

Fundamental academic values strengthen democratic societies – a student perspective

Text: Hans Leifgen

At the workshop “Fundamental Academic Values in the European Higher Education Area – From a Student Perspective” in April 2021, representatives of various European student organisations discussed the importance of fundamental academic values in connection with European higher education policy. Debate focused particular on the relevance of such values in terms of the successful contribution of the higher education sector to active participation in democratic life in Europe.

Academic freedom, accountability, equitable access, institutional autonomy and social responsibility: these “fundamental academic values” – ¹as they are called in the Bologna context – are closely linked to active social engagement and participation in democratic life. They include various aspects relevant to human rights compliance: freedom of expression, democratic participation, equality, prohibition of discrimination and social responsibility. What is more, adherence to academic values is fundamental to ensuring that higher education institutions are able to perform those essential tasks assigned to them in the service of and as part of a democratic society.



The five fundamental academic values in the European Higher Education Area

European education policy focuses on democratic participation

Currently, fundamental academic values are increasingly coming into focus in the debate on higher education policy, especially in view of the increasing pressure on democracy. In a video message for the 2021 annual conference of the European University Association, for instance, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, emphasised the key role of universities in this debate on fundamental values and rights.

In keeping with this, European education policy focuses on providing students with critical skills relevant to social responsibilities and civic duties. This is why fundamental academic values have been part of the Bologna Process from the very outset and the European Commission has long advocated for them. The new Erasmus+ programme generation 2021-2027 will therefore prominently feature academic values too, underlining the importance of higher education to democratic societies and in promoting critical thinking among students.

“Our democracies are coming under increased pressure and our universities must therefore continue to be home to academic freedom and democratic values, free speech, gender equality and fundamental rights. These principles must be cherished and nurtured, today more than ever, as they are threatened across the globe.” *Charles Michel*

¹ The five fundamental academic values listed here were defined by the Scholars at Risk network. See Scholars at Risk, Promoting Higher Education Values. A Guide for Discussion, New York 2020, S. 4, available online at <https://t1p.de/a30k> [01.06.2021].



The **bologna hub** project aims to support higher education institutions in implementing the central elements of the Bologna reform.

One priority of the BMBF-funded project bologna hub is to address current education policy topics in the European Higher Education Area through events as well as publications and studies.

Students engaged in discussion on fundamental academic values

At the workshop in April 2021, which was organised within the framework of the DAAD project **bologna hub**, representatives of various major student organisations exchanged views on fundamental academic values.

Participants from the European Students' Union (ESU), the Erasmus Student Network (ESN), the Association des Etats Généraux des Etudiants de l'Europe (AEGEE-Europe) and the fzs (Free Federation of Student Unions), as well as student representatives on the DAAD Executive Committee and DAAD Board of Trustees, talked about past activities, existing obstacles, the effects of the coronavirus crisis and future potential in connection with academic values.

In the course of a lively debate, it became clear that academic values have a key role to play in the day-to-day work of the student organisations and are highly significant to their self-image. Workshop participants stated that all five fundamental values are closely linked: they should therefore be conceived of as being equal and belonging together.

The student representatives also agreed that higher education institutions have a social responsibility to share their academic knowledge with all members of society and to address current problems and the needs of all citizens. Phuong Anh Nguyen, representative of the student bodies on the DAAD Executive Committee, argued that “[t]he participation of students in democratic life [...] has the potential to underpin democracy and the solidarity of a society”.

In order to support students and doctoral candidates who are at risk in their home country and unable to continue their studies or research in their home country, the DAAD has set up its own study programme – the “Hilde Domin Programme”.

At its presentation, DAAD President Prof Dr Joybrato Mukherjee stressed that a free and democratic society only functions where the academic pursuit of knowledge and the free development of personality go unhindered.

