

Article #4

#ACATHINKS

DECEMBER 2023



HILLIGJE VAN'T LAND | in

Secretary General,
International Association of
Universities (IAU)

Dr. Hilligje van't Land serves the global higher education community as Secretary General of the International Association of Universities (IAU), the global voice of higher education (NGO with UNESCO Associate Status), which celebrated its 70th Anniversary in 2020. For the past two decades, she has fostered the key role of higher education in societal transformation.

She supervises the overall programme activities of the IAU, develops the Association's strategic plans and oversees the everyday work of the secretariat. She positioned the IAU as partner in UNESCO work on Education for sustainable development and in particular the UNESCO ESD for 2030 Programme, the UNESCO Futures of Education initiative and Mission 4.7, as member of the High Level Advisory Board.

She fosters the positioning of higher education as a key stakeholder for the UN Agenda 2030 and represents IAU in other working groups and expert committees.



GIORGIO MARINONI | in

Manager of Higher Education
and Internationalisation,
International Association of
Universities (IAU)

Giorgio Marinoni has been Manager of Higher Education and Internationalisation at the International Association of Universities (IAU), since February 2015. He oversees Internationalisation as one of the four strategic priorities of the Association. Among his responsibilities at IAU are research projects, advisory services and external representation of the Association for what concerns internationalisation.

He is the coordinator of the ISAS (2.0) programme of advisory services for advancing internationalisation and the coordinator of the Network of International Education Associations, NIEA, a global network of non-profit, non-government associations whose main stated purpose is to advance international higher education. He has published the report of the 5th Global Survey on Internationalization of Higher Education and of the 1st and 2nd Global Surveys on the impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education. He is the coordinator of the 6th Global Survey on Internationalisation of Higher Education.

international level, and served the ESN as its President in 2007

European Higher Education Cooperation in a Global Context

The impact of geopolitics on (international) higher education

The role of universities in society and the relation between universities and politics

To understand the impact of geopolitics on (international) higher education it is fundamental to understand the relation between universities and politics, as well as the role of universities in society. To do so, we need to look back in history and examine the fundamentals of our current global higher education framework.

At the International Conference convened by UNESCO at the University of Nice, in France in 1950, i.e. the conference that marked the adoption of the IAU Constitution, the Universities of the World agreed to three indissociable principles that every university should stand for, namely:

- the right to pursue knowledge for its own sake and to follow wherever the search for truth may lead;
- the tolerance of divergent opinion and freedom from political interference; and
- the obligation, as social institutions, to promote, through teaching and research, the principles of freedom and justice, of human dignity and solidarity, and to develop mutually material and moral aid on an international level.

For almost 75 years now, these three principles, together with the core values – academic freedom, institutional autonomy and social responsibility locally and globally; cooperation and solidarity based on mutuality of interests and shared benefits; tolerance of divergent opinions, freedom from political interference; equity in access and success in higher education and open access to knowledge; scientific integrity and ethical behaviour as cornerstones of conduct for all stakeholders in higher education; higher education and research in the public interest; quality in learning, research and outreach – constitute the basis upon which the International Association of Universities (IAU) works and develops projects and initiatives with its member institutions and partners around the world.

Article #4

#ACATHINKS

DECEMBER 2023

At the consecutive UNESCO World Higher Education Conferences (WHEC), i.e. in Paris 1998, Paris 2009 and Barcelona 2022, in which IAU played a pivotal role, the higher education community reaffirmed these principles and agreed to redefine their implications within the framework of a new *Social Contract*. This contract sets out mutual responsibilities, rights and obligations between 'University' and 'Society', so that they may meet the challenges of our time. Already at the 1st WHEC in 1998, at a time when the ties, obligations and commitments between Society and University were already becoming more complex, more urgent and more direct, IAU, on behalf of the higher education community, stressed the need to "establish a broadly recognised International Charter of mutual rights and obligations governing the relationship between University and Society, including adequate monitoring mechanisms for its application". While such a Charter is yet to be developed, IAU laid some important foundations: its *Policy Statement on Academic Freedom, University Autonomy and Social Responsibility* (International Association of Universities, 1998); and its contributions to the UNESCO Report *Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education* (UNESCO, [2021](#)) and the UNESCO Roadmap *Beyond Limits. New Ways to Reinvent Higher Education-Roadmap* (UNESCO, [2022](#)) presented to the 2022 WHEC.

