Higher Education Values and Social Responsibility

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Abstract
Current political, social, and economic turbulence has brought about a resurgence of attention to essential principles and values needed for higher education to flourish. However, the threats and mistrust faced by higher education today require a response that goes beyond the promotion of traditional operational values, such as academic freedom and institutional autonomy, to focus also on the values that drive higher education's mission and purposes.

Each epoch is marked by a few events and trends that define opinions and impact on the general policy narrative and framework. The current era is no different, though the impact of such events and trends is often felt globally. Increased populism and attractiveness of authoritarian leadership threaten democracy. Sustainable development imperatives are changing behaviors and attitudes. Massive migrations bring population diversity to many nations, while persistent and growing economic gaps within and between nations raise social unrest. The use of social media brings a more participative approach to information sharing, but precludes control over its content. The power of global, private sector actors such as Google, Facebook, and others, is felt at every level. The still unpredictable effect of artificial intelligence adds new challenges.

To differing degrees in different contexts, these developments impact on higher education and are accompanied by a resurgence of attention to values and principles that need to be protected and promoted. They bring new opportunities, responsibilities, expectations, and constraints on higher education institutions. No longer having a monopoly on knowledge creation, let alone information dissemination, universities' very relevance is being questioned. Simultaneously, the conviction that only a knowledge-based path leads to economic competitiveness for nations and well-being for individuals, raises pressure to provide access to higher education to an ever-growing proportion of the population. Wider but also successful participation in higher education is required for social cohesion and in order to avoid marginalization due to gaps between "those who know" and "those who know not."

The complexity of societal challenges and moral dilemmas are among the reasons for university leaders, faculty, and students to reflect on the purpose of higher education and the values that drive and underpin the process.

Principles and Values

This is not the first time that fundamental principles guiding higher education have attracted attention. For example, several decades ago, two international organizations of higher education articulated and underlined their commitment to fundamental values. In 1988, on the occasion of the 900th anniversary of the University of Bologna, the Magna Charta Observatory (MCO) adopted its *Universitatum*. As a contribution to the 1998 UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education, the International Association of Universities prepared its statement on "Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy and Social Responsibility." The two organizations continue to promote these values and encourage universities to adopt and integrate values into their mission and functions.

Both organizations focused primarily on academic freedom and institutional autonomy. These two principles continue to be seen as a condition *sine qua non* of strong and well-performing universities fulfilling their social responsibility.

Today the discussion concerning higher education values needs to—and often does—go beyond these framing operational principles. It focuses on the values that guide the very purposes of education and research.

Values to Frame the Goals of Higher Education

The choice of values can determine the goals of higher education and define the kind of graduates a university seeks to produce. The responsibilities that universities adopt as their own are defined by the values they, as a community, adopt and implement through policy, programs, and curriculum. Indeed, in 2019, a Global Forum on Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy, and the Future of Democracy, hosted by the Council of Europe, adopted a declaration in which the first paragraph states: "Education, including higher education, is responsible for advancing and disseminating knowledge and developing **ethical and able citizens**." Such a focus on the qualities of graduates is significant and essential.

Former President of the European Council Herman van Rompuy, speaking about values and human rights, once said that frequently, what we evoke most often is in reality what is most lacking. Could renewed attention to values in higher education be a sign that the sector has lost its commitment to them? Have values and social responsibility been forgotten or ignored? How much is the commitment to values such as integrity, solidarity, inclusiveness, etc., actually about marketing and feeling good, and how are these concepts applied and lived in universities around the globe?

Ideally, universities are spaces, both real and virtual, where truths and new knowledge are sought and freely shared, where reasoned and respectful dialogue is promoted and protected, where openness to other perspectives prevails, and where discrimination is banished. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy alone are insufficient to create such spaces. Protecting only these values may not suffice to regain trust for higher education institutions. Values such as equity and fairness, integrity, truthfulness, honesty, ethics, openness, respectful dialogue, and critical analysis must also become the visible and actioned hallmarks of these institutions. This requires ongoing dialogue to develop a consensus about shared values and a commitment to action by all stakeholders. Several universities around the world, working with the MCO, are taking this journey.

Responsibility and Obligation

Today, scientific knowledge is questioned and fake news is spreading fast, old hatreds such as racism, xenophobia, and religious intolerance are growing, and humanity is threatened by the continued abuse and exploitation of the planet's resources for economic gain by a few. In times such as these, universities and other higher education institutions have the obligation to speak truth to power and to serve the collective interests of society. Their functions, operations, and most importantly, their purposes and mission must be framed by values and principles.

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