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Concerns: Submission of the bylaws of the Collective for Academic Freedom, Democracy and Solidarity (CLADS) to the Rectorate of UNIL

Dear General Secretary,

We are pleased to submit to the Rectorate of Unil the bylaws of association of the Collective for Academic Freedom, Democracy and Solidarity (CLADS), whose constitutive general assembly occurred on December 11, 2024.

As stated in Article 2 of the CLADS bylaws, the association is established upon the principles of the Unil Charter and the EPFL Ethics Charter. It is founded “on an understanding of the University that is democratic in operation, open in access, critical in the construction of knowledge, opposed to all forms of discrimination, supportive and respectful of human rights and international law, and free from repression of these rights.”

The Association pursues the following goals:

- to protect the autonomy of higher education universities and colleges, and ensure that these institutions respect the values inherent in the fulfilment of their purposes of research and education;
- to ensure the respect of the academic freedom of lecturers/researchers, and defend them against any infringement of this fundamental freedom in the exercise of their profession;
- to protect and promote the creation of critical knowledge within universities and colleges, and their duty to publicize it in accordance with the critical function that these institutions must embrace;
- to protect data gathered by researchers from seizure;

- to defend the freedom of expression of lecturers/researchers in the public arena, and encourage them to engage with the public, based upon the values that underpin scientific work;
- to defend freedom of expression and assembly for all members of universities and colleges;
- to express and develop active solidarity with members of academic institutions who are in danger, in Switzerland and around the world.

Why create an association to defend the principles and values that underpin our academic community?

For several years now, authoritarian regimes have been targeting researchers. As a reminder, the death under torture of Italian PhD student Giulio Regeni, a Cambridge University fellow, in Egypt in January 2016, was a trauma for the academic community internationally. There are unfortunately too many examples of this, and members of Unil have regularly stood in solidarity with academics in danger in Turkey, Hungary, Ukraine, Russia, Iran and elsewhere, often with the support of the Rectorate. As a reminder, on March 19, 2024, an event entitled “How to save research to save freedom?” was organized at Unil, in tribute to Fariba Adelkhah, a scientific prisoner in Iran from 2019 to 2023, with the support of Unil's International Relations department.

Threats to researchers and academic freedom are far from being confined to authoritarian regimes. In an international context of rising illiberalism, attacks on academic freedom manifest themselves in the disqualification of fields of study (climate change, gender studies, etc.). This even goes as far as the closure of entire study and research programs; by way of example, the Central European University has been forced in 2019 to leave Budapest and relocate to Vienna.

Discourses of delegitimization and threats to academic freedom know no borders, and leading members of the academic community need to take these issues seriously. In this context, the Initiative Droit et Société (IDES) organized its inaugural conference on November 25, 2024, on the theme of “[Academic Freedom: Practices for a Changing World](#)”; the event, opened by Vice-Rector Liliane Michalik, brought together a wide range of speakers.

The creation of CLADS is an extension of all these initiatives. Activities will be organized on a bottom-up basis. First and foremost, it will encourage reflection on the issues of academic freedom and the autonomy of universities and higher education institutions, at the level of the university community (UNIL and EPFL), notably by organizing working groups and events (round tables, conferences). Another challenge is to coordinate efforts to preserve academic freedom and university autonomy, while respecting the ethical and deontological principles at the heart of our university community's missions. These approaches are intended to be open and constructive, and to serve the common good of our university community.

We thank you for your attention to this letter and remain at your disposal for any further information you may require.

Lausanne, le 16.12.2024

Collective for Academic Freedom, Democracy and Solidarity CLADS

*This is English version of 20.12.2024, is an approximate translation!
The French original is the official document.*

Association bylaws

Legal form, purpose and location

Art. 1

Under the name “Collective for Academic Freedom, Democracy and Solidarity (CLADS)”, hereafter referred to as the Association, a non-profit association is hereby established, governed by the present Articles of Association and by Articles 60 et seq. of the Swiss Civil Code. The Association respects the principles of the [University of Lausanne Charter](#) and the [EPFL Ethics Charter](#). It draws its inspiration from the general principles formulated in the open letter “[For academic freedom, against the repression of students](#)”, sent to swissuniversities in June 2024 by several hundred lecturers/researchers from Swiss universities and colleges. This document is appended to and forms an integral part of the present bylaws.

