



ROUNDTABLE: ACADEMIC FREEDOM: CONFLICT, POLITICAL INSTABILITY, AND STATE REPRESSION

Academic Freedom in Times of War: Case of the Sudan

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Abstract

The conflict that erupted in Sudan in mid-April 2023 has had a profound impact on scholars, university staff, academic institutions, and academic freedom in the country. It also has had a deep impact on scholars displaced because of war or political repression since the 1990s, who now constitute a significant part of the Sudanese diaspora. The war has devastated the country's population, landscape, services, and infrastructure, including both general and higher education sectors. In the half-decade that preceded the current conflict, Sudan witnessed an uprising in 2018, in which students, academics, and academic associations played an important role, followed by a short transitional period (2019–21) and a subsequent coup (2021). The latter consolidated the power of the army and its allies and narrowed the space for academic freedom that had expanded during and after the uprising. Although an incident that occurred at the University of Khartoum toward the end of 2025 shows that there may be a degree of freedom of intramural expression (the right to challenge the workings of the university), other events in Sudan suggest little respect for freedom of extramural expression (the right to engage in public expression without negative repercussions), because of the nature of governance arrangements, among other factors. This particularly affects academics and professionals currently in Sudan who call for peace.

Keywords: academic freedom; conflict zones; displaced persons; higher education; Sudan

Given ongoing war and a related humanitarian crisis in Sudan, there is a tendency to downplay the need to center academic freedom, that is, the freedom of educators, researchers, and others associated with the academy to research and produce knowledge (as a social and cultural public good) based on competence and experience in their academic areas of specialization without interference or

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repercussions.¹ This is not surprising. The war, which started in mid-April 2023, has devastated the country's population, landscape, services, and infrastructure, including both general and higher education sectors. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), at the end of 2025, 30.4 million (out of the country's population of 46.8 million) needed humanitarian assistance. The war has uprooted over fourteen million of the country's population.² In addition to displacement, Sudanese communities and individuals across gender, ethnicity, social class, disability, age, and other aspects of difference have faced and continue to face killing, looting, injury, food insecurity, lack of or limited access to education, and sexual and gender-based violence to varying degrees. Toward the end of 2025, the plight of communities affected by war in Sudan became better known globally because of a massacre by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in al-Fashir, North Darfur, an area that was under siege for eighteen months. Many were killed, and over 100,000 had to flee the area to other parts of Sudan or to neighboring countries.

These experiences form the context within which academic freedom (and the lack thereof) is manifest in Sudan. Academic freedom is "severely restricted" given the impact of the ongoing war on institutions of higher education, according to "Free to Think 2025," the annual report of Scholars at Risk, which monitors academic freedom across the globe.³

Yet, academic freedom and ensuring an environment that enables intellectual courage and integrity, which I believe are crucial at all times, become even more important during wars and crises. Without academic freedom and intellectual courage, it is difficult to interrogate and interpret the root causes of a conflict and the geopolitical and economic factors that drive it, or to share and debate strategies for peace-building and postconflict reconstruction. Academic freedom in and outside a country affected by war, such as Sudan, enables possible solidarities and support for academics and others affected by war.

In this article, after a brief discussion of history and context, I consider academic freedom in light of Sudan's current war. I draw on my ongoing research regarding conflict in Sudan and on a review of relevant academic literature, policy reports, and summaries of conversations in panels organized in and outside Sudan on the impact of war on higher education in the country. I share these insights knowing and acknowledging my positionality as a feminist educator and researcher who is a member of the Sudanese diaspora in North America. I am one of many students and scholars who were either displaced or found themselves in exile in the 1990s, for several reasons, including restrictions on academic freedom and earlier wars in Sudan. This exemplifies the

¹ American Association of University Professors, "FAQs on Academic Freedom," accessed 11 January 2026, <https://www.aaup.org/issues-higher-education/academic-freedom/faqs-academic-freedom>. Also see Joan W. Scott, "What Kind of Freedom Is Academic Freedom?" *Critical Times* 5, no. 1 (2022): 1–19; and Peter Ives, *Rethinking Free Speech* (Halifax, NS: Farwood, 2024).

² Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Sudan: Key Facts and Figures (As of 30 November 2025)," United Nations, November 2025, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/sudan/sudan-key-facts-and-figures-30-november-2025>.

³ "Free to Think 2025: Report of the Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project," Scholars at Risk, 2025, 70, 102, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/free-to-think-2025>.

dispersal of Sudanese academics that predated the war that erupted in 2023. The only difference is the scale of the current exodus.

I was a student at the University of Khartoum following the overthrow of the regime of Gaafar Nimeiri (1969–1985), a time that witnessed relative freedom of speech (which I do not conflate with academic freedom) and an expansion of academic freedom. Faculty and students in this and many other universities were (and continue to be) politically and publicly engaged. Two of our professors at the time were ministers in the civilian transitional government (1985–86), and several others led initiatives for peace between the democratically elected government (1986–89) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) to end a civil war that erupted in 1983.⁴ But a National Islamic Front (NIF)-led military coup put an end to democratic rule in 1989. The NIF later split into two parties, one of which (the National Congress Party led by Omar al-Bashir) ruled the country until 2019. NIF initially used the University of Khartoum to expand its membership, but once in power, worked to undermine the institution.

Having left the country after graduation from University of Khartoum, I started returning to Sudan regularly two years after the government of Omar al-Bashir signed a series of peace agreements with different opposition groups, the most well-known being the comprehensive peace agreement signed with the SPLM in 2005. I was in Khartoum in January 2023, three months before the eruption of war. This war has affected me and my family in profound ways, but the perspectives of women who reside in makeshift shelters and colleagues who had to evacuate different states in 2023 may well be different to mine. As Patricia Hill Collins would argue, the insights I share in this article might be “unfinished,” but they are not irrelevant.⁵ I believe that knowledge production occurs within and outside academic institutions, and that knowledge producers include both academics and nonacademics, including those who have had limited or no access to formal education.⁶ These ideas inform the analysis that follows.

Conflicts, Political Instability, Structural Adjustment Policies, and Higher Education in Sudan

Sudan's colonial legacy and postcolonial histories have shaped and continue to shape higher education. These histories have contributed to the country's

⁴ A deeper analysis of earlier wars in Sudan is beyond the scope of this article. See Nada Mustafa Ali, *Gender, Race, and Sudan's Exile Politics: Do We All Belong to This Country?* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books [now Bloomsbury], 2015).

⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2002), 270. For a discussion of the roles of university professors in peace-building initiatives following the overthrow of the Numeiri regime see, for example, Taisier Mohamed Ahmed Ali, “From Koka Dam to al-Mirghani–Garang Agreement: Steps in the Journey of Seeking Peace” (Arabic), *December* (newspaper), 20, September 18 2025. <https://decembernews.com>. Last accessed April 24, 2026.

⁶ An elaborate discussion of the politics of knowledge production is beyond this article. I explore this topic in several other publications.

contemporary political instability and economic and social inequalities. The country has witnessed several civil wars since the mid-1950s. Sudan also has alternated between democratic governance (1956–58; 1964–69; 1985–89, and 2019–21) and military regimes (1958–64; 1969–85; and 2021 to the present). The introduction of structural adjustment policies in the 1980s and early 1990s further impacted budgets available for higher education and caused political unrest.⁷ Alternation between civilian and military regimes impacted the structure and the autonomy of higher education institutions in the country, especially under the rule of Omar al-Bashir (1989–2019). Ironically, al-Bashir's regime expanded higher education by establishing universities in different parts of Sudan to curtail the influence of major universities, as mentioned, such as the University of Khartoum, given that its faculty and students had been at the forefront of mobilizations against military regimes in 1964 and 1985. The same regime limited freedom of association, freedom of expression, and academic freedom. The government restricted student organizing on campuses, created parallel unions, and restricted what faculty could teach. This forced many faculty and staff into exile.

