

## RESPONSE OF THE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY TO THE QUESTIONS RECEIVED FROM 'GENT STUDENTS FOR PALESTINE'.

17 MAY 2024

On 15 May 2024, members of the Committee on Human Rights Policy and Dual-Use Research received questions from students who are currently demonstrating against the collaborations Ghent University has with Israeli organisations.

The Committee provided the students with a response and decided to make it public.

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Dear students,  
Dear protesters,

Thank you for your message. The Committee members read your concerns about Ghent University's ties with Israeli institutions. These concerns are shared not only by you and your colleagues in the University Forum, but also by the wider university community. Ghent University is concerned about the conflict (which has been going much longer than since 7 October 2023) and has refused collaborations with organisations involved in serious human rights violations in the region on several occasions. These decisions were a result of the university's human rights policy which was developed a few years ago. We think it is important to emphasise this, because too often it is claimed that Ghent University is 'complicit in human rights violations'. As a university, we make every effort to avoid this.

We would like to confirm that prior to the meeting of the Board of Governors on 3 May 2024, the Committee on Human Rights Policy and Dual-Use Research indeed proposed not to start new bilateral research collaborations with Israeli universities. At the time, the Committee also made it clear that this advice goes further than the current university policy on human rights, which only focuses on human rights violations committed by partners or during projects, not on the actions of governments in which these partners reside. The Committee always advises directly to the rector. Because this latest advice went beyond the university's human rights policy as approved by the Board of Governors in 2017, we believe it to be logical that the rector submitted this specific advice of the Committee to the Board of Governors. After all, this was a strategic decision that went beyond the existing policy on human rights. The Board of Governors met at length on 3 May 2024 and in a serene manner. The different points of view were discussed comprehensively and each member within the Board of Governors was then able to vote in good conscience. The rector is allowed to take a position during the meeting that deviates from the Committee's advice, but the rector will also loyally implement a decision of the Board of Governors if that final decision is not in line with his own position taken during the meeting. This goes

for all members of the Board of Governors, and is the essence of participatory democratic decision-making.

Although the Committee on Human Rights Policy and Dual-Use Research proposed that no new bilateral research collaborations should be started (i.e. an institutional agreement between Ghent University and a single other partner), the Committee did not advise to exit ongoing multi-partner collaborations (e.g. Horizon Europe projects with many partners, including Ghent University). That was part of a nuanced and proportionate advice at the time.

Indeed, on 13 May 2024, the rector again asked the Committee for advice and a review of three Israeli partners which were the subject of an earlier advise of the Committee given at the end of 2023. Back then, the Committee advised not to start new collaborations with the three institutions. On 16 May 2024, the Committee ruled that, in view of the escalation of the war and human rights violations, the ongoing multi-partner collaborations with the three institutions concerned should be halted.

The Committee is regularly asked for advice and meets monthly to issue these advices. As such, the rector asking for the Committee's advice does not mean that the process is stalled (as evidenced by the fact that the Committee met yesterday and gave an advice), nor that "*the rector is simply passing on the responsibility for Ghent University's human rights violations to the Committee.*" As for the latter, Ghent University does not violate human rights and does not dodge its responsibility for violating human rights (quite the contrary). As for the three Israeli partners, by the end of 2023, the Committee had advised against entering into new collaborations with them. It did not advise to withdraw from the existing (multilateral) collaborations with these three partners. Yesterday, at the request of the rector, the Committee re-evaluated its earlier advice, which can be found here: <https://www.ugent.be/nl/univgent/missie/mensenrechten/advies-israel-16mei2024.pdf>.

Furthermore, we would still like to emphasise that the rector has so far followed every advice issued by the Committee on Human Rights Policy Committee and Dual-Use Research which was based on the university's human rights policy.

Finally, it is indeed important to engage in dialogue with each other. We therefore understand that you wish to have a conversation with the rector and hope that a conversation can take place in circumstances in which both parties can agree. Hopefully, that conversation can offer insight into the views and beliefs of both parties.

Kind regards,

The members of the Committee on Human Rights Policy and Dual-Use Research.