Art. 2

Based on an understanding of the University that is democratic in operation, open in access, critical in the construction of knowledge, opposed to all forms of discrimination, supportive and respectful of human rights and international law, and free from repression of these rights, the Association pursues the following goals:

- to protect the autonomy of higher education universities and colleges, and ensure that these institutions respect the values inherent in the fulfilment of their purposes of research and education;
- to ensure the respect of the academic freedom of lecturers/researchers, and defend them against any infringement of this fundamental freedom in the exercise of their profession;
- to protect and promote the creation of critical knowledge within universities and colleges, and their duty to publicize it in accordance with the critical function that these institutions must embrace;
- to protect data gathered by researchers from seizure;
- to defend the freedom of expression of lecturers/researchers in the public arena, and encourage them to engage with the public, based upon the values that underpin scientific work;
- to defend freedom of expression and assembly for all members of universities and colleges;
- to express and develop active solidarity with members of academic institutions who are in danger, in Switzerland and around the world.

Art.3

The Association's location is in 1015 Lausanne. Its duration is unlimited.

Organisation

Art. 4

The bodies of the Association are:

- the general assembly;
- the committee;
- the accounting auditors.

Art. 5

The Association's funding comes from ordinary or extraordinary membership fees, donations or legacies, and proceeds from the Association's activities.

The financial year begins on January 1 and ends on December 31 of each year.

Its commitments are guaranteed by its assets, and exclude any personal liability of its members.

Members

Art. 6

Members of the association may include lecturers/researchers at the University of Lausanne (UNIL) and the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL), as well as members of the academic, administrative, technical and scientific staff of the two universities, who wish to contribute to the achievement of the objectives set out in art. 2.

Persons in the categories defined in the previous paragraph who are employed by a university established in the canton of Vaud may also be members of the association.

A majority of the association's members must be active at UNIL or EPFL.

The admission of new members is the responsibility of the Committee.

Art. 7

Membership is cancelled:

- by resignation;
- by expulsion for just cause or in the event of serious misconduct.

Exclusion is decided by the Committee. The person concerned may appeal against this decision to the General Assembly.

General Assembly

Art. 8

The General Assembly is the sovereign authority of the Association, and is composed of all its members.

It meets at least once a year, convened by the Committee.

Art. 9

The competences of the General Assembly are as follows. It :

- adopts and amends the bylaws of Association;

- elects the members of the committee and the presidency;
- elects the auditors;
- determines the Association's direction and activities;
- approves reports, financial statements and the budget;
- relieves the Committee and the auditors of their duties;
- sets the annual membership fee for individual members;
- decides on other projects on the agenda.

The General Assembly may take up, or be seized of, any matter which it has not entrusted to another body.

Art. 10

The General Assembly is convened by the committee, and communicated to the membership electronically at least 10 days in advance. The announcement is accompanied by an agenda.

The committee may convene an extraordinary General Assemblies as often as necessary, through its own initiative, or upon the request of a quarter of the Association's members.

Art. 11

The General Assembly is chaired by the Presidency of the Association. In the absence of the Presidency, the assembly is chaired by another member of the committee.

Art. 12

General Assembly decisions are taken by a simple majority of the members present.

Each member has one vote. Proxy votes are not permitted.

In the event of a tie, the vote of the Assembly chair counts double.

Art. 13

Voting is conducted by raising hands.

Upon the request of at least one member, voting can be done by secret ballot.

Committee

Art. 14

The committee consists of a minimum of three members, individually appointed for one year by the General Assembly.

A majority of its members must be active at UNIL or EPFL.

Committee members are eligible for re-election.

The committee allocates the various tasks or functions to be performed among its members.

In the event of a vacancy during its term of office, the Committee may co-opt new members until the next General Assembly.

Art. 15

The committee implements the decisions of the General Assembly and takes the necessary measures to ensure that the statutory goals of the Association are achieved.

It manages and organizes the Association's activities.

It decides on all matters not expressly reserved for the General Assembly.

It meets as often as the business of the Association requires.

Art. 16

The committee is responsible for:

- taking necessary measures to achieve the Association's objectives;
- convening ordinary and extraordinary General Assemblies;
- deciding on the admission and resignation of members;
- deciding on the exclusion of a member;
- ensuring the application of the bylaws of Association, drawing up by-laws and administering the Association's assets.

