



EBERBACH STATEMENT

Convened by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Academic Cooperation Association (ACA), in September 2019 European scholars and academic policy makers gathered at Kloster Eberbach to consider "European Values in Higher Education".

The participants reaffirm:

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) must be underpinned by the core values on which higher education and research in Europe as well as in other parts of the world have been built and continue to develop. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy, ethics and transparency in research, teaching and learning, the participation of staff and students in the life and governance of higher education institutions are essential conditions for universities to fulfil their missions of advancing knowledge and understanding. They are essential for universities to help ensure that Europe be not only a community of interest but also a community of values ("Wertegemeinschaft").

Universities are an integral part of our societies. They further the core of values rooted in the Enlightenment. Our identities as members of the academic community, Europeans, and citizens of the world are based on this tradition as well as the core values agreed on in Europe: democracy, human rights, rule of law, and absence of discrimination on any ground such as the applicant's gender, race, colour, disability, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status¹, as agreed upon in the fundamental documents of the Council of Europe which have been agreed on by all countries of the EHEA.

The value basis of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has been agreed by its member States through the declarations and communiqués adopted by its successive ministerial conferences.² They are nevertheless under more serious threat today than at any time during the two decades since the Bologna Process was launched and in the decade since the European Higher Education Area was formally established. It is therefore timely and necessary to sound the alarm to reaffirm our core values. We therefore call on Ministers to reaffirm the values of the EHEA and to ensure that these values not be reserved for declarations but are put into daily practice in their education systems and in the higher education institutions that make up the systems.

Universities have a responsibility for fundamental as well as for societal values

In the context of the EHEA, an important distinction is made between "fundamental values", such as academic freedom, institutional autonomy, student and staff participation, and "societal values", such as democracy, rule of law, and human rights. The universities bear responsibility for both.

Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are key values for the universities as they concern the universities directly. Neither the freedom of the individual member of the academic community to pursue knowledge and understanding nor the autonomy of institutions to set their own priorities and govern themselves can exist in isolation. In some cases, difficult decisions need to be made. When academics stand for views that contradict the values on which we base our societies, academic freedom becomes a difficult issue. Therefore, the question of which views to spread have recently led to conflicts on who has the right to teach or to speak at a university.

¹ Cf. Article III.1. of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

² Cf. <http://www.ehea.info/page-ministerial-declarations-and-communiques>.

As higher education institutions depend on funding from many external sources, they are susceptible to pressures from many parties. Universities act in a financial and political context where it sometimes becomes difficult to contradict those who finance research, especially from private sources, or ministries on whom higher education institutions depend. Especially when governments curtail the autonomy of higher education institutions and act in ways harmful to the values of society or the universities, the options of the institutions' leadership or individual professors are limited and often uncomfortable. Not only policies, but concrete policy projects become a difficult issue, for example if nationalism and populism replace the search for truth as the guiding principle for universities. Truth is not a question of majority. However, universities can and should fight, even if they will not always prevail against authoritarian government policies. Universities as well as individual academics need the integrity to foster a culture of courage to not deny these values out of fear of losing reputation or financial support.

Universities, then, have an obvious interest in the fundamental values. They have no less of a responsibility for our societal values and should include them into their mission.

Education needs to be more than a process for acquiring practical competences, skills and knowledge but rather has the responsibility to shape the personality and character of young people and help them becoming mature and responsible citizens. That includes transmitting values in an open and critical way. This has to take into account that everybody is exposed to multiple influences, especially through social media and that people entering the university have already acquired certain values. Institutions should be aware of the virtual circle: they educate teachers which later will teach pupils. Teachers should not teach (only) yesterday's values to today's children who are expected to shape the world of tomorrow but take into account that values can evolve. A critical approach to sources is a fundamental competence in research. Universities must make it a fundamental competence also of our societies.

Institutions should teach about values, rather than teach specific values

The role of the universities is among others to deal and to teach dealing with different views; they cannot be arenas for streamlining thought.

Values should be transmitted through teaching and developed through academic dispute. Learning outcomes are not only about what we know, understand, and are able to do: they are also about what we are willing to do – and abstain from doing. The ability and will to engage in ethical reflection and critical analysis must be part and parcel of every higher education study programme. Students should be explicitly exposed to values; thus, there should be a space for critical debate and examination of values. This includes critical reflection with the students about which kind of society we want to live in. The way in which this space is organised reflects a certain set of values.

The transmission of societal values requires a holistic approach

The structure and the management of the university has to reflect its values and include the students. Leaders themselves need to act as role models and practice what they preach. But most of all, transmitting values requires a holistic approach to education and has to be a result of participatory engagement; they have to be trained through both theory and practice.

As many studies confirm, studying abroad is a very potent means to further critical thinking, develop a more mature personality, reflect upon one's own values and at the same time support many of the values agreed upon (openness, tolerance, intercultural understanding etc.). There are different ways of creating a space for critical transmission of values. Doing so successfully and effectively requires a holistic approach. Mobility is a significant experience to compare values and views in different countries. To reflect with others on their experiences can be helpful in the process of critical thinking about civic values and help students to act in the larger society.

An additional task is imparting academic and research integrity, especially in the light of recent fraud and plagiarism cases on the one hand, and an increasing scepticism about the value of science on the other.

If the responsibility towards society is to become a central part of the university mission, action also should be taken at political level

Higher education institutions need to take responsibility for transmitting and respecting values.

If values are to be taken seriously, the way in which they are addressed and furthered need to be included in the assessment and evaluation systems, e.g. by offering incentives for academics, study programmes, and institutions.

Universities should base their activities on fundamental and societal values and develop and maintain an appropriate internal culture and procedures to do so.

We call on the Ministers to cater for an environment, in the European Higher Education Area and within each education system, to create the conditions and the attitudes required to make this important mission of higher education possible.

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