

PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY OF AND FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Public responsibility *for* higher education

Public responsibility *for* higher education denotes a set of duties that public authorities must fulfill as part of their overall responsibility for the education sector and society as a whole. Public responsibility *for* higher education is mainly exercised at the level of the national higher education *system*. It includes political, public policy, regulatory and legal obligations, including with regard to funding, and is in its details defined by each EHEA member in accordance with the principles that have been agreed jointly through the EHEA and other relevant contexts. It is exercised with due regard to the other fundamental values of the EHEA and involves the responsibility to help safeguard all the fundamental values of higher education. It includes the core responsibility for the proper functioning of the higher education system, for the benefit of the broader society and individual development, as well as to the members of the higher education community.

While in most EHEA member states the public responsibility for higher education is mainly exercised at national level, this responsibility (or parts thereof) may also be exercised at regional and local level. Increasingly, there is also a justified perception of public responsibility for higher education being exercised at supra-national level, also in accordance with commonly agreed principles.

Public authorities, at their respective levels, have the primary responsibility for putting in place supportive regulatory frameworks that enable higher education institutions to effectively pursue their educational, research and outreach missions. Public responsibility may be exercised through legislation and other regulations but also through other means such as policies or funding.

Public authorities should exercise this responsibility in consultation with the higher education community and other stakeholders. They should specifically ensure that legal and regulatory frameworks foster and enable institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and self-governance by the higher education community.

Public authorities should consult and seek input from the higher education sector, internal university constituencies, and relevant external stakeholders regarding the configuration and substance of these frameworks. They should, however, assume *exclusive responsibility* to ensure that the frameworks within which higher education is conducted are put in place and function adequately, including the legal framework, the qualifications framework of the higher education system, frameworks for quality assurance, the recognition of foreign qualifications, information on higher education provision, the funding frameworks, and the frameworks for the social dimension of higher education.

Public authorities should assume *leading responsibility* for ensuring that all qualified candidates enjoy effective equal opportunities to undertake and complete higher education, irrespective of their background. They should assume a *substantial responsibility* for financing and ensuring provision of higher education. All higher education within an education system should be provided and funded within the framework established by the competent public authorities, regardless of whether the provision and funding are public or private¹.

Public authorities should further all major purposes of higher education: preparation for the labour market, preparation for life as active citizens of democratic societies, personal development, and the development and maintenance of a broad and advanced knowledge base².

Public responsibility *of* higher education

While public authorities have final responsibility for the relevant regulatory and policy frameworks at all levels, higher education institutions should engage in the design and implementation of these frameworks. More directly, however, public responsibility *of* higher education denotes the obligations of the higher education community to the broader society of which the higher education community is a part. The higher education community encompasses all staff and students as well as institutional leaders, and the members of higher education organizations (e.g. university, student, and staff associations).

Through its own actions, internal regulation and policies, the higher education community should ensure that the fundamental values of higher education are respected, furthered, and implemented. It should pursue truth and the production, transmission, dissemination, curation, and use of knowledge as a public good by upholding and developing the standards of teaching, learning, and research within and across academic disciplines.

The higher education community should continuously inform broader society of its work and results. It should engage in the identification, analysis, and understanding of the problems that confront broader society and individual constituencies. The higher education community should also participate in designing solutions to these problems and provide expertise to meet these challenges, in accordance with its own standards and values.

The higher education community should seek to foster and disseminate, and should itself be guided by a culture of democracy, solidarity, and ethics. It should provide information publicly about societal risks related to action or inaction, when such risks can be determined on the basis of research and scholarship. The higher education community should design and pursue its policies and activities in ways that are consistent with fairness, non-discrimination,

¹ Cf Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)6 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the public responsibility for higher education and research, para. 7. Recommendations by the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers have been accepted by all EHEA member States except the three that are parties to the European Cultural Convention without being Council of Europe members. While Russia is no longer a member of the Council of Europe, it was at the time the Recommendation was adopted.

² Cf Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)6 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the public responsibility for higher education and research, para. 5.

and transparency. It should offer access to higher education to qualified candidates without regard to their economic, social, ethnic, or other background and provide support in order to enable those admitted to complete their studies with success.

Major challenges of modern societies, including those relating to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and sustainable development more broadly, the survival of our planet, issues of war and peace, democracy, and living together cannot be met without a strong contribution by the higher education community through research, learning and teaching, societal outreach and innovation and technology transfer. In the words of the Magna Charta Universitatum (2020), 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 higher education community should therefore contribute to the development of society on the basis of scholarship and research as well as teaching and learning.

The higher education community should engage in and with the public sphere, including in public debate, to ensure that our societies be developed and governed on the basis of factual knowledge as well as critical and constructive thinking. It should work with the society of which it is part, including with its local community, to help improve opportunities for all members of society, in accordance with the democratic and social missions of higher education.

The higher education community should equip its graduates with general, specialized and ethical knowledge, understanding, support them in developing the ability to act and to decide what action to take and what action to refrain from taking.