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## Higher Education as a Change Agent: Exploring Interconnection of Academic Freedom and Sustainable Development

### Abstract

Considering the fast-changing times and mounting challenges, higher education institutions (HEIs) became recognized as important change agents in the society but at the same time became more threatened. To that end, recently Magna Charta Universitatum, a declaration stating that intellectual and moral autonomy is the hallmark of any university and a precondition for the fulfilment of its responsibilities to society has been revised to reflect the changes of global society as well as to recognise HEIs' role to address the challenges that come with change. In fact, the revised document indicates that universities acknowledge their responsibility to engage with and respond to the challenges of the world and to their local communities to benefit humanity and contribute to sustainability. In order to achieve this promise, the academic freedom (AF) of scholars as knowledge seekers and builders as well as key actors in education and social change needs to be safeguarded. The aim of this paper is to enhance consideration for relationship between AF and sustainability. Based on the scholarly literature we explore the interconnection between the two notions. The preliminary findings clearly indicate that sustainability and AF play an imperative role in HEIs. Freedom of academic voices needs to be supported to protect and promote authentic participation in public discourses and to sustainably shape future society. Meanwhile, the infringement on AF carries unwanted consequences including slow transition towards sustainability.

Keywords: academic freedom, sustainability, sustainable development goals, higher education

### Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are in a unique position in terms of their potential to make contribution to the global society. In fact, they represent critically important spaces responsible for producing and disseminating knowledge which assist in navigating an uncertain world and in nurturing conscious and carrying citizens dedicated to social wellbeing and achievement of sustainable development goals (SDGs). Spooner (2023, para. 10) suggests that universities should be rather viewed as multiversities since they are:

*immensely diverse and quite adept at integrating a variety of conflicting demands and purposes: from fostering ground-breaking scientific research and transmitting and critiquing knowledge to supplying teachers for our schools and medical personnel to our hospitals.*

In fact, HEIs fulfill many roles providing social, economic and environmental benefits to glocal communities.

As indicated in UNESCO (2022, p. 19) report, the importance of HEIs in global progress towards the SDGs is significant. Without HEIs input towards the 2030 Agenda, it will be difficult if not impossible, to achieve the global goals (GG):

*HEIs have accumulated knowledge and research procedures that can both explain and contribute to solving the main ecological, economic and social problems that face societies both locally and globally. The academic freedom they profess and defend, as well as their normative structure and ethical principles, have allowed most HEIs to be oriented towards an understanding of our world's problems and in many cases towards possible solutions to some of them. HEIs have drawn on this knowledge, produced globally, to design their educational programmes and are training new generations of professionals with knowledge, skills and ethical principles that it is hoped will guide their professional decisions and actions. As aspirational, free institutions, HEIs in general are particularly open to novel and critical thinking and therefore also represent unique intellectual spaces for rethinking sustainable development.*

HEIs' strength as agent of change lies in offering a collective space to connect with countries, cultures, and disciplines while exploring plural ways of thinking, knowing and acting. A vital activity to address common challenges through achieving GG and thus make our future sustainable socially, environmentally and economically. It is essential to recognize that for HEIs to serve as change agents, AF of scholars as knowledge seekers and builders as well as key actors in social change needs to be safeguarded. UNESCO (2017, p. 6) report states that:

*based on the principles of academic freedom, higher education provides a protected space for independent and historically informed reflections, which is both, oriented towards the generation of new knowledge and towards contributing to meeting societal challenges.*

AF is an integral component not only of a democratic society but also of a sustainable society. AF assures honest unrestricted flow of information and innovation without interference of the State and other external authorities. It can be deduced that sustainability is an expression of AF and HEIs' commitment to address social challenges. UNESCO (2022, p. 60) report also indicates that because of AF, HEIs are in privileged position to provide bold and novel contributions towards achievement of SDGs. Despite the significant pressures on academic work caused by intensified academic capitalism, marketization of access and competition for status through rankings and metrics, most HEIs retain enough autonomy in their academic activities (teaching, researching and community engagement) to critique the status quo and the hegemonic power. At the same time, it is important to recognize that in many contexts AF is severely constrained.