Nowadays, the growing responsibility of university to society and the calls for the sector to respond more directly to global geopolitical challenges, invites for a new reflection on the positioning of universities in political discourse.

In the revised version of the Magna Charta Universitatum (Magna Charta Observatory, [2020](#)) – a declaration and affirmation of the fundamental principles upon which the mission of universities should be based – the value of **institutional autonomy**, defined as "*independence: research and teaching must be intellectually and morally independent of all political influence and economic interests*", stands at the forefront, a centrality similar to the 1998 IAU [Policy Statement](#). The same document reaffirms that the university should be valued as "*a site for free enquiry and debate, distinguished by its openness to dialogue and rejection of intolerance*", therefore stressing the importance of **academic freedom**, i.e. the freedom for members of the academic community to teach, study, and pursue knowledge and research without unreasonable interference.

Institutional autonomy and academic freedom are recognised as **universal values**, common to all universities. However, the Magna Charta Universitatum

also recognises that "*Universities have proliferated around the globe, dramatically increasing in variety as well as scope and mission*" and that "*Universities acknowledge that they have a responsibility to engage with and respond to the aspirations and challenges of the world and to the communities they serve, to benefit humanity and contribute to sustainability.*" The Charter reaffirms that indeed, universities do not exist in a vacuum; they are influenced by their particular geographic location and culture, and even by the current moment in history, while they are (or rather should be) independent from undue political interference.

The reality of universities around the world is diverse, and values, as well as their contextual interpretation, are different. For instance, it is clear that public universities experience a certain degree of influence from their governments, which can be more or less pronounced, depending on the specific country in which the institutions are based and the type of government.

Governments have an interest and desire to 'control' what universities do, up to a certain level, considering that they constitute an important part of the educational system of a country, educate the next generations of citizens, and among them also the future leaders. In history, there are many examples of how governments reoriented teaching in universities to serve their own interests. For instance, during the colonial times, the main purpose of universities that were set up by the governing power was to educate a class of administrators loyal to the colonial empire for which they would later work. Governments often have a specific interest also in the research conducted by universities, as scientific breakthroughs can lead to technological, and thus economic, development and advancement. This translates into the adoption of measures aiming at protecting national interests, or so-called "national security", in modern jargon. Such measures have a direct impact on international cooperation and especially international research collaboration. One might think that private universities are less subject to governmental interference, but they are equally exposed, as they likewise must comply with governmental regulations.

The role and relation with society is also marked by the values carried by an institution. These values reflect specific world views. We can for instance think about the specific worldviews fostered by different faith-based higher education institutions around the world, and the impact these worldviews have on the way in which universities will, or will not, work together.

Article #4

#ACATHINKS

DECEMBER 2023

Nonetheless, acknowledging this diversity in values, related worldviews, and the degree of influence of governments on universities should not preclude the existence of shared fundamental values, such as those referenced above.

The broader question is though: *How do universities both adhere to such values and accurately translate them into practice, especially when dealing with major geopolitical events?*

One dilemma is to decide *when* and *how* universities, as a whole, should speak up and respond to specific major geopolitical events, or whether they should rather refrain from doing so. Another dilemma revolves around the relation between academic freedom and the freedom of speech of individual academics. Here the question is: *How to protect the first, while at the same time ensuring that the second does not go against the principles and values of the university itself?*