Art. 17

The committee must include any proposal from a member, submitted in writing at least 48 hours in advance, on the agenda of the (ordinary or extraordinary) General Assembly.

Art. 18

The committee is responsible for maintaining the Association's accounts.

Art. 19

The Association is bound by the joint signatures of one member of the Presidency and one other member of the committee.

Auditors

Art. 20

The auditors consist of two persons elected by the General Assembly.

They verify the Association's financial management and present a report to the General Assembly.

Dissolution

Art. 21

The dissolution of the Association is decided by the General Assembly by a two-thirds majority of the members present.

By decision of the General Assembly, any assets are to be allocated to an organization with objectives similar to those of the Association.

The present bylaws were adopted unanimously by the 34 members present at the Constituent Assembly held on 11.12.2024 at the University of Lausanne.

CLADS association bylaws, adopted by the founding General Assembly on 11.12.2024

On behalf of the Association

Co-president

Julia Steinberger

Co-president

Jamila Sam

Secretary

Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi

Association CLADS
List of Committee Members
Elected on December 11, 2024

1. Nicolas Bancel, Full Professor, SSP, Unil
2. Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi, Full Professor, SSP, Unil (secretary)
3. Sébastien Chauvin, Associate Professor, SSP, Unil
4. Joseph Daher, Visiting Prof., SSP, Unil
5. Garance Durr-Legoupil-Nicoud, Graduate, Doctoral Assistant, Physics, EPFL
6. Olivier Fillieule, Full Professor, SSP, Unil
7. Laurent Le Forestier, Full Professor, Faculty of Arts, Unil
8. Irene Maffi, Full Professor, SSP, Unil
9. Guillaume Matthey, Doctoral Assistant, SSP, Unil
10. Elio Panese, Doctoral Assistant, FDCA, Unil
11. Francesco Panese, Full Professor, SSP, Unil
12. Yves Pedrazzini, Associate Researcher, ENAC, EPFL
13. Stéphanie Prezioso, Associate Professor, SSP, Unil
14. Jamila Sam, Senior Lecturer, IC, EPFL (co-president)
15. Julia Steinberger, Full Professor, FGSE, Unil (co-president)
16. Josselin Tricou, Lecturer, FTSR, Unil
17. Bernard Voutat, Prof. Emeriturs, SSP, Unil

Auditors

1. Emmanuelle Mathieu, Senior Lecturer, SSP, Unil
2. Gabriel Vallat, Doctoral Assistant, STI/ENAC, EPFL

Open letter to swissuniversities: In defense of academic freedom, against student repression

4 June 2024

We, as professors, teachers, researchers and academic staff of Swiss universities and universities of applied sciences, call on swissuniversities to ensure that the institution which represents our academic community at the federal level takes a swift stand against the use of force in the face of student movements and occupations, and for the promotion and protection of academic freedom, currently under attack by the media and targeted by political initiatives seeking to control universities and the knowledge they produce.

Since the first student occupation at the University of Lausanne on May 2nd, 2024, a dozen of Swiss universities and universities of applied sciences have experienced some form of mobilization and occupation by their students, demanding transparency and firm stances from their leadership regarding a conflict that is attracting international attention due to its unprecedented severity and intensity. In response to these demands, which are based on fundamental principles – freedom of expression, respect for human dignity, international and humanitarian law – the rectors of Swiss universities have reacted in contrasting ways but, we deplore, all too often in ways that are largely inadequate.

