged campuses, leveraging European expertise in post-conflict recovery.
- **Student-Led Initiatives:** Encouraging European student organisations to partner with Palestinian counterparts, fostering cross-cultural dialogue and mutual support.

In this context, experts in international higher education stated:



What is needed is a new model of intervention
that is based on an equitable partnership
between international and local higher education,
marked by solidarity, a relationship of trust and accountability,
of international and local learning and of support and agency building.
Developing this model requires 'real-world engagement' with
the Gaza Strip, but also maintaining a critically informed,
and yet friendly distance, which enables international institutions to work with
Gaza's universities to achieve a just global higher education for everyone.

**This is not an easy road to take,
but one that is necessary.**

Jebril. 2025

3.4. Strengthen Advocacy for Academic Freedom and Mobility

The European Union and its member states should take a firm stance in international forums to **advocate for the protection of education as a fundamental human right**, even in conflict zones. This includes:

- Pressuring relevant authorities to ensure the safety of academic institutions and the unhindered mobility of students and educators in Gaza.
- Engaging with UNESCO, UNHCR, and other global bodies to monitor and report on violations of academic freedoms and to mobilise international support for Gaza's education sector.
- Championing the inclusion of Gaza's higher education challenges within broader EU policy discussions on conflict resolution and development in the Middle East.

These actions align with the **core values of the Bologna Process**, which seeks to bring more coherence to higher education systems across Europe (European Commission, n.d.). The Bologna Process established the European Higher Education Area to facilitate student and staff mobility, make higher education more inclusive and accessible, and enhance its attractiveness and competitiveness worldwide. Participating countries have agreed to introduce a three-cycle higher education system (bachelor's, master's, and doctoral studies), ensure mutual recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad, and implement quality assurance systems to strengthen the quality and relevance of learning and teaching.

Regarding recent developments, the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) has addressed the impact of conflicts on higher education. For instance, in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the BFUG fully supported Ukraine and encouraged European Higher Education Area members to offer support for higher education in Ukraine (European Higher Education Area, n.d.), under their national legislation and policies. While specific outcomes concerning Gaza's higher education challenges were not detailed in the latest BFUG meeting, the group's actions demonstrate a commitment to upholding educational values in conflict situations.

Conclusion

The future of international higher education in Gaza stands at a critical juncture. Profoundly disrupted by the escalation of conflict since October 2023, demands urgent, coordinated, and compassionate global intervention. The unprecedented devastation inflicted on Gaza's academic infrastructure and institutions, the loss of over 10,000 students and educators, and the systemic erosion of mobility opportunities have not only paralysed Gaza's educational ecosystem but also jeopardised the intellectual and social capital vital for post-conflict recovery. This crisis underscores a stark reality: education in conflict zones is not a luxury but a lifeline—a foundation for resilience, hope, and societal regeneration.

Erasmus Student Network, with its decades-long expertise in fostering inclusive mobility and cross-border academic collaboration in international education, emerges as a credible and pivotal actor in this context, advocating for educational resilience. As Europe's largest student mobility organisation, ESN's strong ties with European institutions and active presence in the Mediterranean region uniquely position it to advocate for and drive forward practical, impactful solutions. ESN holds a unique position to support Gaza's integration into the international academic landscape. Its recommendations—ranging from an Emergency Education Fund under Erasmus+ to hybrid mobility models and institutional partnerships—reflect a nuanced understanding of Gaza's challenges and align with proven strategies deployed in other conflict-affected regions, such as Ukraine.

Key to these efforts is the recognition that rebuilding Gaza's higher education system transcends physical reconstruction. It necessitates addressing structural inequities, psychological trauma, and geopolitical barriers to academic freedom. ESN's call for flexible eligibility criteria, capacity-building projects, and advocacy for academic mobility resonates with the principles of the Bologna Process, emphasising inclusivity, equity, and global integration. Moreover, existing initiatives like the TESI Initiative and UNIMED's dual-mode learning approach demonstrate the feasibility of leveraging technology and international solidarity to mitigate educational disruptions. Ultimately, a comprehensive and empathetic

approach to internationalising higher education in Gaza is imperative. European universities and international organisations must not merely observe from a distance but actively engage in fostering academic resilience, upholding the right to education, and rebuilding a sector that remains essential for Gaza's recovery and long-term stability.

By championing Gaza's integration into global academic networks, the EU and its partners can transform rhetoric into tangible progress, ensuring that Gazan students and institutions are not left behind in the pursuit of knowledge and peace. This endeavour is not merely a regional obligation but a global responsibility—one that reaffirms education as a universal right and a cornerstone of sustainable recovery.

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