

# THE FUNDAMENTAL VALUES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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## Introduction

As is well known, the Bologna Process was launched in 1999 – with a prelude at the Sorbonne in 1998 – and led to the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2010. Kazakhstan joined the EHEA in the same year.

From its outset, the Bologna Process was built on a set of values that are considered fundamental to higher education. This is indicated by the explicit mention of the Magna Charta Universitatum in the [1999 Bologna Declaration](#) as well as by the fact that the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) in [October 2004](#) stipulated that applications for further accessions would, among other things, be assessed in the light of applicants' adhesion to “the principles underpinning the Bologna Process as follows:

- Mobility of students and staff;
- Autonomous universities;
- Student participation in the governance of higher education;
- Public responsibility for higher education;
- The importance of the social dimension of the Bologna Process”.

Until some time between the Ministerial conferences held in 2012 in București and 2015 in Yerevan, the fundamental principles of the EHEA were nevertheless taken for granted and were not discussed much.

That, however, changed with political changes in Europe that put increasing pressure on these fundamental values. In 2015, Belarus was admitted to the EHEA – as the first country admitted to the EHEA after 2010 – on the basis of a [Roadmap](#) that included commitments on fundamental values. The [2018 Bologna Implementation Report](#) includes a relatively brief section (pp. 40 – 46) on values and governance in which it points to challenges in the implementation of fundamental values and concretely points to breaches in Hungary, Russia, and Turkey.

The Implementation Report also showed that assessing the implementation of the fundamental values of the EHEA is less than straightforward. Therefore, a task force was appointed in the 2018 – 20 program to suggest definitions and criteria for assessing implementation. This led to the definition and [statement](#) on academic freedom [adopted by Ministers in 2020](#) as well as to establishing a [Working Group on Fundamental Values](#) for the 2021 – 24 work period.

## The fundamental values of the EHEA

The understanding of the fundamental values of the EHEA has evolved over the years, and they are currently defined as:

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

While on the face of it, the EHEA therefore has four fundamental values, I would argue that there are in fact six, since two of the bullet points above in fact contain two separate values each.

Academic freedom is the only value that has so far been defined officially, in the 2020 Rome Communiqué, as “as 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, while mentioned in the same same breath as academic freedom, is in fact distinct from it. It designates the obligation of academics and students to conduct their research, learning, and teaching ethically and transparently. Part of the background for including academic integrity as a separate value is that Europe has experienced a series of cases in which research results have been falsified or at least tampered with or in which substantial parts of doctoral dissertation have demonstrably been plagiarized.

Academic freedom and academic integrity do, however, have elements in common: they concern the freedom and obligation of individual members of the academic community, and they include an obligation to observe the standards of the chosen academic disciplines, largely established by academic peers. The latter is a sound but not entirely unproblematic principle. In some cases, the standards of a discipline have been developed and advanced in the face of opposition from a majority of academics working within the discipline. Dr. Ignaz Semmelweiss’ assertion that doctors’ observance of standards of hygiene would dramatically improve the chances that patients would survive the treatment is a well-known example of significant progress obtained in the face of strong opposition from peers.

Institutional autonomy designates the ability and will of higher education institutions to set their own priorities independently of public or other authorities. This is a principle of which Europe has seen many violations over the past few years, with the Central European University as the perhaps most emblematic case. While the principle of institutional autonomy is straightforward, it nevertheless raises [a number of questions that need to be discussed further](#). These include the proper relationship between institutions and public authorities, the impact of general legislation – e.g. labor legislation, safety regulations, and accounting rules – and the impact of funding models.

Student and staff participation in higher education governance is a strong feature of European higher education and is well established in most EHEA countries. It must nevertheless be underlined that both students and staff must be free to elect their own representatives freely and fairly as well as to run for election. The governing bodies on which students and staff are represented must have a meaningful decision making role.

The public responsibility *for* higher education designates the responsibility of public authorities to support and foster the development of higher education. In a [Recommendation from 2007](#), the Council of Europe has developed the concept of public responsibility further and states that “public authorities have:

- exclusive responsibility for the framework within which higher education and research is conducted;
- leading responsibility for ensuring effective equal opportunities to higher education for all citizens, as well as ensuring that basic research remains a public good;
- substantial responsibility for financing higher education and research, the provision of higher education and research, as well as for stimulating and facilitating financing and provision by other sources within the framework developed by public authorities”.

The public responsibility *of* higher education designates the responsibility of the academic community – institutions, faculty, and students – to contribute to the development of society on the basis of learning, teaching, and research. This responsibility includes working with local communities as well as seeking solutions to major societal issues like social inclusion, fair economic development, and climate change. The Council of Europe works on these issues through a project on the [democratic mission of higher education](#).

### **Why are fundamental values important?**

The two most common arguments in favor of fundamental values are democracy and quality. No society can be fully democratic if principles like academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and student and staff participation in higher education are not observed, and the fundamental values cannot be fully implemented except in democratic societies. The academic community can neither advance our state of knowledge and understanding nor contribute to the development of our societies unless it can speak truth to power.

At the same time, high quality learning, teaching, and research also rely on scholars and students being free and willing to question reduced thought, as the example of Semmelweis shows. There is a saying, often attributed to Isaac Newton, that we “stand on the shoulders of giants”, which points to the fact that our current state of academic knowledge and understanding builds on the achievements of our predecessors but also that we take their achievements further.

Ultimately, the fundamental values of higher education are essential because the degree to which we observe them defines who we are, as an academic community and a societies.

### **Fundamental values in Central Asia**

While the fundamental values are universal, the way in which they are implemented needs to be adapted the conditions and traditions of different societies. Central Asia has the same need and capacity for high quality learning, teaching, and research as any other part of the world, but Central Asia needs to decide how the fundamental values can best be implemented in the specific regional and local context. Adaptation, however, means deciding how the values can best be put to practice in a given context. Adaptation should not be used as an excuse for not implementing values that some may see as “uncomfortable”. Adaption is a question of “how”, not of “whether”.

## **Mutual support**

The initiative by Kazakhstan to establish a Central Asian Higher Education Area is a promising one and deserves our full support. The EHEA may serve as inspiration but Central Asia needs to decide for itself how the Central Asian Higher Education Area can best be developed and implemented. The EHEA may point to some possible road signs, but Central Asia will do the traveling.

Like the EHEA, the Central Asian Higher Education Area will require that the countries and academic communities that constitute it support each other. There will be a need for some kind of governance body, which in the EHEA is the BFUG, but Central Asia would also be well advised to set up a more permanent support structure. The EHEA has the Bologna Secretariat, which is provided by the country hosting the next Ministerial conference. [A more permanent Bologna Secretariat has been discussed](#) but has so far not been adopted. As the Central Asian Higher Education Area will launch a new structure, it may also wish to consider whether a permanent Secretariat, based in one of the countries – very possibly Kazakhstan – but with staff members from other participating countries would not provide the kind of impetus the new Central Asian Higher Education Area would need to succeed.