On May 7th, following the occupation of the École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) by about a hundred students, the EPFL presidency immediately issued an ultimatum and had all entrances to the hall of the SG building blocked [1]. On the same day, the management of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETHZ) filed a criminal complaint for trespassing, and the Zurich municipal police forcibly evacuated some sixty demonstrators who had launched a sit-in [2]. On the night of May 13th to 14th, after the Rector of the University of Geneva had referred the matter to the public prosecutor's office, masked police officers entered the Uni-Mail building, arrested the sleeping demonstrators and handcuffed them inside the university [3]. On 14th May, the police intervened at HEPIA [4]. On May 17th, police forces armed with rubber bullets and water cannons used tear gas against students at the University of Zurich, making two arrests, and in “at least two cases, police officers held students down with their knees behind their backs” [5]. The protests were supported by students from the Zürcher Hochschule der Künste (ZHdK) and the Zürcher Hochschule für angewandte Wissenschaften (ZHAW). In Bern, the police intervened on two occasions. At dawn on May 15th, they evacuated students from the building occupied at Unitobler. On May 30th, they evacuated the main building, which the students had occupied in the morning and which they intended to vacate in the evening. The occupants were controlled individually and a criminal complaint was announced [6]. On May 17th, the occupiers of the University of Fribourg evacuated the campus on police orders, and following a criminal complaint for trespass lodged by the rectorate [7]. On May 23rd, the building of the Haute école d'art et de design in Geneva, occupied at the call of the Coordination étudiante Palestine des Hautes écoles (CEP HES), was evacuated following a police summons [8]. On May 27th, following the filing of a criminal complaint by the management of the University of Basel and two ultimatums, the police evacuated the occupiers, threatening them with coercive measures [9].

This enumeration is distressing, and does not reflect our institutions and their missions. The vast majority of our university administrations have responded to our students' demands for public debate and to their mobilizations based on non-violent principles and a clear ban on hate speech and discrimination [10], with threats, force and sometimes violence. To our students, who want to mobilize their academic community and to remind us of our responsibilities, which are enshrined in the charters of our institutions, our hierarchies have responded largely by refusing dialogue and presenting the students' demands as unjustified and having no place at the University. Our students are part of our academic community, they are also its future, they deserve much better than condescension, contempt or intimidation. Since when have Swiss universities considered it normal to call in the police when a group of students is demonstrating peacefully, when no damage or material disorder has been observed or is to be feared, when people's physical safety is guaranteed and no insults or threats have been uttered? In which universities (and in which country) do we work, where students are handcuffed on campus for expressing moral indignation? These images would shock us if they took place in Russia, Iran or Hungary, so why should we tolerate them here?

Whatever our positions and opinions on the demands put forward by these student collectives, as teachers responsible for accompanying our students in the process of becoming informed citizens, active in the life of their community and their country, capable of judging facts in the light of the values proclaimed and protected by our liberal democracies – freedom, equality, fundamental rights – and capable of disentangling the true from the false on the basis of rigorous analyses and protocols, we can only be dismayed, saddened and worried by the way our hierarchies have decided to treat them, in clear disregard of the values and principles that drive our academic communities.

We call on swissuniversities to take a firm stand to ensure that violence and intimidation against students and all members of the university community cease immediately. Swissuniversities must commit to guaranteeing freedom of expression in higher education by issuing clear rules of conduct for its members: the use of the police is unacceptable when it aims to prevent dialogue or negotiations [11].

Beyond the obvious hindrance and threat to freedom of expression that the use of law enforcement represents, these repressive policies also have the consequence of considerably weakening our institutions and the principles that protect them: autonomy and academic freedom. Repressing students, claiming that their demands have no place on university campuses, or that their political discourse runs counter to the missions of our institutions, constitutes a serious challenge to the principles on which our academic institutions and their role in society are founded. This repression is an attack on freedom of expression.

It is also a strategic error that poses a significant risk to our entire scientific community. In our highly polarized social and historical contexts, attacks on academic freedom and researchers are not new, nor are they unique to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict [12]. For several years, various far-right parties in Europe have been attempting to delegitimize, defund and close down study and research programs [13]. Hungary's President Viktor Orbán was the pioneer of this policy, working to close study programs on subjects displeasing to the regime, then finally forcing Central European University to leave Budapest in 2019 and relocate to Vienna. Switzerland seems to be following in the same footsteps, with the SVP

group of deputies announcing that they will table a postulate to examine how political neutrality of research is guaranteed in universities [14], and an SVP deputy of the Vaud Grand Council announcing a joint amendment with the PLR to “constrain students, professors, the Rectorate” of UNIL [15]. We fear that this is the first step in a campaign to weaken university autonomy.