Following Sudan's 2018 uprising, the space for academic freedom expanded relatively, although challenges to higher education persisted. However, following a coup in 2021 that interrupted Sudan's transition to democracy, restrictions on academic freedom increased and institutional autonomy eroded.⁸ In 2021, a group of academics and intellectuals drafted the "Sudanese Declaration for Academic, Cultural, and Intellectual Freedoms." This was in reaction to the dismissal of a philosophy professor at al-Nileen University who organized a panel on religious renewal.⁹ Moreover, before the eruption of conflict, the University of Khartoum was in the process of establishing a law that safeguarded academic freedoms. The draft law restricted security forces' access to the university's campus.¹⁰

Earlier conflicts, and the reasons these conflicts erupted, resulted in unequal access to education, especially higher education, in Sudan, depending on one's regional location and ethnicity, among other factors. Parts of South Kordofan state, which are under the control of SPLM-North, for example, have been in a state of no-war and no-peace since the secession of South Sudan in 2011. The same applies to the Southern Blue Nile area. Both states constitute part of what is known as the "New South" of Sudan. They lack basic infrastructure and

⁷ See Munzoul Assal and Musa A. Abdul-Jalil, eds., *Past, Present, and Future: Fifty Years of Anthropology in Sudan* (Bergen, Norway: CMI, 2015), 2–3. Assal and Abdul-Jalil also write about the impact of anthropologists' involvement in humanitarian work, whether as employees of international civil society organizations or as consultants on research and the academy in Sudan.

⁸ Leaders of this coup replaced thirty vice-counselors in 2022. See Deborah Avant, Mark Boyer, and Omar McDoom, "ISA Statement on Institutional Autonomy in Turkey, Sudan, Hungary, Russia and Venezuela," International Studies Association, 10 June 2022, <https://www.isanet.org/News/ID/6253/ISA-Statement-on-Institutional-Autonomy-in-Turkey-Sudan-Hungary-Russia-and-Venezuela>.

⁹ "Declaration of Academic and Intellectual Freedoms and Demands for Resignation of the Director of al-Nileen University" (Arabic), *Madamik*. Republished in Sudan Monitor, 7 September 2021, <https://www.sudanmonitor.net/Details/10286/إعلان-الحريات-الأكاديمية-والفكرية-ومطالبات-بالإقالة-مدير-جامعة-النيلين>.

¹⁰ Amr el-Tohamy, "University of Khartoum's New Draft Law Limits Security Forces on Its Campus," Al-Fanar Media, 10 April 2022, <https://al-fanarmedia.org/2022/04/university-of-khartoums-new-draft-law>.

institutions of higher education. There are efforts to provide access to higher education for students from these areas through support from academics in the diaspora from the same area. There is a research, teaching, and publication center in South Kordofan that is directed by Sudanese poet Abbakar Adam Ismail.

The war that erupted in 2023 has been exceptionally destructive to higher education, given its scale, and given that it has unfolded primarily in urban areas (including Khartoum) where most universities are concentrated.¹¹

As discussed earlier, the war has uprooted a population of at least fourteen million. Like other Sudanese, students, faculty, and university staff and administrators had to evacuate major cities or leave the country. Faculty and staff who stayed in the country face the same conditions as other populations, depending on which part of the country they are in. In some areas, food insecurity is a key problem.¹² Twenty million needed health care as of January 2026, in a context in which 37 percent of healthcare institutions are not functional.¹³ Many women, students included, have faced harassment at checkpoints during evacuation, and also different forms of sexual and gender-based violence.

Amid this destruction, local communities across Sudan have been active in initiatives that provide mutual aid and other support to communities affected by war. Local communities have coordinated delivery of essential services through the much-celebrated Emergency Response Rooms, in which mostly young people, some of whom are recent graduates or were enrolled in universities before the war, volunteer to deliver services and food to communities. Women, especially those organized in cooperatives, also have delivered services to communities in different states.¹⁴ Research has documented strategies that different universities have used to avoid interruption of education. This includes the introduction of online learning in some universities, holding exams in countries in the Middle East and Africa, and participation of students in Sudan in clearing campuses from debris.¹⁵

The Impact of War on Higher Education and Academic Freedom

On 7 January 2026, University of Khartoum's Secretary of Academic Affairs Ali Rabbah published a resignation letter, citing "outside interference and attempts to control the university's registrar's office and academic records" as reasons for his resignation. The university's administration published a letter, announcing

¹¹ Mohamed Elmagzoub El-Tahir et al., "Universities under Siege: The Impact of the Sudanese War on the Sustainability of Higher Education in Sudan," *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education* 2025.