Source: New scholarship programme for students and doctoral candidates at risk, DAAD, press release 14.04.2021, available online at https://www.daad.de/en/the-daad/communication-publications/press/press_releases/hilde-domin-programm

“Academic freedom performs two roles in democratic societies. On the one hand, the lively, vibrant debate within the academic community (students included) is necessary for nurturing critical thinking and advancing public discourse within broader society. On the other hand, since academic freedom is based upon other rights such as freedom of expression and of dissent, a descent into authoritarianism will inevitably lead to a crackdown on academic freedom, making it a good proxy on the health of democracy within a country.” *Matteo Vespa*

Academic freedom as an indicator of democratic stability

Nonetheless, it is not always easy for higher education institutions to meet the objectives of European education policy in the area of civic education and ensure the unhindered academic pursuit of knowledge: they are often particularly affected by state restrictions because students and university members support democratic protest and opposition movements.

During the workshop, Matteo Vespa, member of the Executive Committee of the ESU, described a direct link between academic freedom and the state of democracy in a country. He said he believed academic freedom and democracy were mutually dependent. Matteo Vespa referred to the need for open exchange at universities in order to promote critical thinking. He also said that “academic freedom was a good indicator of the stability of democracy in a country”.

Student participation in the governance and management of higher education institutions

In order to better support democracy and solidarity in a society, the student representatives called for greater student participation in university bodies and in educational policy decision-making processes. In addition, they underlined the relevance of approaches that aim to secure students’ academic freedom and autonomy in university representation.

Besides academic freedom, the student representatives particularly identified student participation in the governance and management of higher education institutions as being the key interface between fundamental academic values and participation in democratic processes. In this way, as was stated by Phuong Anh Nguyen, diverse points of view could be put forward for discussion and comprehensive solutions found to controversial issues. This would make procedures more transparent and higher education policy as a whole more effective.



“Through student participation, different opinions and perspectives can be integrated and discussed in order to find comprehensive solutions to controversial issues.

When students actively participate and are involved in decisions that are made in the governance and management of higher education institutions, transparency in higher education policymaking can be increased and more effective policies can be established.” *Phuong Anh Nguyen*

Integrating students’ perspectives and measuring academic freedom

Central concerns relating to the future of student representatives, are focussing on the area of communication: firstly – as also called for by Phuong Anh Nguyen– they said they wanted to be more involved in debate on education policy, with greater weight being given to their perspective. Secondly, they said they would seek to intensify dialogue between student organisations in the future, as well as enhancing cooperation to uphold academic values and boost participation in democratic life.

Furthermore, the student organisations advocated that a working group of the Bologna Follow-Up Group is now about to develop a coherent framework for measuring and monitoring the degree of academic freedom and violations of this freedom. Matteo Vespa emphasised that raising the issue of limited academic freedom at the European level could encourage states to rethink their position. He said that measuring academic freedom offered the opportunity to strengthen democratic action.

Promoting democratic action and active social engagement

In principle, the student organisations welcomed the fact that political statements emphasised the relevance of academic values and participation in democratic life. They said they would like to see a greater focus on these issues in European higher education in the long term, however. For example, training in democratic action and critical thinking ought to be further anchored in both teaching and day-to-day university life.

In order to make this happen and promote an inclusive and open society, the student representatives said it was necessary to engage in open discussion about our society and the world we want to live in. At the same time, they said, university projects had to be carried out on the subject of academic values and democratic participation, and it was important to enable international mobility. They said that both contributed to social progress in the European Higher Education Area, as students would be taught shared values and active social engagement – something that would benefit Europe as a whole.

[Hans Leifgen](#)
EU04 – Policy Support
> bologna@daad.de

Further links

bologna hub: <https://t1p.de/75hx>

Workshop “Fundamental Academic Values in the EHEA – From a Student Perspective”:
<https://t1p.de/qurs>

DAAD Executive Committee
<https://www.daad.de/en/the-daad/who-we-are/organisational-structure/committees>

ESU: <https://www.esu-online.org>

ESN: <https://esn.org/>

AEGEE: <https://www.aegee.org/>

fzs: <https://www.fzs.de/>

EUA: <https://www.eua.eu/>

Academic Freedom Index: <https://t1p.de/3g6j>

Bologna Follow-Up Group: <https://t1p.de/8lcg>