

June 21, 2019

GLOBAL FORUM ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM, INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY, AND THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

DECLARATION

The Global Forum on Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy, and the Future of Democracy was held at Council of Europe headquarters in Strasbourg on 20 – 21 June 2019 and co-organized by the Council of Europe; the International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility and Democracy; the Organization of American States; the Magna Charta Observatory; and the International Association of Universities.

Participants in the Global Forum adopt the following

D E C L A R A T I O N

1. Education, including higher education, is responsible for advancing and disseminating knowledge and developing ethical and able citizens. It therefore plays an essential role in modern democratic societies. Education is key to developing, maintaining, and sustaining a culture of democracy without which democratic laws, institutions, and elections cannot function in practice: education furthers and supports a set of attitudes and behaviours that seeks resolution of conflicts through dialogue; that accepts that while majorities decide, minorities have certain inalienable rights; and that sees diversities of background and opinion as a strength rather than as a threat. Education at all levels is therefore critical in helping develop the values, ethic, and ways of thinking on which democratic societies are based and which strengthen opposition and resilience to terrorism and violent extremism.
2. Higher education can only fulfil its mission if faculty, staff and students enjoy academic freedom and institutions are autonomous; principles laid out in the Magna Charta Universitatum as well as the UNESCO Recommendation on the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are essential to furthering the quality of learning, teaching, and research, including include artistic creative practice – quality understood as observing and developing the standards of academic disciplines and also quality as the contribution of higher education to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Higher education must demonstrate openness, transparency, responsiveness and accountability as well as the will and ability to work with and contribute to the communities in which colleges and universities reside.
3. The future of democracy is at risk in the absence of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, just as it is when the press, media or civil society organizations are

weakened and compromised. Increasingly, these freedoms and institutions are threatened and undermined. The community of faculty, staff and students as well as higher education leaders must combine autonomy and accountability, freedom of research and teaching, and societal responsibility.

4. Faculty, staff, and students, higher education leaders, and public authorities can and should support academic freedom and institutional autonomy and contribute to its implementation. Equally, each can harm, limit and undermine these fundamental democratic values, as we see in too many instances in too many parts of the world. Countries that have counted among the established democracies are not immune to the temptations of silencing critical voices in academia: the Central European University – which provided the keynote address at our Global Forum – is but one example.
5. While academic freedom may be understood as the freedom of expression aligned with the standards of knowledge and research, members of the academic community have a double duty: to challenge received knowledge and understanding through high quality research, teaching, and enquiry, and to use their academic freedom to further the common purposes and improvement of our societies.
6. Campuses must be fora of vigorous debate and honest pursuit of truth, guided by the desire to help all human beings. Any limits on freedom of expression must be based on protection of the specific rights of others (e.g., to protect against discrimination or defamation) rather than on expediency or to advance a single political ideology.
7. Institutional autonomy is often understood through the prism of the legal relationship between higher education institutions and public authorities. Institutions cannot be autonomous unless public authorities allow them to be so, but legal provision alone can guarantee neither the pursuit of knowledge nor democracy, since both depend upon open democratic values, attitudes and behaviours. Any limitations on institutional autonomy must be based on essential educational or legal needs (such as those reflected in accreditation requirements or non-discrimination laws), not on political grounds.
8. Participants recognize that while academic freedom and institutional autonomy are often considered together, one does not necessarily guarantee the other. A culture that values and promotes academic freedom should be encouraged across higher education institutions regardless of their level of institutional autonomy.
9. Significant violations of academic freedom and institutional autonomy threaten democracy. Sadly, their frequency is on the rise. Public authorities and the academic community alike must be vigilant in addressing and challenging such violations, and the responsibility for doing so does not stop at institutional or national borders. An attack on the freedom of one member of the academic community or the autonomy of one institution is an attack on the fundamental values of our democracies, regardless of where it takes place.
10. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are also threatened when financial support from individuals, private corporations, or institutional donors predominantly

determines the focus of research and teaching and diminishes the public and democratic purposes of higher education. In general, public funding is fundamental, but financial support from multiple sources and financing not narrowly earmarked can strengthen academic freedom and institutional autonomy without diminishing the crucial societal role of higher education.