¹² Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan: Executive Summary," United Nations, December 2025, <https://www.unocha.org/sudan>.

¹³ "Sudan: 1000 Days of War Deepen the World's Worst Health and Humanitarian Crisis," press release, World Health Organization, 9 January 2026, <https://www.who.int/news/item/09-01-2026-sudan-1000-days-of-war-deepen-the-world-s-worst-health-and-humanitarian-crisis#:~:text=©->.

¹⁴ Nada Mustafa Ali, "Khartoum's Women Street Vendor Cooperatives and the Politics of Care," *Middle East Report*, 16 April 2024.

¹⁵ Muhannad B. M. Ahmed et al., "Sudanese Medical Students' Satisfaction with Online Learning and Its Association with Their Psychological Distress: A Cross-Sectional Study," *BMC Medical Education* 25, no. 706 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-025-07228-1>.

its intent to form a committee to investigate this and other issues in Rabbah's letter.¹⁶ The response of the university's board—emphasizing that the protection of academic records carried exceptional weight—indicates some tolerance for the freedom of intramural expression (even though the resignation sheds doubt on this) in relation to issues of academic and institutional integrity. The Ministry of Higher Education, however, denied these allegations and stated that protecting students' academic records was a matter of “national sovereignty.” A report in the *Sudan Times* stated that “What began as an administrative decision quickly grew into a wider crisis, reflecting how conflict has blurred lines between governance, oversight, and daily university life.”¹⁷ However, there is far less tolerance for more contentious issues, such as supporting a peaceful resolution to the ongoing conflict. The de facto government in army-controlled areas often accuses intellectuals, journalists, and others advocating for a peaceful resolution to the war of supporting the RSF or of lacking patriotism.

For a country affected by war, it is intriguing that there is a growing body of literature that is based on quantitative and qualitative research on the impact of the 2023 war on higher education in Sudan.¹⁸ Sudan currently has 39 public universities and 126 private universities.¹⁹ About 700,000 students were enrolled in these universities, and around 14,000 faculty taught there. Since the start of the war, the RSF militia has destroyed and looted over 100 campuses and used some of these campuses as military barracks. The militia also looted and vandalized over ten museums and cultural centers, holding artifacts that represent “thousands of years of civilization, indigenous knowledge, and traditions . . . that bridge Arab and African cultures with distinctive variability, with 200 indigenous communities spread over Sudan and 67 indigenous languages spoken.”²⁰

¹⁶ “Sudan War Shadows Khartoum University As Resignation Deepens,” *Sudan Times*, 10 January 2026.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ El-Tahir et al., “Universities under Siege”; Hajar Saad Salih et al., “Depression, Stress and Anxiety among Khartoum University Students Who Stay in War-Afflicted Regions in Sudan,” *BMC Psychiatry* 25, no. 135 (2025); Muna El-Gaddal and Rebecca Glade, “Research in Displacement: The Impact of War on Sudan's Higher Education,” Rift Valley Institute, 2024, <https://riftvalley.net/publication/research-in-displacement>. Research includes a study by undergraduate students at al-Mashreq University on the impact of henna extract in treating malaria. See Mosab Nouraldein Mohammed Hamad et al., “Potent in Vitro: Antiplasmodial Effect of *Lawsonia Inermis* (Henna) Extract against *Plasmodium* Species,” *Cohesive Journal of Microbiology and Infectious Disease*, 27 October 2025, <https://crimsonpublishers.com/cjmi/fulltext/CJMI.000676.php>; Esra Abdallah Abdalwahed Mahgoub et al., “Dental Education amid Armed Conflict in Sudan: Unveiling the Impact on Training,” *PLoS ONE* 19, no. 10 (2024); and Nawal K. N. Alamin et al., “Science in Times of War: Reflections from Sudan,” *African Science Frontiers Research Journal* 1, no. 1 (2024).

