

► Freedom and inclusiveness in Higher Education

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Introduction

To say we live in an era of unprecedented change and disruption would be an understatement of massive proportions. It seems we go from crisis to crisis – both natural and man-made, both near and far. Around us we see the rise of populism and neo nationalism relying on fake news and propaganda, stimulating xenophobia, racism and fear of ‘the other’. Those who propagate such views denigrate scientific knowledge and expertise and consider these to be politically biased, destined to control the **freedom** of individuals. Academic freedom is threatened on some campuses divided by debates around Wokism, Islamogauchism, critical race theory and many other theories that, for the most part, stem from and try to address inequalities, real and perceived power imbalances and injustice in our society at home and across borders. If that is not enough, a war on democracy and freedom is raging in Europe once again.



So, the two themes framing this conference – freedom and inclusiveness - are not only critical and most relevant issues for our societies and for our universities, they are extremely timely, as are all efforts to create deep and strong international collaboration among different HEIs as exemplified by Arqus and the European Universities initiative.

Let me begin my presentation with a few personal anecdotes. They illustrate how values such as **Freedom**, which might be deemed universal and understood by all, are nevertheless coloured by subjective and personal experiences and cultural bias. This can make the task of reaching a shared understanding of their meaning while respecting cultural differences (as within the Arqus alliance, for example), potentially difficult. At the same time living and continuously examining such values in higher education is essential to tackle and overcome current and future crisis in society.

The concept of Freedom has been especially in the limelight since the beginning of the Pandemic and now the war in Ukraine. At the beginning of this year, the so-called **Freedom Convoy** held my personal attention. In the name of Freedom the convoy occupied Ottawa, a peaceful, sleepy capital of Canada where I lived for many years. It also blocked the Canada-US border in Windsor.

Ironically, this is the very same border crossing where slaves who fled from the USA to Canada in the 18th century were said to travel the Freedom Trail.

Freedom certainly carries a different meaning in these two instances.

Not even a month later, we watched, stupefied as Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine to squash an independent nation's and people's **Freedom to choose** their own path. My 96 year old mother, who lives in Canada, near the end of that Freedom Trail I mentioned before, and I in France, watch this war unfold. We are vividly reminded about our past and the choice my parents made to cross the border from Czechoslovakia to Austria in 1968 while very similar Russian tanks and soldiers rolled into Prague to 'liberate' us. My parents also fled in search of **Freedom**, including the freedom of education for their children.

Daily, we are witnessing how the concepts of Freedom and liberty are being interpreted, used and indeed misused in unprecedented ways. In higher education, Freedom both academic freedom for individuals and autonomy for institutions are foundational values but they too can carry different weight and connotation and can be constrained in different ways in different contexts. The long history of these values and their importance is part of the history of the University of Padova, founded in 1222 by a group of students and professors from Bologna, seeking more academic freedom than what they enjoyed in their institution of origin.

During the Pandemic, we also noted that the curser with regard to individual vs collective freedoms was not always situated in the same place when we looked at policy and its implementation in various countries around the globe.

So, I also share these stories in order to underline that in increasingly internationalized universities with diverse populations we must integrate and learn from, the subjective viewpoints of all university staff and students. Their personal trajectories matter and colour their sensitivities. I am certain, that my personal experience of being different, the only kid who did not speak English, who did not go to church on Sunday, who had never tasted coca cola or ketchup before we arrived in a small village in Ontario, being this outsider has had a lasting impact on me.

The value and the necessity of inclusiveness

This brings me to the value and indeed the necessity of inclusiveness.

In the educational system, and especially in the University, it is imperative to enjoy and provide a safe space for everyone to freely express diverse viewpoints and hold reasoned arguments about all topics. This is in fact part of the responsibility that comes with the right to Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy. These freedoms confer obligations on the university and one of these obligations is to explore and encourage inclusion of various perspectives in learning and in research. It is also, the obligation to fight exclusion and injustice which stand as obstacles to achieving diversity.

Being open to other perspectives is also necessary to understand where our own beliefs and reactions come from. Thus, inclusion and diversity are not only about learning about and from the other, it is a way to hold up a mirror and learn about ourselves. As our worlds become ever more interconnected, we need to recognize that in all relations there are multiple ways of seeing, feeling, knowing and even prioritizing values, even values as fundamental as freedom.

I am an optimist by nature and by profession I believe in the power and capacity of universities to change our world. History – and here in Padua we are surrounded by it, has shown us how enduring these institutions are. They outlast numerous doomsday predictions about their disappearance because they evolve and change. In our era of rapid change, the needed transformations might be too slow, especially for students, decision makers and even the general public. So, universities are often criticized for not being relevant, responsive enough or even useful. Though the value of scientific knowledge may have been somewhat redeemed during the Pandemic, we are not out of the post-truth era yet, nor has the mistrust and indeed dislike of expertise disappeared.

