

Report from session 1 - Academic and related civic values in changing societies

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First of all I would like to thank all the organisers for this event and the participants for the discussions these days - it has been a pleasure. My name is Helmi Andersson, I am from the National Union of University Students in Finland and I had the wonderful opportunity to summarize the discussion from session number one – academic and related civic values in changing societies.

We had a really interesting and rich discussion this morning on our topic, which was Academic and civic values in changing societies. The questions we have tried to answer were the following: How can universities be safe havens for open debate in times of high political tension? How can we safeguard academic freedom and independent research? How can we build strong communities that together spread the message of education as a public good? How can we support and promote these values through the Bologna process?

As our keynote and roundtable speakers, we had:

[Livi Matei](#), Central European University, Provost,
[Janika Spannagel](#), Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), Researcher
[Paolo Maria Mancarella](#), University of Pisa, Rector
[Daniel Kontowski](#), University of Winchester, Researcher
[Rob Copeland](#), ETUCE Standing Committee for Higher Education and Research, Chair
[Sjur Bergan](#), Council of Europe, Head of Education Department (BFUG)

Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are key values of the EHEA and the Bologna Declaration explicitly refers to the Magna Charta Universitatum. One of the criteria for accession to the EHEA is respect for academic freedom and institutional autonomy and therefore it is also one of the elements on which compliance with EHEA values and policies should be judged.

However, rather unanimously, our speakers agreed that academic freedom has not received the attention it deserves in the Bologna process. It is also important to distinguish between institutional autonomy and academic freedom. They often complement each other but as Janika Spannagel and Livi Matei pointed out in their speeches they are not equal. While institutional autonomy has improved during the past decades, the same cannot be said for academic freedom. I believe everyone in the session agreed that academic freedom is a fundamental value for the EHEA now and in the future and that it should be addressed in the next communique.

In the discussion today, we were presented with many, different threats that are posed to academic freedom. These threats consist of political threats and threats related to commodification and funding of higher education and research. They can be crude and obvious but also subtle and unnoticeable. We have seen these threats on different levels realised in European countries, e.g. more crudely in Hungary but also subtle infringements in other countries. As pointed out by Livi Matei and Rob Copeland, one example of subtle infringements of academic freedom took place in Britain where a member of parliament sent letters to academic staff questioning the suitability of their educational material.

As it was pointed out by the crowd, we have also seen free speech and academic interaction with society being limited through hate speech. While one of the most important tasks of academia is to interact with society - efforts to silence academics through harassment on social media are becoming increasingly common. How can we fight that and support academics that participate in societal discourse?

One way of doing this is to provide incentives for participating in public discourse and having strong academic communities that can support each other. Rob Copeland also brought up the importance of steady employment and good working conditions, as important factors in salvaging academic freedom and academics themselves from self-censorship. If you need to worry that your employment is challenged because of what you are saying – you, and all of us, have a problem.

We are also seeing increased marketisation and commercialisation of higher education which harms institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Examples of these are policies such as the increased use of performance-based funding, the reliance on fixed-term contracts for academic staff and the shift towards corporate forms of institutional governance that limits the freedom to research and right to teach without any interference.

As a student, I am glad that several speakers talked about students as part of the academic community rather than customers. Tuition fees are a manifestation of perceiving higher education as a commodity instead of a public good. Through the fees, students are seen as customers rather than part of the academic community. And I agree with Sjur Bergan, it is more than a semantic difference – as a member rather than a customer, you have something at stake and you want to fight to change it for the better. Students, as members of the academic community, are fundamental for the future of EHEA.

Linking education to the needs of the labour market is on the rise. However, if graduate outcomes and labour market outcomes are emphasised in excess, it leads to performance management and in some HE systems, increased performance-based funding. This can create biases to certain type of subject areas. Whilst it is important that public authorities can ensure there is an adequate amount of educated people where it is needed in society and that the labour market has a supply of qualified workforce in order to keep our societies functional - the higher education institutions' mission is greater than that.