On these dilemmas there are several schools of thought, of which we highlight two. One, more common in North America, is that universities should refrain to take an institutional position, as they should instead create and offer a safe space for their academic communities to freely express themselves and debate contrasting views. Yet, we have very recently seen the potential limits of such approaches in the United States of America, with the start of investigations of three Ivy League universities for their (lack of) responses to campus antisemitism (Knott, [2023](#)). The second one, which is more common in Europe, is that universities should be engaged in society and therefore are called upon to speak up in case of geopolitical events, a position explained in a recent publication by the Council of Europe which stresses that *"an engaged university is neutral in the sense of being non-partisan, but it is far from neutral in the sense of being devoid of values or convictions"* (Bergan, Gallagher, & Harkavy, [2020](#)).

Despite the contrasting difference between the two schools of thought, it is clear that academic freedom is not the same as freedom of expression and that both have their limitations. When dealing with political and societal debates, universities should adhere to their fundamental values and pose limitations to discourses that go against such values, taking a clear position, for example, against hate speeches, calls to violence and violations of fundamental human rights.

Universities in a new geopolitical context

The questions of *How do geopolitics impact higher*

education and especially international cooperation in higher education worldwide? and *How do universities around the world react to changing geopolitics?* were debated in the final plenary session of the 2023 International Conference of IAU, under the broader theme of the conference *"Higher Education with Impact: The Importance of Intercultural Learning and Dialogue"* (International Association of Universities, [2023](#)).

Since its creation, IAU has been pivotal in advocating for and advancing the need for increased international cooperation in higher education, working relentlessly on building the sometimes-fragile bridges between societies. International cooperation is an essential tool to build such bridges and for international cooperation to be successful, it is fundamental to foster intercultural learning and dialogue in teaching and learning, research, campus operations and community outreach initiatives.

Undoubtedly, the current geopolitical context is less favourable to international cooperation than it used to be only a few years ago. The economic development of different countries around the world, above all China, but also the BRICS at large, and their desire for more recognition in the global balance of power met with resistance by the former dominating powers (the so-called Western nations and the United States of America above all) to share power are creating new tensions between these blocs. Events such as the global financial crisis that started in 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 exposed the shortcomings of an interconnected world based on a neo-liberal economic model. Growing inequalities, the perceived or real worsening in lifestyle for some sectors of society have led to a negative reaction to globalisation, which manifests itself in a tendency to close-up behind national borders, with nationalism and nativism on the rise in many countries around the world. All of this clearly has a negative effect on international collaboration.

One of the challenges of the current geopolitical context is the increased polarisation and the tendency towards a simplistic, binary reduction of opinions, knowledge and belief systems, which leads to a vision of the world in black or white, the 'us vs. them', or 'you are either with me or against me' paradigm, in which there is no longer space for nuanced opinions or options, in which people can no longer 'agree to disagree'.

Speaking as a global network of higher education institutions, this is clearly neither the 'solution' nor the paradigm that the world needs today. Rather, we must strengthen power of education and intercultural dialogue to overcome such challenges, as recently

Article #4

#ACATHINKS

DECEMBER 2023

underlined by Mohd Hamdi Abd Shukor, Former Vice-Chancellor, University of Malaya, Malaysia and IAU Board Member *"Regrettably, the spectres of intolerance and extremism loom large, feeding off misinformation and prejudice. Through enriched intercultural interactions, education, and dialogue, we can dismantle the fallacies that empower such ideologies"* (IAU, [2023](#)).

With a global membership and voice, we continue to advocate for world in colour and value a world composed of many diverse opinions, knowledge and belief systems, which might differ and sometimes starkly contrast with each other, but not necessarily be mutually exclusive. We believe not only in the possibility of agreeing to disagree, but in the necessity to do so, as this is the first step to recognising the existence of a problem and eventually to finding solutions.

And we strongly believe that the most pressing challenges the world faces today, i.e. climate change and sustainable development, poverty, global health, food security, just to mention a few, affect everybody everywhere, and can only be tackled through cooperation at global level.