### **Current status of sustainability in HEIs**

The scale and severity of human influence on social systems and the planet is worrisome in terms of wellbeing and sustainability. As explained by Stephens et al. (2008), throughout the history HEIs paid a crucial role in society for advancing science, however due to current social issues, their role of advancing science in practical and applicable ways maximized. As clearly indicated by UNESCO (2017, p. 3):

*Sustainability Science requires important new capacities of individual scientists for integrated critical analysis and foresight; the ability to cope with systems thinking,*

*changing environments, risks and insecurity; and the capacity to recognize and address diverse values as well as conflicts of goals and interests, to empathize and work responsibly and collectively in diverse partnerships. Such capacities need to be strengthened through all forms of education.*

The term ‘sustainability’ defined by various individuals and institutions differs creating space for flexibility but also ambiguity. It is also important to mention that the interpretation of the term may differ across cultures and contexts. As accurately stated by Wals and Jickling (2002, p. 227):

*Sustainability is as complex as life itself; hence, it differs over time and space and it can be discussed at different levels of aggregation and viewed through different windows.*

Multitude of academic activities that take place at HEIs offer variety of ways to engage in fostering sustainable practices, facilitating sustainable long-term goals, and applying scientific knowledge to create social change. As suggested by Stephens et al. (2008, p. 321), higher education can: model sustainable practices for society; teach students the skills of integration, synthesis, and systems-thinking and how to cope with complex problems; conduct use-inspired, real-world problem-based research; promote and enhance engagement between individuals and institutions both within and outside higher education to resituate universities as transdisciplinary agents.

With all the potential at hand, relying on current scholarly literature, it is evident that norms steering HEIs, namely driving forces of marketisation and the increasing focus on rankings, which drives up competition between academics and institutions do not align with principles of sustainability. It is unsettling yet vital to realize that this kind of neoliberal approach promoting elitism and unhealthy competition is not effective long-term. Some scholars (Ferrer-Balas et al., 2008) argue that in order for HEIs to contribute to social sustainability they would have to first invest in their own internal change.

According to scholars like Stephens et al. (2008, p. 323), there is a need to embrace sustainability science as an emerging field relying on

*interdisciplinary research that internalizes the link between knowledge and action, integrates social and physical sciences, and calls for the training of individuals to be able to deal with the complexity and interconnectedness associated with the major sustainability challenges facing society.*

UNESCO (2017, p. 1) report elaborates that sustainability science

*can be geared towards the generation of basic knowledge, towards applied technology or towards sociocultural innovation as well as towards new governance or social and economic models. Sustainability Science is an expression of both academic freedom and of academic responsibility towards societal issues.*

## **The situation and main problems with AF**

Before overviewing the key challenges facing AF, some conceptual clarification is needed. First, the distinction between institutional autonomy and AF needs to be clarified. Although many references in the literature portray these two values in different ways (one as a condition of the other or as parts of each other), we argue that they are closely related concepts, which cannot exist independently of each other (Rónay & Niemczyk, 2022). However, when Kováts and Rónay (2023) set up their model of AF, they identified two conceptual components: essential and supporting elements, with institutional autonomy falling into the latter category. The essential

elements are freedom of a) teaching, b) research, c) learning, and d) dissemination. Between these elements and the supportive elements, self-governance, which means the decision-making and the inevitable involvement of the academic community in academic affairs, can be seen as a transitional area. Autonomy as a supportive element and employment security, and, in a broader context, financial security ensures all the above-mentioned elements. Therefore, AF is the individual's right, and autonomy is the institutional right.

These conceptual elements are subject to the risk of restriction, individually and in complex ways. One classic phenomenon is the State intervention, which can be direct (either by threatening the security of existence or the freedom of the person) or by creating a system of rules and conditions in which the restriction is often hidden and takes the form of self-censorship (Kováts & Rónay, 2022). Under pressure from the State or even independent of it, the institution itself can also restrict AF even though the HEI enjoys a high degree of autonomy.

In liberal democracies and in the new authoritarian or illiberal states, as well as in dictatorships, the reasons for restricting AF may vary. In the former, the discussion of certain topics, defined often as sensitive, is prevented on the protection of fundamental rights and human rights. This may include restriction of certain topics during conference discussions or themes addressed with students within the classroom. Barriers may also be built via taboo or negatively viewed topics by the authorities, which often include discourses about gender issues and LGBTQI+ rights in illiberal countries, while these can also be politics, religion, and ideology in a dictatorship. It is essential to mention that all these impositions have financial implications for HEIs and individual scholars who may not obtain funding if engaged in the above-mentioned sensitive topics.

