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Sjur Bergan

Independent expert

THE FUNDAMENTAL VALUES OF THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA: WHAT ARE THEY, AND HOW DID THEY DEVELOP?

Abstract. The European Higher Education Area has defined six fundamental values: academic freedom, academic integrity, institutional autonomy, student and staff participation in higher education governance, public responsibility *for* higher education, and public responsibility *of* higher education. The article describes the process leading to the definition of these values as well as the circumstances that meant that these values could no longer be taken for granted. Instead, in the space of a few years, a consensus emerged that the values need to be a policy priority. Along with the list of fundamental values, the Ministers of the EHEA adopted fairly extensive statements outlining their understanding of these values. Nevertheless, continued consideration is required both to develop a better understanding of the many issues that influence the way in which fundamental values are implemented and on developing arrangements for assessing how the values are put into practice in EHEA Member States.. Many of the values relate to various aspects of the relationship between public authorities and the higher education community, in particular higher education institutions.

Introduction

In the communiqués adopted since 2018 (Bologna Process 2018, 2020a, 2024a), the Ministers of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) adopted a set of fundamental values, defined as

- Academic freedom;
- Academic integrity;
- Institutional autonomy;
- Student and staff participation in higher education governance;
- Public responsibility for higher education;
- Public responsibility of higher education.

In statements adopted as appendices to the Rome and Tirana Communiqués (Bologna Process 2020b, 2024b), the Ministers outlined their understanding of these fundamental values. The three communiqués and two statements do, however, give little indication of the process that led the EHEA to an agreement on its values. Before taking a closer look at how the six values are understood, it is therefore worth providing an overview of the process (Bergan and Matei 2025).

A long process toward a common understanding

From its outset, the Bologna Process gave importance to its fundamental values. In 1999, it was perhaps natural that a declaration adopted in Bologna (Bologna Process 1999) give pride of place to the Magna Charta Universitatum (Magna Charta Observatory 1988), which had been adopted by European Rectors in the same city eleven years earlier. In so doing, the Ministers identified academic freedom and institutional autonomy as cornerstones of the Bologna Process, which would lead to the establishment of the European Higher Education Area in 2010 (Bologna Process 2010), the year in which Kazakhstan acceded to it.

Representatives of students and staff were not officially present in Bologna in 1999, but representatives of the European Students Union (then known as ESIB – European Students' Information Bureau) were invited to the next meeting of Ministers, held in Prague in 2001. In

the Communiqué adopted at this meeting, Ministers underlined that "the involvement of universities and other higher education institutions and of students as competent, active and constructive partners in the establishment and shaping of a European Higher Education Area is needed and welcomed" and that "students should participate in and influence the organisation and content of education at universities and other higher education institutions" (Bologna Process 2001: 3 - 4).

In other words, in 2001 we see a budding reference to what later became a more precise reference to student and staff participation in higher education governance. This was further strengthened by a statement in the Berlin Communiqué to the effect that "[s]tudents are full partners in higher education governance" and a call on "institutions and student organisations to identify ways of increasing actual student involvement in higher education governance" (Bologna Process 2003: 5). We had to wait until the Bergen Communiqué, however, to see a reference to staff participation as well as the inclusion of Education International (EI) as a member of the Bologna Follow Up Group (Bologna Process 2005: 6). To my recollection, this delay reflects the fact that EI was less present in the European policy debate at the time than was ESU rather than any considered view on the relative importance of student and staff participation.

In 2003, Ministers changed the criteria for accession to the Bologna Process from participation in the EU programs Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci, and Tempus-Cards (Bologna Process 2001: 3) to all countries parties to the European Cultural Convention (Council of Europe 1954) provided that their competent public authorities "declare their willingness to pursue and implement the objectives of the Bologna Process in their own systems of higher education" (Bologna Process 2003: 8).

Even if the objectives of the Bologna Process were outlined in the successive declarations and communiqués adopted by Ministers, this provision made it necessary to identify the specific objectives to which applicant countries would need to commit. In a largely forgotten document (Bologna Process 2004), the BFUG spelled out its understanding and also adopted a procedure for assessing new applications. The BFUG adopted five "principles" to which new applicants – and presumably also all the countries that had joined the Bologna Process between 1999 and 2003 – would adhere. The list includes three elements that were later included among the fundamental values of the EHEA (institutional autonomy, student (but still not staff) participation in higher education governance, and public responsibility *for* (but not yet *of*) higher education. In addition, the list includes two elements that were later not included among the six fundamental values but that were nevertheless of crucial importance to the EHEA and that were later the subject of a specific strategy (mobility of students and staff; Bologna Process 2012a) and a set of principles and guidelines (the social dimension of the EHEA; Bologna Process 2020c).