But to argue that universities do not change is to ignore the numerous ways universities are indeed changing their mission and how often they do so with the intent of regaining societal trust. Of course, this is not the same in every context, however, I believe that the direction for this change, or the narrative about the needed transformation for universities of the future is similar in many parts of the world.

There is a growing, perhaps renewed emphasis on the university to play a much bigger Civic role. And part of the process of becoming a Civic University is a shift in the values that universities adopt as their cornerstones and the place they accord to these values in their mission and actions.

Values – such as those we are discussing today – freedom, inclusiveness, as well as ethics and equity among others, are being discussed, articulated and adopted in universities but they are also becoming critical frames for their interaction with society and internationally with other universities.

Why do I say this? What evidence is there about this shift?

Reading the new Mission Statement of Arqus (2022-2032), is a perfect case in point to demonstrate the commitment to the social responsibility and the Civic role being adopted by this Alliance. Arqus wants to be a ‘societal player’, focus on equity and sustainable future, be an open place of freedom and pluralism where socially engaged citizens thrive.

Global developments

Let me highlight a few other major/global developments that show this trend:

First, the UN Sustainable Development Goals adopted in 2015, unite the world in a shared commitment to and responsibility for tackling the challenges facing humanity and the planet that sustains us. This agreement constitutes an important global compact which places the responsibility for change on all nations – rich and poor - and all sectors including higher education and research.

Today, we would be hard-pressed to find a university mission statement that does not make reference to their engagement to meeting these goals in research, in curriculum and in introducing sustainable management practices into their operations. This is certainly the case of Arqus and almost all the European University Alliances; many situate the rationale for their collaboration within the context of their responsibility to address global societal, economic, environmental and cultural challenges.



Higher education is claiming its role as both a critical analyst but also a proactive change agent in the search for a sustainable future.

A second important example comes from the Magna Charta Observatory (MCO). Some thirty years after the adoption of the Magna Charta Universitatum, a Declaration adopted by more than 800 rectors over its lifetime, the MCO deemed the time had come to draft a new declaration which reflected better the current context of universities not only in Europe but globally. The

2020 Magna Charta Universitatum¹ takes into consideration the major changes that have impacted on the role of universities around the globe in the last 2-3 decades. In addition to enshrining again the central foundational values of Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy as in 1988, the 2020 MCU adds Responsibility to Society as an equally important counterweight on which universities must be based. The 2020 MCU integrates the idea that rights confer obligations. The obligation or the price to pay for freedom – is serving a societal purpose – becoming the Civic University.

A third and last sign of this shift towards more socially responsible actions that I would underline is the more critical way in which we view internationalization. After decades of taking for granted that no matter what, higher education internationalization was a good thing, the process is now questioned about its value, impact and purpose. As a result, the purpose of this process became an integral part of its definition. Internationalization is not only about academic and scientific quality. It is also about making a meaningful contribution to society².

Thus again, focusing on the why of the process by looking beyond simply the university's own internal goals.

There are many other developments that demonstrate that universities have fully abandoned the Ivory Tower, that they are adopting a more self-critical and civically engaged role to address issues of social justice, equity, sustainability and democracy. In addition to the Magna Charta, the International Association of Universities and other, more specialised networks such as the Talloires network of Engaged Universities, the University Social Responsibility Network and others are active and growing. Even the rankers are jumping on board and in 2019 Times Higher Education published the first impact ranking³ with the number of universities wishing to be 'judged' on the societal impact growing each year as well.

Still, there are numerous books and articles about what is wrong with universities and how they need to change. So, in addition to arguing that universities are already shifting their focus towards a more relevant and socially responsible purpose, let me cite a recent thought-provoking book by Chris Brinks, former Vice Chancellor of Newcastle University in the UK, and of Stellenbosch University in South Africa. In his book, Brink not only examines universities critically,

¹ MCU 2020: <http://www.magna-charta.org/magna-charta-universitatum/mcu-2020>

² Internationalization of Higher Education, De Wit, H. Hunter, F., Howard, L. Egron-Polak, E., 2015, study completed for the EU Parliament, available:

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/540370/IPOL_STU\(2015\)540370_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/540370/IPOL_STU(2015)540370_EN.pdf)

³ For information on the THE impact ranking: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings>

but also points to strategies that will take universities even further towards fulfilling their civic responsibilities without sacrificing quality, inclusion and diversity or the pursuit of excellence.

In his book *The Soul of a University*⁴, Brink challenges universities to balance out their quasi-exclusive preoccupation with excellence by placing the purpose they serve on an equal footing. His book invites universities to focus as much on what they are good at – which is of course about the pursuit of excellence, as on what they are good for, in other words, their purpose, especially their purpose to society. He attributes the public’s critical view of universities to the fact that they make it impossible to see how their expertise benefits everyone. For Brink, the educational trickle-down effect does not work and the knowledge gap has become too big.