11. Administrative regulations, public and private indifference, considerations of immediate return on investment, a limited view of utility, and seeing higher education only through the lens of a narrow economic agenda also threaten academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Financial regulations and arrangements should be used to further rather than to limit institutional autonomy. More broadly, academic freedom and institutional autonomy are threatened by the absence of a vision that connects the purposes of higher education to democratic purpose.

The participants in the Global Forum therefore call on

Members of the academic community and their organizations

- to orient their research, learning, and teaching toward developing knowledge and understanding based on facts and science and interpreting these in a spirit of open mindedness and respect for differences of views, backgrounds, and traditions;
- to provide broader society with factually based knowledge and to base their own participation in public debate on the same standards of truthfulness, open mindedness and respect that should be at the base of their academic work;
- to refrain from any actions that could contribute to – or legitimize – the spread of false or misleading information, including spurious claims of “fake news” and “alternative facts”, or willful distortion of the results of their own research or that of others.

Higher education institutions and their leaders

- to raise awareness among members of the academic community of the importance of academic freedom and institutional autonomy as well as the crucial role of higher education to democracy;
- to commit to maintaining, developing, and sustaining the public purpose and social responsibility of higher education;
- to explore the role and meaning of academic freedom and institutional autonomy within their respective institutions and systems, and the steps needed to protect these in an increasingly polarized and divided public sphere;

- to commit to – or maintain their commitment to, as the case may be – the *Magna Charta Universitatum*.

Higher education leaders and their organizations as well as public authorities at all levels

- to create and maintain the conditions for the academic community to enjoy freedom of research, learning, and teaching as well as the freedom to engage in public debate based on their academic work;
- to create and maintain an atmosphere of vigorous and respectful debate within their institutions and higher education systems;
- to ensure faculty, staff and students the freedom to teach, learn and research without the fear of disciplinary action, dismissal or any other form of retribution.
- to give due regard to academic freedom and institutional autonomy in setting higher education priorities, developing policies, and assessing funding options.
- to provide sufficiently secure employment conditions for faculty/academic staff to exercise academic freedom.

Public authorities

- to set the framework for academic freedom and institutional autonomy and continuously monitor the implementation of those fundamental rights, while encouraging the adoption of sustainable long-term strategies for higher education;
- to take due account of the principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy in developing regulations and policies in other areas of public responsibility;
- to balance the need for general rules and regulations ensuring the protection of individuals and guaranteeing sound public administration with respect for the principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy;
- to provide strong public funding as a basic requirement for autonomy and academic freedom.

The Council of Europe, the Organization of American States, and other international institutions and organizations

- to make academic freedom and institutional autonomy key elements of their work to further democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, through normative standards as well as policy;
- to address violations of academic freedom and institutional autonomy within their member States at a political level as well as through their Education programmes and projects.

The Ministers of the European Higher Education Area, who will meet in Rome in June 2020

- to recommit to upholding academic freedom and institutional autonomy as part of the foundation on which the European Higher Education Area is built;
- to include the gathering of information on the respect for academic freedom and institutional autonomy in the Bologna Process Implementation Reports and to provide and facilitate the gathering of such information within their own countries and systems;
- to address violations of academic freedom and institutional autonomy at political level within the European Higher Education Area, in view of their collective political responsibility for the EHEA.

The Council of Europe, the International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility and Democracy, the Organization of American States, and other partners in our cooperation on the democratic mission of higher education

- to continue their work to strengthen the role of higher education in developing, maintaining, and sustaining democratic societies;
- to continue to highlight the importance of academic freedom and institutional autonomy in furthering higher education's democratic mission as well as to develop policy proposals and engage in public advocacy to more fully achieve that mission.