While three fundamental values were included, academic freedom was not, even if there was a reference to it from the very beginning of the Bologna Process. Even with the benefit of hindsight, I am unable to explain this oversight, except by saying that it was most likely seen as subsumed under institutional autonomy, which was again seen, at least indirectly, as a reference to the Magna Charta Universitatum. This is perhaps not a very satisfactory explanation but at the time, academic freedom and institutional autonomy were often considered - wrongly – as different aspects of the same value.

There were further references to values and principles in the subsequent communiqués up to and including the Bucharest Communiqué (Bologna Process 2012b), but there was no mention of further fundamental values. The Budapest-Vienna Declaration (Bologna Process 2010), which formally established the EHEA, refers to "academic freedom as well as autonomy and accountability of higher education institutions as principles of the European Higher Education Area and underline the role the higher education institutions play in fostering

peaceful democratic societies and strengthening social cohesion", acknowledges "the key role of the academic community - institutional leaders, teachers, researchers, administrative staff and students - in making the European Higher Education Area a reality" Bologna Process 2010: 2), and also refers to the EHEA as "a unique partnership between public authorities, higher education institutions, students and staff, together with employers, quality assurance agencies, international organisations and European institutions" and one in which "higher education institutions, supported by strongly committed staff, can fulfil their diverse missions in the knowledge society" (*ibid*.: 1).

Even if almost all Declarations and Communiqués adopted between 1999 and 2012 include some reference to values, there was little discussion at Ministerial conferences or in the BFUG and its working groups of how these values could be fostered, and there was no attempt to establish a coherent list of values. Different values and principles were mentioned in various communiqués but there was not attempt to establish an authoritative or consolidated list.

This is a reflection of the fact that up to and including 2012, the values of the EHEA were largely taken for granted. In the space of three years, by the Yerevan Conference (Bologna Process 2015a), this situation would change.

Toward 2015, there was a perception that the fundamental values on which the EHEA builds were under threat. Partly, this was caused by political developments in some member states, and the 2018 Bologna Implementation Report identifies three: Hungary, Russia, and Turkey (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2018: 42). These were the most blatant but not the only examples of situations that gave rise to concern. Belarus again applied for accession to the EHEA, after the country had been dissuaded from applying in 2005 and rejected in the run up to the Ministerial conference in 2012 (Bologna Process 2012c: 24 – 25). In 2015, its application was accepted but with a Roadmap that also included explicit reference to fundamental values (Bologna Process 2015b: 2 - 3). A broader phenomenon was the emergence and consolidation of populist movements (Müller 2017) that openly disregarded the importance of academic knowledge and understanding as a basis for societal decision making and that questioned the values of democracy itself , in at least one case by using the contradictory label of "illiberal democracy". The danger of disregarding academic research became very obvious when the COVID pandemic struck and a vocal minority of public opinion not only questioned the need for and benefits of vaccines but in some cases also subjected academics working on vaccines to pressure and intimidation (Bergan *et al.* 2021, Birchall and Knight 2022, Lynas 2020).

The renewed attention to fundamental values and the realization that they could no longer be taken for granted led the BFUG to launch work on defining and exploring these values. From a first discussion at its meeting in Bratislava in December 2016 (Bologna Process 2016), the BFUG arrived at the six values adopted by Ministers and, with the help of a dedicated working group, the more detailed statements adopted in 2020 and 2024. Five of the values had been listed in one or more communiqués prior to 2018, whereas academic integrity was brought into the debate only in the preparation of the Paris Communiqué (Bologna Process 2018). As noted, some values and principles remain important in the EHEA but are nevertheless not included among its fundamental values.

The fundamental values of the EHEA

The six fundamental values of the EHEA are open to some interpretation, and Ministers also adopted a set of statements that outline a common understanding of them. The statements are worth reading in full (Bologna Process 2020b, 2024b), but they may be summarized as follows.

Academic freedom is seen as the freedom of academic staff and students to engage in research, teaching, learning and communication in and with society without interference nor fear of reprisal.

Academic integrity is understood as a set of behaviors and attitudes in the academic community internalizing and furthering compliance with ethical and professional principles and standards in learning, teaching, research, governance, outreach, and any other tasks related to the missions of higher education.