Academia has a responsibility to ensure that knowledge in certain fields is not lost but fostered - even if the labour market or public considers that specific area futile for the moment. Daniel Kontowski talked about this by discussing the role of liberal arts education in the EHEA. As he pointed out – too tight frameworks or letting the labour market define which fields are important can harm academic freedom and lead to a decrease of some programmes and study fields.

As we discussed today, the role of higher education in society is to foster and preserve knowledge and culture and in that way benefit society as a whole. In order to do so, the whole academic community should take part in decisions that affect that community. It is crucial that both staff and students are actively taking part in defining where the university should go next - which are the important questions that need to be answered. An increase in student participation in the governance and administration of the university was proposed by Paolo Maria Mancarello and could result in stronger academic communities that actively promote academic freedom and preserve their institutional autonomy.

Now, I will hopefully be able to present some solutions and next steps for the future of the Bologna process. The work has already started through the expert group formed within the BFUG, whose task is to address infringements of academic freedom, but work still needs to be done.

The political threats are not that easy to address. As Sjur Bergan pointed out, the most important part of the Bologna Process are the ministerial meetings. Now, as I stated earlier, the speakers agreed that the next communique should address academic freedom. At the same time, there is a risk that the ministers struggle to pinpoint their colleagues from countries that are failing to meet the criteria set up for the EHEA. Thus, it is important to find the right wording and the exact criteria for what we mean when we talk about academic freedom if we want to see actual progress. Many speakers agreed that we lack a common wording and definition for academic freedom in the EHEA now.

Paolo Maria Mancarello pointed out that one way of safeguarding academic freedom from the political threats imposed by governments, could be to further develop and maintain cooperation of European universities. This could be done through more joint programmes and research involving universities all over Europe. The cooperation should include not only research but also teaching and education.

One thing the speakers all agreed on is, that in order to promote academic freedom across Europe through the Bologna process, we need to create a common set of values and tools to measure it, so that we can know that progress is being made.

Academic freedom is a composite of many different things, so it is almost easier to measure the lack of it. As we have discussed earlier academic freedom can be infringed – not only through attacks on academic staff but it can also be subtler, e.g. in the form of marketisation. If we want to measure academic freedom, we need to have some kind of tool. The research conducted at the Global Public Policy institute by Janika Spannagel and her colleagues is aimed to give us precisely this. They are creating ways to measure academic freedom globally. The preliminary results will be available before the next ministerial meeting in Rome and will hopefully be very helpful in defining the future of the Bologna process.

Moreover, as many of our speakers pointed out the success of the EHEA after 2020 requires a greater focus on core public investment in higher education. Higher education is not only a public good, but a public responsibility and that notion should also show in the funding of our institutions. As noted from the crowd, students', teachers' and researchers' access to publications and data should be guaranteed, to make sure academic freedom is realised.

To conclude and sum up the discussion from this morning, what we would like to see happening in the European Higher Education Area beyond 2020 are the following points:

As Liviu Matei, among others suggested, the next ministerial meeting in Rome should address the issue of academic freedom. As Sjur Bergan pointed out, it is important to find the correct wordings in that meeting to keep countries that have now infringed upon academic freedom within the process in the future. Broken dialogue is better than none.

In order to address the issue of academic freedom we need to create a common definition of it and find ways to improve and protect it. Hopefully the research of Janika Spannagel with her colleagues will help us with this task.

As Rob Copeland and Paolo Maria Mancarello pointed out, strong communities are important for institutional autonomy and assuring academic freedom. We need to perceive students as members of the academic community – not as customers.

As Daniel Kontowski pointed out, we also need to have space in the Bologna process. We need space for countries, institutions and programmes to experiment. If there is no room to experiment, academic freedom is infringed.

Finally, we would like to see increased core public investment in higher education so that we can improve and maintain qualitative research and education in our institutions.

Thank you.

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