¹⁹ Sudan Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, “Handbook for Admissions to Higher Education Institutions at the Level of BA/BSc and Technical Diploma for the Academic Year 2024/2025” (Arabic), accessed January 2026, https://daleel.admission.gov.sd/ahli_org.htm, وزارة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي، الإدارة العامة للقبول وتكوين وتوثيق الشهادات، دليل القبول لمؤسسات التعليم العالي لمستوى البكالوريوس والدبلوم التقني للعام الدراسي الجامعي 2024-2025

²⁰ “Crisis and Consequence: The Escalating Humanitarian Emergency in Sudan,” UNESCO, June 2024, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/crisis-and-consequence-escalating-humanitarian-emergency-sudan>.

As stated, the war has affected university staff, faculty, and students in the same way it has affected other Sudanese populations, including their freedoms of expression and association.²¹ Both sides of the conflict have targeted journalists, for example. Academics faced and continue to face displacement, injuries, and lack of access to basic needs and services. The war has had a psychological toll on many. As Salih and colleagues observe, “It is impossible to adequately convey the intense stress, agony, and mental breakdown brought on by the unplanned move, family separation, and murder of friends and family.”²² Research among 443 undergraduate students residing in areas affected by war, for example, identified “high levels of psychological distress,” including depression and anxiety, especially among female students. The study identified an urgent need for counseling and community-based support for students affected by war. The authors also recommended further research on the long-term psychological impact of conflict on students.²³

Qualitative research I led in 2024 identified specific challenges that affect students who have faced sexual and gender-based violence. A student, 25 years old, who was displaced from an area in greater Khartoum to a city in North Kordofan, recounts how RSF soldiers beat, humiliated, and raped her. She told the interviewer,

I was a medical student, and overnight, I became idle, with no access to education or employment. . . . I no longer have passion or desire for life. Four raped me because of a former dispute between their tribe and my tribe/extended family. They burned our family’s home and forced us to leave [the area]. I hope no other girl faces what I [have] gone through.²⁴

Several quantitative studies examine the impact of conflict on universities and how universities and staff and students are addressing challenges arising from conflict, including through online learning.²⁵

The many students, faculty, and university staff members who were forcibly displaced within the country and into neighboring countries and elsewhere in the world have their own stories. The situation of academics outside Sudan varies according to social class. Institutional or individual connections or partnerships with global academic institutions and other bodies before the war also are among

²¹ This is evident in numerous media reports and social media accounts and videos. See “Freedom in the World 2025: The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights,” Freedom House, 2025, 6, 26, 32, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2025/uphill-battle-to-safeguard-rights>.

²² Salih et al., “Depression, Stress and Anxiety.” The authors of this study administered DASS-42, a 42-item questionnaire that contains three self-report scales formulated to measure the conditions of depression, anxiety, and stress. Every scale includes fourteen items, with subscales of two to five items with the same content.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Interview by a gender-based violence practitioner in North Kordofan for research co-led by the author. On file with the author.

²⁵ See, for example, El-Gaddal and Glade, “Research in Displacement”; Ahmed et al., “Sudanese Medical Students”; and Toga Khalid Mohamed et al., “Medical Education under Siege: The War’s Impact on Medical and Paramedical Sudanese Students,” *BMC Medical Education* 25, no. 1 (2025): 861.

the factors shaping access to higher education institutions for academics displaced by the war. Some academics who partnered with universities outside Sudan before the war were able to join these or other institutions in various capacities. Others still seek employment.

El-Gaddal and Glade documented hurdles that university students and faculty displaced to Egypt, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda face. These include challenging living situations, the conditions of the higher education system in host countries, prohibitive fees, and bureaucracy.²⁶ Opportunities for employment for faculty are limited given that universities (especially public universities) in neighboring countries are underfunded. However, displaced students and faculty have been able to work or study in universities in South Sudan. El-Gaddal and Glade argue that the higher education system in South Sudan also may benefit from employing Sudanese with doctoral degrees. Uganda offers opportunities for students, especially those who study in English.²⁷ El-Gaddal and Glade recommend support for rebuilding Sudanese institutions of higher education. They also recommend funding displaced academics and students and the institutions that support them through grants.