But in higher education, striving to be good at something and to be good for something is not a zero-sum game as both parts reinforce each other. In Brink’s view quality, is inseparable from equality and in turn, equality is inseparable from diversity - the second important concept for our discussion today, namely inclusiveness through access.

Universities are complex and multifaceted institutions and their development is anchored in the national, and in Europe, increasingly regional context. Their freedom is not absolute and the constraints imposed are often contextual. The national or regional policy and regulatory frameworks often dictate what is expected of them. These expectations have been highly economic in nature in recent decades – labour market needs, competitiveness, international attractiveness, technological innovation etc. More recently, and the European Universities initiative is an example of this, social justice, cultural, environmental and equity dimensions are taking a much larger place in the expected role of universities.

As Arqus demonstrates very well, universities are shifting their attention and widening the scope of their responsibilities to include more than placing high in rankings, securing more of the international student market share, responding to the short-term needs of industry, among other preoccupations. They are focusing on strategies and actions they need to take in order to eliminate inequalities and exclusion based on race, gender, ethnic origins, socio-economic status or age.

But inclusiveness in higher education to be sustainable as a policy needs to be about more than a response to external expectations. It is also about the recognition that inclusiveness and its consequent diversity is the road to excellence and relevance. As we turn more and more to

⁴ Brink, Chris., ‘The Soul of a University: Why excellence is not enough’, Bristol University Press, UK, 2018

challenge-based learning and research, the inclusion of many viewpoints is necessary. Just as meeting most global challenges requires multidisciplinary approaches, so do our curriculum and research efforts need the multiplicity of perspectives and lived realities that a diverse student, faculty and staff population bring to the university.

‘Exploiting’ diversity in the positive sense of the word though is not without obstacles and difficulties. Respect, openness, self-analysis, and empathy can only be instilled in graduates, if these values are the ethos of the institution as a whole. And accessibility and choice for learners is insufficient if the environment into which they are admitted is not geared for retention and their success. As the IAU 2008 Statement on Equitable Access and Success⁵ states - access without a reasonable chance of success is an empty promise.

For inclusiveness to be more than a laudable goal and become reality in the university or an Alliance of universities such as in Arqus, means a transformation in all aspects of the institutions. It needs to be reflected in the hiring and promotion processes, outreach and student recruitment, admission and counselling, curriculum, the pedagogical approach, the research agenda and the external, including international, relations of institutions. The Arqus action line devoted to access, inclusiveness and diversity is very much in line with this comprehensive approach.

In today’s world, it seems to me that universities do not have a choice. They need public support and trust and to keep or gain it, they must meet the needs of highly diverse populations and respond to societal expectations.

Let me conclude by citing a UNESCO-IESALC report about these expectations, based on a global consultation on the future of higher education. The report is entitled Pathways to 2050 and beyond⁶ and its message is very clear. Respondents call for higher education to improve quality of life, bring about social justice, care for the environment and place values such as equity, inclusion, ethics among others at the centre of accessible and affordable higher education for all.

Arqus, in its multiple action lines and especially by exploring and addressing the issues of freedom and access in this Annual Conference is clearly on track to fulfill these expectations. Congratulations on your hard work and thank you for having me join you for this conference.

⁵ Equitable access, success and quality in Higher Education: A Policy Statement by the International Association of Universities, 2008, available: <https://www.iau-aiu.net/Policy-Statements>

⁶ Pathways to 2050 and Beyond: Findings from a public consultation on the future of Higher Education, UNESCO-IESALC, available: <https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/publicaciones-2/>

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A Czech-born Canadian, Eva Egron-Polak studied in Canada and France. She was Secretary General of the International Association of Universities from 2002 to 2017. Prior to becoming IAU Secretary General, she held various positions at Universities Canada, including as Vice President, International.



She has been, and continues to serve as member of many Boards and International Advisory Committees of organizations such as the Magna Charta Observatory, the Global Access to Postsecondary Education initiative, the University of Granada and Arqus. She has consulted for the OECD, the European Commission, the Qatar Foundation, the World Bank and UNESCO.

Eva Egron-Polak initiated and co-authored the IAU Global Survey Reports on Internationalization of Higher Education (2010 and 2014), participated in the study on Internationalization of Higher Education for the EU Parliament (2015), and served on the drafting group of the 2020 Magna Charta Universitatum. She

has undertaken reviews of higher education in many countries including in Spain, and Egypt. She is the recipient of the *Palmes academique* from the Government of France and holds a Doctorate honoris causa from Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania and McMaster University, Canada.



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