### **Bond between AF and sustainability**

As evident in the previous sections, essential elements of AF are necessary if academics and HEIs aim to contribute to SDGs. Sedlacek (2013, p. 76) notes that:

*Universities fulfil a central role in sustainable development processes since they are key players in both the individual as well as the social or collective learning systems. Academic freedom enables universities to explore ideas which, especially in a comprehensive or integrative approach to sustainability, are important to cope with the trade-offs between economic, social, and environmental goals.*

In fact, HEIs are expected to be flagships in sharing the idea of sustainability and leading the realization of GG. To that end, they have to be role models in sustainability processes in all academic activities including sustainability-oriented curricula and fostering green university (Lattu & Cai, 2020). Ekwueme et al. (2016) add that sustainability education is essential not only for ensuring a better future but also to serve as a tool for educating about human rights and social justice, which are part of the conditions necessary to achieve sustainability. To this end, AF is required for sensitive topics even when against the state's interest (e.g., environmentally damaging investments, harmful effects of industrial production, use of alternative energy sources) to be discussed in research and teaching.

Potential tensions between AF in teaching and SDGs are less visible. However, the tensions between AF in research and pursuit of solving sustainability issues often puts pressure on researchers. Meanwhile, AF is essential to ensure restriction-free discussions and sharing of information to responsibly achieve sustainability. The

interconnection between AF and sustainability becomes more complex if we approach it from the supportive elements of AF.

In terms of employment security, it can be stated that academics facing direct or indirect existential consequences, would be hindered by them and so would be the sustainability. The protection of their employment's future may result in their self-censorship, which reflects restriction of their AF. Tran and colleagues (2023) underline that financial freedom's importance as a condition for AF without SDGs' achievement is difficult. While the social mission of higher education has become a global responsibility – including the responsibility for sustainability – the financial conditions for this have also changed (Vasilescu et al., 2010). The transformation of the higher education environment leads to a diversification of funding and, thus, financial exposure. With diminishing public support, there is a growing need to involve market partners that are often involved in activities that threaten sustainability, which may place researchers and HEIs in difficult position. The increasingly market-oriented and market-driven society is weakening the defining characteristic of AF, which can hinder the ability of achieving sustainability (Sedlacek, 2013).

Another aspect of the relationship between sustainability and AF lies in the university itself as being a sustainable organisation. This means mainstreaming sustainability in the university's operations, integrating sustainability into education (including sustainability courses and topics in the curricula), extending research interests towards sustainability, and engaging in research in a sustainable way. In some cases, this means not only a commitment to sustainability but also abstinence of unsustainable practices relevant for AF. Furthermore, it also implies a transformation of the organisational culture. Adams et al. (2018) argue that AF, in particular, makes students, as an intensively fluctuating population, less able to adapt to the culture change required for sustainability. The same authors (2018, p. 440) further claim that *sustainable university requires individuals who behave sustainably: autonomous, self-regulating, and responsible*. They conclude that a sustainable culture of an organisation requires the community's mutual considerations. Namely, these autonomous individuals must transform the organisation and its culture together through mutual decision making. In order to accomplish that the university needs the academic staff's self-governance, which is the elementary condition of AF. Although the relationship between sustainability and AF is complex, they can strengthen each other.

### **Concluding remarks: Against conformity and pro sustainability**

HEIs have the potential and responsibility to address the contemporary challenges to benefit humanity and the planet sustainably. As stated earlier, to achieve this, the AF of scholars as knowledge seekers and builders needs to be protected. Undeniably, focus on sustainability in HEIs is not an option but rather a necessity if they are to serve as agents of change for glocal society. This means saying no to conformity and yes to AF.

António Nóvoa, one of the authors of the 2021 UNESCO report, emphasised the uniqueness of HEIs stating that their power and potential lies in their unique position. Implying that the day they lose their specificity, allowing themselves to be governed by market rules or commodification trends, they will become useless (UNESCO, 2021). We would add that when HEIs allow for AF to be restricted they will no longer serve as agents of change for a sustainable society. In short, we can state that AF is the necessary condition for sustainability thus for achievement of GG.

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