The war situation also impacts research. For example, one of five research assistants involved in a study I led in 2024 could not complete interviews or focus group discussions in Sudan's Northern state because of floods, which required that the research assistant and her family host many extended family members. Other researchers have identified lack of Internet access and electricity black-outs as limitations to their research in Sudan.²⁸

The war has created conditions that highly restrict academic freedom within the country, but numerous Sudanese and Sudanist academics across the globe enjoy various degrees of free speech and academic freedom (depending on location and their research focus). At this writing, it is unlikely that academic freedom in Sudan will be fully respected given the conditions of war and the nature of the regime in power.

Conclusions

Academic freedom is at times perceived as less of a priority during times of extensive crisis, given competing needs and interests. But conditions of war render academic freedom even more crucial. Academic freedom enables deeper understanding of root causes of wars, solidarity, peace-building, and development of ideas to address the long-term impact of war. In Sudan, the war has devastated the country, its people, and its institutions, including academics and academic institutions. Yet research reports, journal and newspaper articles,

²⁶ In this article, neighboring countries include several nearby countries in the Middle East and Africa that do not share borders with Sudan.

²⁷ El-Gaddal and Glade, "Research in Displacement," vi. Also see Husam Eldin Abugabr Elhag and Rania M. H. Baleela, "Preliminary Investigation and Analysis of the Impact of the Sudan War on Higher Education and Scientific Research Sectors," *International Journal of Educational Development*, 112 (2025).

²⁸ Elhag and Baleela, "Preliminary Investigation."

and social media narratives paint a picture of the creative ways that students and faculty have ensured some stability to enable teaching, learning, and research. Although a full discussion of these roles is beyond the scope of this article, one refreshing example is the volunteers who continue to clean campuses and rebuild halls and labs at several universities. The de facto government allowed the organization of several conferences on education and postwar reconstruction in 2025. However, it remains unlikely that either side of the conflict will respect academic freedom. Ensuring an end to the conflict and a postconflict democratic order that respects human rights and commits to social justice and gender equality are important prerequisites for ensuring academic freedom in the country.²⁹ Academic freedom is also essential for achieving these goals.

It is also important to address war-related trauma among faculty, staff, and students affected by war, and to ensure a culture of democracy and acceptance in which freedom of speech is enabled. International solidarity, raising awareness about the impact of war on academics and academic institutions in Sudan, support for scholars at risk, and providing opportunities for students to continue their education are important recommendations and actions that the Middle East Studies Association's Academic Freedom Committee and the Scholars at Risk network emphasize.³⁰ It is also important to identify good practice models in the region, such as support that universities provide for students and faculty affected by war, and that institutions such as the Arab Council for Social Sciences offer for emerging scholars and students affected by war. Recent reports have recommended supporting Sudanese students through universities in the region (that is, universities in Africa and the Middle East), but universities in the global North, including the United States, also should continue to address these crises and to accommodate students and scholars, given that "displaced scholars bring knowledge and capacity to their host institutions."³¹

²⁹ These same conditions also likely will limit the freedom to debate issues related to gender equality on campuses or at least consider these issues irrelevant. See the introduction in Ali, *Gender, Race*.

³⁰ See, for example, "Letter Regarding the Devastation of the Education Sector in Sudan," Middle East Studies Association Committee on Academic Freedom, 5 April 2024, <https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom/2024/04/05/letter-regarding-the-devastation-of-the-education-sector-in-sudan>.

³¹ Institute of International Education, "Preserving Knowledge amid the World's Largest Humanitarian Crisis," 14 November 2025, <https://www.iie.org/blog/preserving-knowledge-amid-the-worlds-largest-humanitarian-crisis>. Between April 2023 and November 2025, IIE's Scholar Rescue Fund awarded forty-six fellowships to Sudanese scholars. Almost 50 percent of awardees were women. The program placed these scholars at host institutions in four continents. Additionally, in January 2026 several Sudanese academics hosted in universities in Europe and the United States have reflected on their experiences on LinkedIn in ways that support this statement.

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