

activism on academic campuses: a critical reflection

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In contemporary discourse, the role of young people in shaping social and political landscapes has become increasingly pivotal. Across the Global North countries, a significant transformation is underway as liberal democracies find themselves tested by a surge in support for right-wing political factions (Elerian et al., 2025). These groups often advance nationalist and separatist ideologies, often promoting legislative measures that are anti-immigrant and restrictive towards minority rights. This shift not only challenges long-standing peaceful diplomatic relations built since the early post-World War II period but also questions the international cooperative spirit that flourished following the fall of the Berlin Wall. The multifaceted pressures exerted on both established and emerging democracies are rooted in a confluence of factors, including the economic disruptions attributable to globalization. These economic strains have created fertile ground for inequality, stemming from a neoliberal...

Keywords: activism, civic engagement, demonstrations, higher education, inequality

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2025.2451091>

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764213515992>

Nevertheless, this disengagement from established political processes has spurred a corresponding increase in alternative forms of civic engagement among youth (Wood, 2022). These forms of civic

participation diverge from conventional political involvement, focusing instead on a wide array of collective and individual actions that promote social change. Individual efforts may include lifestyle changes, such as the embrace of sustainable practices like recycling, boycotting products from certain brands, and adopting ethical consumption habits like veganism. On a collective level, youth are actively organizing and participating in protests, demonstrations, sit-ins, and other forms of direct action within both online spaces and offline communities. Such movements are often characterized by creative and artistic expressions, as well as academic and intellectual endeavors, each with the potential to influence public policy, raise awareness, and galvanize societal transformation.

The narrative surrounding this wave of alternative civic engagement is predominantly positive, commonly described as activism—a concept celebrated for its transformative potential and its promotion of progressive societal changes (Inguaggiato et al., 2025). Activism, as discussed in academic literature, is often championed for its advocacy of solutions to pressing global challenges, such as climate change, minority and human rights, and the acceptance of diverse identities. Research underscores the indispensable role that young activists play in invigorating democratic processes, often exalting their efforts even when they involve confrontational or illegal means, such as occupying public spaces or engaging in symbolic acts of defiance. Nonetheless, there exists a notable gap in academic discourse in addressing right-wing youth activism, which, although similar in practice to its progressive counterparts, is frequently excluded from broader narratives on youth activism. These groups may promote causes such as anti-abortion policies or restrictive immigration laws, often framed within social discourse as troubling indicators of anti-democratic trends rather than legitimate forms of activism.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-025-09728-w>

In the case of youth activities within organisations affiliated with extremist right-wing movements, a different terminology is often employed, one that does not derive from the realm of activism. The discourse typically revolves around the dangers associated with such activities, despite the limited knowledge regarding the motivations and rationalisations of these young individuals. Additionally, there is insufficient information about how civics education in schools and informal settings may influence the choices of young people to distance themselves from public activity, to engage in progressive activist activities, or to join nationalist movements. Given the varied terminologies used in each of these cases and the lack of comparative empirical research on the subject, it is challenging to draw substantial conclusions about the meaning of these phenomena in diverse social, ethnic, demographic, and geographical contexts.

Additionally, it is essential to recognize that those who enter academic campuses, namely students, already constitute a dominant segment of society, endowed with various privileges. This includes the privilege of having their voices heard within academic environments, the ability to articulate arguments in a manner that captures the attention of the media and policymakers. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced among students attending elite universities in the Global North, where access to higher education often correlates with socioeconomic advantages, elite status, and influential networks.

While many students actively participate in dialogues surrounding social justice, activism, and civic engagement, their positions often reflect a relatively privileged perspective. These students have the opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions, mobilize for causes, and influence public opinion

due to their access to resources, education, and platforms that amplify their voices. This engagement, however, may inadvertently overshadow the experiences and viewpoints of many young individuals from less privileged backgrounds who do not have the same opportunities to attend higher education institutions, particularly elite ones.

Many youths, particularly those from marginalized communities or lower socioeconomic backgrounds, face systemic barriers that prevent them from entering higher education. These barriers include financial constraints, lack of academic support or guidance, and broader societal inequities that contribute to the exclusion of certain demographics from the academic discourse. As a result, their perspectives, concerns, and needs often go unheard, resulting in a significant vacuum in dialogue around critical issues such as social equity, representation, and justice. Furthermore, the absence of these voices from the higher education narrative not only represents a loss of diversity in viewpoints but also limits the collective understanding of societal challenges. The academic environment suffers when it does not include a wide array of perspectives that reflect the complexities of the society in which these institutions operate.

The shockwaves from the Hamas terrorist attack on Israeli civilians on October 7, 2023, have reverberated through academic spaces, particularly within the Global North, positioning universities as epicenters of a renewed wave of student civic engagement. In solidarity with the Palestinian cause, student activism has intensified, featuring large-scale demonstrations on campuses, ongoing occupations of university buildings, and, incidents of violence towards Jewish and Israeli students and faculty. Such activities, extending to include vandalism against Jewish and Israeli-associated properties and disruptions of academic engagements involving Israeli scholars, have sparked a contentious debate regarding the boundaries and responsibilities of academic institutions in fostering civic dialogue and engagement and specifically about the nature of these protests, and whether these activities are much needed expressions of solidarity with the suffer of Palestinians or rather violent and racist expressions of antisemitism. Questions about the nature of the participants, their stand in the society as privileged actors or oppressed individuals were also raised. Leadership and faculty responses have been varied, underscoring the tensions inherent in balancing support for free expression with the obligation to maintain respectful and inclusive academic environments.

Amid these developments, the discussion around the role of faculty in education assumes particular urgency, set against a backdrop of broader transformative changes within global higher education. Economic uncertainties, the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence technologies, and the existential threat posed by climate change are reshaping expectations of academic institutions, compelling a re-evaluation of their goals and methodologies. The debate surrounding the function of higher education should be expansive, extending beyond immediate protest movements to encompass a comprehensive reassessment of the educational mission. This reassessment should prioritize fostering environments that stimulate critical thinking, encourage nuanced understanding of complex societal issues, and cultivate engagement in safe and supportive contexts.

In my view, academic institutions have a responsibility not only to educate but to develop informed, critical thinkers capable of navigating and shaping an increasingly complex world. This endeavour involves questioning foundational societal and democratic principles, embracing diverse perspectives, and engaging collaboratively with youth—particularly those marginalised in academic discourse—ensuring their voices contribute to shaping societal and political futures. In addition,

academia must acknowledge the voice of those who are not part of higher education system – in many case the majority of young people.

Acknowledging the privileges of those who are present within campuses and questioning the ways and causes of the protests, is not meant to diminish their activism or contributions; rather, it emphasizes the responsibility of these students and the institutions they represent to advocate for greater inclusivity. By doing so, they can help bridge the gap between different societal segments and ensure that all voices, particularly those that have traditionally been sidelined, are part of the conversation in shaping policies and practices that affect their communities. Only by embracing this expansive and inclusive mission can academia truly fulfil its role as an incubator of democratic values and a catalyst for societal advancement.

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Recommended Citation

Yemini, M. (2025). Activism on academic campuses: A critical reflection. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, 8(22).

https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2025.22.5

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