

THE UNIVERSITY CANNOT HAVE A POLITICAL VOICE

Jeroen Huisman, Ethical Forum, Brussels, 1 December 2022

OUTLINE

- Hypothesis
- Examples that speak to that hypothesis
- Those examples show that most university statements/positions are actually non-political
- ... or political (small “p”)
- Explain why this may be the case (and why that may be a good thing?)

HYPOTHESIS

Universities primarily use institutional and technical arguments in situations that “smell like politics”

Institutional arguments: “taken-for-granted” societal values and virtues: freedom of speech, research to improve life (animal testing!), education for citizenship, access, equity, etc.

Instrumental arguments: references to laws and regulations (codes, protocols), safety issues

In fact, universities are masters in **de**-politicisation.

EXAMPLES

An UGhent student association invites Filip De Winter to speak about his new book, that deals with the rather controversial theme of “the great replacement” (*omvolking*).

Ghent University: “I underline the importance of freedom of speech and will only limit this freedom on the basis of legal restrictions”

Added: “for safety reasons the event has been moved to another building”

EXAMPLES

Earlier ... on the same case:

Antwerp University: “Freedom of speech is the fundament of democracy ... preventive censoring is not possible (constitution) ... anyone having a concern, is invited to attend and ask critical questions. The university will not attend for this could be interpreted as a sign of appreciation ... the university calls upon everyone to make this a peaceful event”

EXAMPLES

Elsewhere ... various universities revoke honorary degrees

Robert Gordon University (2011): “Recognition of his business acumen, entrepreneurial vision and the long-term future his company is planning in the North-east of Scotland ... our students can learn much from his business acumen, drive and focus”

Robert Gordon University (2015): “Mr X has made a number of statements that are wholly incompatible with the ethos and values of the university”

source: WonkHE (Paul Greatrix)

EXAMPLES

... various universities do NOT revoke honorary degrees

Utrecht University (1986): “Her contribution to human rights”. A stimulus to reconsider the university’s relationship with the Apartheidsregime.

(1989): No reason to withdraw the doctorate, presumption of innocence. Furthermore, “the regulations are not clear about revokement”.

EXAMPLES

Ghent University (2016): “The situation over there [safety] is such that we are forced to forbid our staff to travel to Turkey for business reasons”

Borderline case:

VUB (2022, Djalali case): “There is a battle for **freedom** and **women’s rights** and **against oppression** in Iran. ... A religious norm is something a person chooses and never imposes on someone else ... A [warm] university that actively shapes **values of freedom and equality** and stands up if needed.” **INSTITUTIONAL!**

VUB (2022?) “We call on the **Iranian leaders** to stop this **barbarity**. We ask the whole world to **keep pressure on Iran** to stop the **degrading and unjust treatment** of Djalali. He has been **held unjustly** and in **shameful conditions** for more than six years. Djalali must be released so that **his family can finally embrace him again**”

INSTITUTIONAL and **POLITICAL**

MORE EXAMPLES

Mampaey, J., & Huisman, J. (2016). Defensive stakeholder management in European universities: an institutional logics perspective, *Studies in Higher Education*

Bottom-line: Universities use conflict-reducing and de-politicitation strategies when the liberal academic logic is attacked or criticised

WHY?

Pragmatic instrumentalism: the university cannot take a political side, given the plurality of its internal and external stakeholders (**accountability**)

Institutional argument: It is the “only” way ...

Universities (as many other organisations) are in an “iron cage”, it is obliged to invest in staying **legitimate** (= perception/assumption that its actions are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions)

COULD/SHOULD THIS BE DIFFERENT?

If universities were to be political:

- It would lose support from key stakeholders
- It would lose face in relation to key (institutional) expectations (however generic, vague, intangible these may be ...)

This does not mean universities are politically toothless: they educate students as critical citizens and allow their academics to speak truth to power

THANK YOU

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