

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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