Institutional autonomy is defined as the will and ability of higher education institutions to fulfil their missions without undue interference and to set and implement their own priorities and policies as concerns organization, finance, staffing and academic affairs. It is a precondition for academic freedom and a prerequisite for higher education institutions to fulfil both their democratic mission and to provide high quality learning, teaching and research for the benefit of society.

The participation of students and staff in higher education governance is in some ways the most difficult value to define briefly. It encompasses the right of students and staff to organize autonomously, in accordance with the principle of partnership and collegiality, without pressure or undue interference; to elect and be elected in open, free and fair elections; have their views represented and taken into account; initiate and participate in all debates and decision-making in all governing bodies; and, through their representative organizations, be duly involved in issues concerning the governance and further development of the relevant higher education institutions and system.

Public responsibility *for* higher education designates a set of duties, mainly exercised at the level of the national higher education system, which public authorities must fulfil as part of their overall responsibility for the education sector and society as a whole, whereas public responsibility *of* higher education refers to the obligations of the higher education community to the broader society of which the higher education community is a part. The former is mainly exercised by public authorities and the latter mainly by the higher education community organized through higher education institutions.

The understanding of each value is described separately but Ministers underline that the six values constitute a coherent whole and cannot be put into practice selectively. For example, a country that allows a high degree of institutional autonomy but only a low degree of academic freedom, such as by encouraging autonomous but authoritarian institutional leadership, cannot be said to fully implement the fundamental values of the EHEA.

Challenges to implementation

Having obtained agreement by all members of the EHEA on a set of common fundamental values is no small achievement. It does, of course, not solve all problems. To the contrary, the fundamental values moved to center stage of the EHEA because they are being challenged to a greater degree today than in the early stages of the Bologna Process. The examples of high profile violations identified in the 2018 Bologna Implementation Report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2018: 42) have unfortunately been supplemented by others since then. These are mostly what we may call “headline grabbing “ cases, in other words cases that are seen as newsworthy in either the country in which the violations occur, in other countries, or both. Such cases are often political in nature and concern instances in which public authorities seek to restrict the right of institutions or individuals to exercise their rights.

Therefore, public authorities and the higher education communities must continue to work together to ensure that the fundamental values are put into practice. This will require work in each country as well as continued discussion at European level among both policy makers and academic researchers.

This discussion will need to focus on, the relationship between public authorities and the higher education community. In principle, this looks straightforward: public authorities are

responsible for the higher education system, while higher education institutions are responsible for their own learning, teaching, and research. In practice, there are many gray zones. While public authorities would most likely be acting within their competence if they decide to establish a new institution or study program in an underserved part of the country or in an academic discipline where the government considers that the country needs increased competence, such as Artificial Intelligence, are there limits to the government's margin of maneuver? Can it disregard quality concerns or give very precise indications of what should be taught or researched? By way of example, in 2021 the then Norwegian government decided to establish a "decentralized" teacher training program in a small locality in the norther part of the country. Even if the decision was ultimately to establish a study program under the auspices of an existing institution rather than establish a new institution (Fanghol and Vartdal 2021), it ran against the advice of the Norwegian quality assurance agency (Schei 2021) as well as the preferences of the institution ultimately made responsible for the program. While there is an argument for saying that the comet public authorities act within their competence if they decide to establish a study program or institution in an underserved part of the country, it is much less clear that they act within their competence if, in so doing, they disregard the concerns of the quality assurance agency and the institution that will have to run the study program.

In this particular case, the funding for the new study program was not reallocated from other parts of the education budget. More broadly, a legitimate question is nevertheless whether there are there limits to the extent to which public authorities may redirect funding to specific institutions or programs. Are there, or should there be, criteria for the proportion of program or project specific versus basic or lump sum public funding?

Not least, at a time when legitimate concerns about national security interests are increasing, what is the proper relationship between these concerns, the ability of universities to hire the staff they consider best qualified regardless of their nationality and background, and the ability of staff and students to conduct their research and publish their findings without, as the EHEA definition has it, "without interference nor fear of reprisal". What is the proper balance between the duty of public authorities to ensure the safety of their country and protect it against espionage and even terrorism and the right of the academic community to pursue its teaching and research without interference?