Intercultural learning and understanding for international cooperation

The first step to effective international cooperation is to know each other and to understand and appreciate our differences. For this reason, intercultural learning and dialogue are essential.

Intercultural learning within higher education encompasses the development of competencies, attitudes and skills that enable individuals to effectively engage with diverse cultures. It goes beyond mere tolerance of the other, and encourages active participation in true dialogue, fostering empathy, respect, self-reflexion and understanding. It should be seen as a tool for conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Intercultural learning and dialogue in higher education cultivate a global mindset among students, staff and university leaders and prepare them to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world. Exposure to diverse perspectives encourages critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving abilities. Graduates, staff and leaders equipped with intercultural competencies are better positioned to address complex global challenges, contributing to innovation and sustainable development.

Moreover, fostering intercultural dialogue within higher education institutions creates inclusive multicultural learning environments, where diversity is celebrated, and cultural barriers are dismantled. This inclusivity translates into societal benefits by promoting social cohesion, reducing prejudices, and nurturing a more harmonious and collaborative global community.

Despite its profound importance and impact, integrating intercultural learning into higher education faces challenges, such as limited resources, resistance to change (also due to the siloed approaches, away from inter and multidisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning and research), and unequal access to internationalisation opportunities.

The question is: *How to address these challenges and continue fostering international collaboration in the current geopolitical climate?*

To paraphrase Ulrich Grothus, President, ACA (2018-2023), in his opening piece of this series (Grothus, [2023](#)), *"we should remain open, but not stupid."* We should acknowledge the changed geopolitical landscape in which universities are subject to more pressures from their governments and demands from their societies and we should accept the fact that there are some limitations to what universities can do. At the same time, we should not underestimate the role that universities play in their own societies and the agency they have, including in influencing government decisions.

To address these challenges, collaborative efforts are needed not only among universities, but also with governments, the business sector and civil society organisations. Institutional strategies that involve internationalisation of the curriculum, training of academic and administrative staff in intercultural, international and global competencies, also by leveraging technology, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), can facilitate a wider adoption of intercultural learning approaches. At the same time, collaboration with governments and organisations, both governmental and not, to ease access to science and knowledge are crucial to open up knowledge systems and minds.

Networks such as IAU or the Academic Cooperation Association, with their complementary mandates, play a fundamental role in promoting international cooperation and fostering intercultural learning and dialogue.

Article #4

#ACATHINKS

DECEMBER 2023

CONCLUSION

The transformative potential of intercultural learning and dialogue for international cooperation in higher education is undeniable. Intercultural learning does not only enrich academic experiences, but also nurtures responsible global citizens capable of effecting positive change.

At the IAU, we strongly believe that universities and the higher education sector in its entirety need to embrace this broad agenda to the fullest. By embracing diversity and promoting intercultural understanding, higher education can pave the way to a more interconnected and harmonious global society, ultimately contributing to a sustainable and peaceful world.

This said, we should not be naïve about this: this should be an intentional process, that will encounter resistance and opposition and requires effort and determination. Yet, we believe that by joining forces and working together on equal footing we will be able to achieve the transformation needed to foster a more inclusive and sustainable world.

This article is part of the 2023 "ACA Think Pieces" series – **European higher education cooperation in a global context**, launched in May 2023. Through their expert contributions in the series, the authors constructively reflect on some of the ongoing debates around the role, the principles and desired openness of international cooperation in higher education (and research), in an increasingly complex geopolitical context. The pieces invite for critical reflections, together with the authors, around some of the much-debated concepts of "knowledge security" and "knowledge diplomacy", values-anchored international cooperation and "European values", prioritising "like-minded" partners, and more, as well as for visionary approaches and practical solutions paving the future of cooperation. The series also channels responses from outside of Europe to these debates and their relevance from partners' perspectives, when assessed through their own priorities, needs and expectations towards cooperation with European partners. The articles are published electronically towards the end of each month on the ACA website, from May until December 2023.