In the face of this obvious threat, swissuniversities must reiterate why the institutional autonomy of universities and the academic freedom that goes with it are absolute and necessary principles to enable the quest for true knowledge about the world – a quest for truth that is, far more than neutrality, our primary mission and *raison d’être*. The development of true knowledge about the world cannot take place outside the legal and normative framework that guarantees the autonomy of academic institutions and the academic freedom of researchers. The latter, defined at the international level [16] as well as in the Swiss constitution [17], clearly affirms that autonomy is “the institutional expression of academic freedom and a necessary condition for teachers and higher education establishments to be able to carry out the functions incumbent upon them” and that “it is the duty of States to protect the autonomy of higher education establishments against any threat, wherever it may come from” [18].

University autonomy is not a blank check given to these institutions: it implies immense responsibilities for universities, which collectively organize the processes that ensure that the search for truth and scientific rigor take precedence over external influences. These processes consist of peer review of all scientific activities, total transparency in both scientific research and administrative processes, and an extensive internal regulatory framework – guidelines on ethics and scientific integrity, but also on promotion, recruitment, equality, diversity and inclusion, etc. – as well as multiple reporting obligations and accountability between the various bodies that make up universities – including their student bodies – and with their supervisory institutions.

Academic freedom is therefore not just an individual right, it is above all a common good, for researchers and for society. It is based on the collective organization of our institutions by virtue of our academic autonomy. We are all involved in the evaluation of our colleagues and in the processes that enable us to conform to the ethical and scientific responsibilities that autonomy entails: applications for ethical certification to carry out research, compulsory methodological training, data retention rules, conditions for the use of artificial intelligence, impact of research on the populations concerned, etc.

Academic freedom and scientific truth do not benefit in any way from a so-called ‘neutrality’ of universities, which should not be confused with their autonomy, or demanded as a price to be paid for that autonomy, which is now being eroded. The knowledge produced by universities is not neutral in two respects. Universities are part of society, and the questions scholars ask in the search for truth are therefore influenced, fortunately, by the times we live in and their specific challenges (artificial intelligence, the rise of extremes, global warming...). What’s more, the knowledge that universities produce has political consequences: helping to develop algorithms for AI has political consequences, as does measuring global warming or analyzing voting trends in favor of extreme right-wing parties. It is the responsibility of academics to be aware of these issues, and not to ignore them in the name of a neutrality that would amount to voluntary blindness. This vigilance and positioning are all the more necessary given that the subjects on which academics work can give rise to strategies of interference and influence by domestic and foreign political players alike, and given that public and private research funding

mechanisms also tend to orient research priorities. To promote a humanist university that is at the service of democracy, it is futile to claim that the university can, and should, be “neutral”. It is also dangerous to do so at a time when political attacks and interference are mounting, in Switzerland and beyond [19], and when defamations against our colleagues who express themselves in public debate are also multiplying in the Swiss media and on social networks. Swiss universities must take concrete and urgent action to combat the distrust in science and to combat discourses against intellectuals and scholars propagated by political actors who wish to limit academic freedom.

The recent position expressed by Swiss universities that “universities are not political actors” [20] seems to foster a dangerous confusion whereby political discussions have no place within universities, and knowledge produced at universities has no place in political debate. It is also in apparent contradiction with the position taken by Swiss universities to encourage Swiss universities to take a stand against cooperation with Russian scientific institutions complicit in the Russian government’s policy of breaking international law [21] in the name of the principles of scientific integrity and academic values [22].

We have good reason to be collectively concerned, and we therefore call on Swiss universities to publicly and strongly reaffirm the principles of university autonomy and academic freedom for researchers. Swiss universities must also respond firmly to the attacks against universities and the targeting of colleagues, and must oppose attempts to call into question the autonomy of higher education institutions, or to make it conditional on a vision of scientific “neutrality” whose sole aim is to control, on the basis of non-scientific criteria, what researchers have the right to work on and how they can express their opinions or disseminate their knowledge. We also call on Swiss universities to set up an observatory to monitor attacks on academic freedom, and a legal task force to support university management in protecting their institutions and employees from public defamation.

We need more academic freedom, not less! Because in a democracy, this freedom is also the safeguard of freedom of expression and reflection for all citizens.

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- [15] RTS 19:30, 28.05.2024.
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- [17] See art. 20 on scientific freedom and art. 16 on freedom of opinion.
- [18] art. 18 and 19 of the UNESCO recommendation concerning the status of higher teaching education personnel <https://www.unesco.org/fr/legal-affairs/recommendation-concerning-status-higher-education-teaching-personnel>
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First signatories

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