Institutional autonomy has sometimes been thought of as the legal relationship between public authorities and higher education institutions. This is of course too simplistic but legal regulations are important to putting the fundamental values into practice. Laws and regulations can both hinder and foster the fundamental values of higher education. Most countries have specific laws on either higher education or on education more broadly. It is not sufficient, however, that such laws be compatible with fundamental values. Other laws also impact on the way in which institutions function and individual academics and students work. Few would argue that the principle of institutional autonomy would exempt universities from observing public safety regulations for laboratories, for example, or dispense them from following public regulations for financial accountability. Few would also argue that academics do not need to be protected by labor legislation. However, how could labor legislation setting strict limits on working hours be adapted to situations where members of the academic community periodically need to work long and intensive hours to complete an experiment or complete a publication? If higher education is a special case that requires specific regulations or exemptions from general legislation, how can the specificity of higher education be argued convincingly, and to which cases does it apply?

The importance of fundamental values may be argued using two sets of arguments, and both are important and valid. One the one hand, they cannot be exercised fully except in a democracy, and societies cannot be fully democratic unless they honor the fundamental academic values. On the other hand, learning, teaching and research cannot be of high quality

unless members of the academic community can challenge established theories and received wisdom.

We are, however, not talking about freedom of speech generally but rather about the freedom to think outside of the box while observing the standards of the pertinent academic discipline(s). A professor of literature or sociology may be free to maintain that the earth is flat without worrying about the consequences for his or her academic career, even if many people may find it difficult to take a person espousing such views seriously. If an astrophysicist were to maintain that the earth is flat, this would be such a marked breach of the standards of the disciplines that he or she would most likely be unable to continue as an academic – unless they were able to argue successfully that the standards of the discipline need to be revised.

In this case, the likelihood of convincing other astrophysicists that the earth is flat is exceedingly small. There are, however, cases in which the standards of a discipline have been revised, sometimes in the face of strong opposition from the academic community. The revision of medical standards of hygiene on the basis of the work by Dr. Ignaz Semmelweiss is an obvious example. Medicine is at the same time an example of a discipline where hazardous theory and practice can have serious and immediate consequences, as we saw during the COVID pandemic, where a very small proportion of the medical community provided "arguments" to a vocal populist anti-vax movement with sometimes lethal results. One high profile case was that of a professor of medicine, Didier Raoult, who developed a following in France even if his methods and recommendations were manifestly unsound and were condemned by the vast majority of the medical community (Lapointe 2025).

Artificial Intelligence is a young and emerging field but it is already clear that it will challenge some of the ways in which academics work. It is perhaps not equally clear in which ways it will do so. Artificial Intelligence is here to stay, so the policy debate and research should focus on how AI can be used and how we can avoid abuse. In terms of our fundamental values, AI is probably a particular challenge to academic integrity. How can academics use AI as a legitimate support for their work, and at what points can the use of AI turn into unethical practice or fraud? Can AI be a co-author, and if yes, on what conditions? Can AI be used to identify fraud and, if so, on what conditions, under what circumstances, according to what criteria, and how can cases of fraud identified by AI be assessed, to ensure that a decision to take disciplinary action is ultimately made by humans on the basis of evidence reviewed and assessed by humans?

Avoiding fraud and abuse will need to rely on a double approach. On the one hand, and most importantly, there needs to be a culture by which members of the academic community internalize ethical standards and behavior. This is largely the case today but AI may challenge this culture of ethics by making it less straightforward to determine what is proper actions and what is not. In some cases, the potential benefits to individuals if the fraud goes undetected are such that some individuals will decided to run what they may see as a modest risk of detection, whether this concerns using academic titles they have not earned, plagiarizing the work of others as part of a thesis or an article, or falsifying research results. Even where these is a well-developed culture of ethics, the academic community will therefore need to be able to sanction violations. Again, AI is a serious challenge not only because cases of fraud may be difficult to accept but also because developments are – at least currently – so rapid that keeping laws and regulations up to date is much more easily said than done.

Assessing fundamental values

One of the milestones of the European Higher Education Area was when Ministers accepted that their implementation of the goals and policies of the EHEA would be assessed by their peers on the basis of implementation reports prepared by outsiders (Bologna Process 2003: 7). Even so, many of the data on which the implementation reports are based are provided by the public authorities of the countries concerned.

Assessing the extent to which fundamental values are implemented in national education systems is even more complicated than assessing for example structural reforms. Partly this may be because the criteria are less straightforward, even if the definitions and statements adopted by Ministers give a fairly good indication of the basis for assessment. In large part, it is also due to the sensitivity of the judgment. For the vast majority of Ministers, it is easier to admit that the national qualifications frameworks is imperfect than to admit that one's country is lacking in academic freedom or in exercising the public responsibility for higher education. An imperfect qualifications framework may be seen as a temporary technical imperfection, but serious issues with the fundamental values of higher education are most likely seen as a failure of democracy with potential implications for the quality of one's higher education.

