

The European Higher Education Area Faces Its Fundamental Values

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From its launch in 1999, the [European Higher Education Area](#) (EHEA) has been underpinned by a set of fundamental values: academic freedom and integrity, institutional autonomy, the participation of staff and students in higher education governance, and public responsibility for and of higher education.

Values under Pressure

The EHEA has long been complacent about its values. Over the past few years, however, it has become clear that values can no longer be taken for granted. As parts of Europe experience a [backsliding of democracy](#), some EHEA governments and societies put the academic community under pressure.

[Populism](#)—mostly on the right, but also on the left—raises questions with regard to the need to base societal decisions on facts and hence also the need for research-based knowledge, whether on COVID vaccines or problematic aspects of our past. European countries are increasingly reluctant to accept migrants and refugees, and to deal with the paradox that little more than a century ago, Europeans migrated to many parts of the world, whether as “huddled masses,” political refugees, or colonizers. Hungary saw its citizens welcomed in many countries as they fled the crushing of the 1956 uprising, but now maintains refugees are somebody else’s problem. Ultimately, this general hostility to migration could lead to questioning the justification for academic mobility.

Prominently, Hungary challenges the fundamental values of the EHEA by targeting the Central European University (CEU) as well as other institutions. The “[Lex CEU](#),” the Hungarian law specifically targeting the CEU operation, was accompanied by a campaign playing on the full register of crude nationalism and anti-Semitism presenting the CEU as an alien institution financed by a Jew, George Soros. Ultimately, the CEU felt obliged to [move most of its activities](#) across the border to Vienna, Austria, but for other institutions, relocation is not an option. The Hungarian Academy of Sciences, for example, cannot operate from abroad. The government also outlawed an entire academic field, gender studies.

Restrictions in the freedom of the academic community to conduct teaching and research have also been seen in other countries. Poland [makes it exceedingly difficult to publish research critical](#) of the way Poles acted during World War II. A Russian court has just [outlawed International Memorial](#), an NGO devoted to critical historical research, in particular on the Stalinist period. The historian Yuri Dmitriyev, who is connected to Memorial and has conducted critical research on the Gulag, recently saw his [jail sentence increased to 15 years](#) on charges that his supporters maintain are fabricated, even if the facts of the case are difficult to establish. Turkey conducted an extensive crackdown on its academic community following the failed coup attempt in July 2016.

Belarus

Belarus [acceded to the EHEA in 2015](#), on its third attempt. In 2005, Belarus was quietly discouraged from submitting a formal application and took the advice. In 2012, its application was rejected in view of the oppression directed at members of the academic community in the wake of the presidential election held in December 2010. Its admission in 2015 was accompanied by a [Roadmap](#) that, among other things, included provisions on fundamental values. I was among those who argued in favor of accepting Belarus, because members of the academic community critical of the Lukashenka

Abstract

Backsliding of democracy puts the values of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) under pressure. The EHEA finds it difficult to deal with violations. Higher education leaders must debate issues that do not make headlines as well as those that do. They must demonstrate international solidarity, so that higher education systems in vulnerable countries receive support as they deserve and need. The EHEA must focus on a fundamental values program for the decade until 2030.

One of the main challenges will be how and where to draw the line between encouraging compliance and taking action against noncompliance.

regime feared longer term isolation if the country were kept out of the EHEA. Belarus' implementation of the Roadmap was unimpressive, but there was nevertheless a thaw of some kind until the failed presidential election in August 2020. Large street protests over weeks and months were followed by significant repression, also against members of the academic community.

Reaction within the EHEA was mixed. In November 2020, only 26 countries and five consultative members signed on to a statement by the then-Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) cochaIRS, Germany and the United Kingdom, while Russia issued a counterstatement. Faced with the prospect of Belarus as the public face of the EHEA in the fall of 2022, however, the BFUG decided to suspend its cochairmanship in December 2021. Nevertheless, several EHEA members—including some EU countries—did not want to take a position.

Even this cursory overview shows that a loosely organized, consensus-oriented intergovernmental process finds it difficult to deal with challenges to its basic values, for lack of political will but also because of the limited leverage of ministers of education on issues that concern the fundamentals of foreign policy and political identity. One of the main challenges will be how and where to draw the line between encouraging compliance and taking action against noncompliance.

The Responsibility of Higher Education

Higher education will harm not only itself but also our democracy if fundamental values are taken for granted or considered to be unimportant because these values are not under immediate or spectacular threat in one's own country.

The academic community needs to raise debates about issues such as the impact of general legislation, financing and governance models, the role that fundamental values should play in quality assurance, and, more broadly, the relationship between public authorities (which are responsible for education systems) and the academic community.

A recent decision by the Norwegian government to direct Nord University to reestablish a delocalized teacher education program at Nesna, population 1,761, illustrates that there are issues of fundamental values also in well-functioning democracies. Nord University had decided to discontinue the program because the university had doubts about its pertinence and quality if it were to be delocalized. While ensuring the provision of higher education in a peripheral area may well be within the competence of public authorities, it is doubtful whether that authority extends to overruling an institution that has decided to close a study program for reasons of quality and budget, without making arrangements to meet the concerns that led to the closure of the program in the first place.

In 2017, a UK member of parliament (MP) asked university leaders for the names of professors involved in teaching European affairs "with particular reference to Brexit." The MP was firmly rebutted, but the fact that such a request could even be made raises concerns.

Academics, especially those in leadership, also need to demonstrate international solidarity. Some leaders and academics in Belarus, Hungary, Russia, and Turkey—the latter three countries singled out in the 2018 EHEA implementation report—have taken courageous stands. They deserve the support of less exposed EHEA colleagues, as well as of international institutions. The latter are hampered by a consensus principle that their leaders and member states would do well to reconsider. Courageous academic leaders under pressure deserve strong support from their peers. Ultimately, this support may convince EHEA ministers to face the threats to our fundamental values and back up their words with effective measures against those who transgress and show no sign of repenting.

The EHEA needs a fundamental values decade: We should make understanding and respecting our fundamental values a main priority of the third decade of the EHEA, which will run until 2030. ▲

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