At the same time, it would be difficult to maintain that the values of the EHEA are fundamental but that the degree to which they are implemented cannot be assessed. Therefore, Ministers in 2024 stated that a reliable monitoring of implementation of fundamental values within all the education systems of the EHEA is required, welcomed the work on creating a technical monitoring framework, and asked the BFUG to report back to the 2027 Ministerial Conference (Bologna Process 2024a: 3).

The proposal referred to in the Communiqué is under development as part of the EU-financed NewFAV project. A preliminary version submitted to the 2024 Ministerial Conference (Bologna Process 2024c: 28 - 33) outlined the principles for the assessment and categorized academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and student and staff participation in higher education governance as "rights/freedoms", whereas it labeled academic integrity, public responsibility *for* higher education, and public responsibility of higher education as "duties/obligations". Within each category, the assessment will seek to establish both *de iure* protection and promotion (for all values) and *de facto* either infringements, threats, and positive developments (rights/freedoms) or fulfillments, threats, and positive developments (duties/obligations). One innovative aspect of the proposed evaluation scheme is to include "outlook". In some cases, proposed legislation or practice may change the assessment of a country's implementation for either better or worse (Matei, Crăciun, and Potapova 2025: 442). However, the prospects of change need to be followed by action. If, for example, a proposed legal amendment is flagged in one edition of the assessment but has not been adopted by the next assessment, this will be indicated as a promised in the first but as a failed promise in the second. A planned action cannot be indicated as "outlook" indefinitely.

Another potentially difficult issue is the sources of information. A country's implementation of fundamental values cannot be assessed on the basis of information provided by its public authorities alone. Therefore, other sources will also need to be used, and the New FAV project is currently exploring a system of national correspondents for all countries involved. These will need to be independent of but trusted by the public authorities responsible for higher education.

As will be seen, assessing the implementation of fundamental values is challenging, and will require both public authorities and the higher education community to exercise a considerable degree of detachment and self-criticism. This may be difficult but it is also essential to the success of the exercise and ultimately to the credibility of the EHEA.

Conclusion

Continued European cooperation in fostering the fundamental values of higher education will be essential for years to come. The reasons for this are both negative and positive. On the one hand, our political systems seem likely to remain under severe pressure for the foreseeable future, for both external and internal reasons. The geopolitical situation, as exemplified by Russia's war on Ukraine but also by other conflicts (Bergan and Uvalić-Trumbić 2025: 78 – 80), seems unlikely to improve substantially very soon. With this, the very notion of a rules

based world order will probably remain challenged. Within many countries, populist political movements – mostly of the right but in some cases also of the left – that challenge both democracy and the notion that societal decision and developments need to be based on academic knowledge seem likely to remain strong and in many cases to either maintain or gain governmental power. They also question the value of international cooperation, so that international higher education cooperation is likely to come under double fire, from those who adhere to neither higher education and research nor international cooperation. The current, second Trump Administration in the United States may be an extreme example but it is not alone.

On a more positive note, continued reflection is required to make fundamental academic values a cornerstone of our higher education policy. Developments within the EHEA demonstrate that these values can no longer be taken for granted but they also demonstrate the benefits of sustained debate and reflection. Even if some violations of our fundamental values are prominent in the news, and even if these cases concern primarily a limited group of EHEA member countries, we also need to develop a more nuanced view of the less dramatic aspects of our fundamental values. How can public authorities best be exercised in respect of these values, and how can the academic community foster them?

Finding good answers to these questions is essential to the future of the EHEA, to our democracies, and to the quality of our higher education and research. These questions concern all members of the EHEA and they should be high on our policy agenda over the coming years, beyond the 2027 EHEA Ministerial conference in Iaşi and Chişinău.

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Information about authors

Sjur Bergan - Independent education expert, Head of the Council of Europe Education Department until 2022. Member of the Bologna Follow Up group 2000 – 22 and of the Working Group on Fundamental Values 2020 – 24, currently associated with this group through the NewFAV project. Chair and co-chair of EHEA working groups on qualifications frameworks and structural reforms 2007 – 15. Author of Qualifications: Introduction to a Concept, Not By Bread Alone, and European Higher Education, Social Responsibility, and the Local Democratic Mission as well as of numerous book chapters and articles. Series editor of the Council of Europe Higher Education Series 2004 – 23. email: sjurbergan@gmail.com