



UiO • **Faculty of Educational Sciences**
University of Oslo

Geopolitical Tensions and the Public Responsibility of Higher Education

**Peer Learning Activity – Public Responsibility of Higher
Education in the European Higher Education Area**

24 February 2026

Bucharest, Romania

Professor Peter Maassen



Outline

- Foundation for the Public Responsibility of Higher Education
- Geopolitical Context and Guiding Principles
- Challenges
- Possible Ways Forward and Examples
- Remaining Issues

Foundation



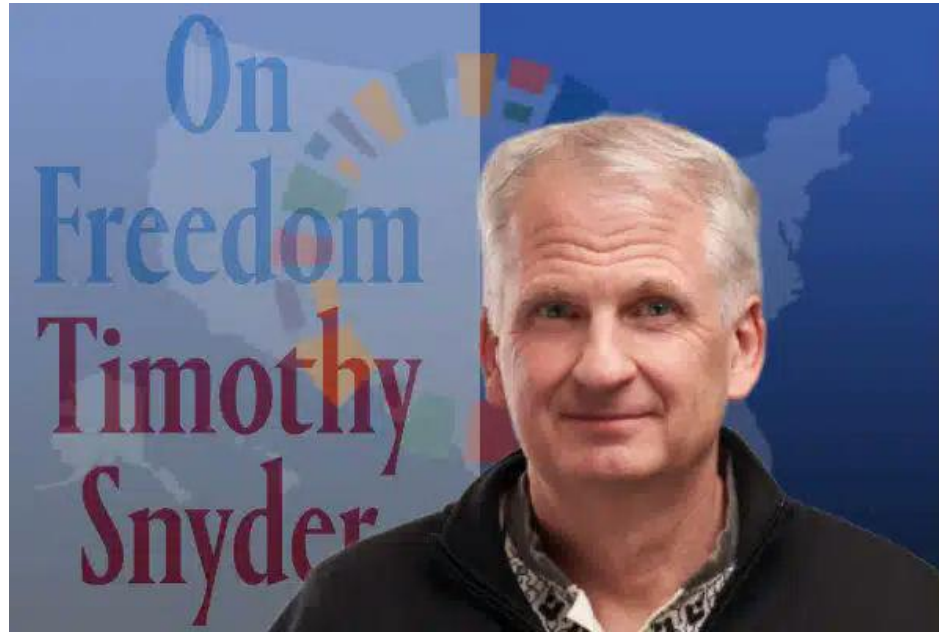
Public responsibility of higher education (Tirana 2024):

- The obligations of the higher education community to the broader society of which the higher education community is a part
- One of six fundamental values of the EHEA
- All six values are equally important
- All EHEA values are a coherent whole and interconnected

Question:

- How are the EHEA values interconnected?

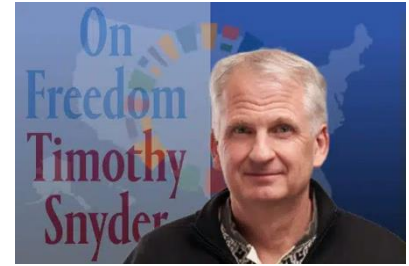
Foundation



“Freedom is the value of values because it is the condition in which all other values may be exercised”

(Snyder, 2024)

Foundation



Consequence:

Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are the conditions under which the other values may be exercised

Institutional Autonomy



The Concept of University Autonomy: Balancing Independence and Responsibility

PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Living autonomy:

- How the formal level of institutional autonomy and reforms affecting institutional autonomy are interpreted, translated, buffered, channelled and used internally in academic organisations (Maassen, Gornitzka, Fumasoli, 2017)

Negative and positive academic freedom

Negative academic freedom

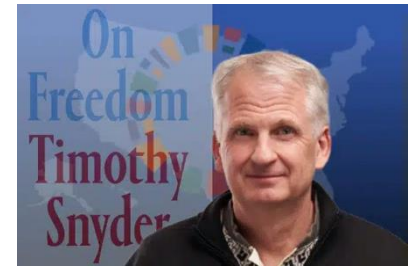
- Freedom **from**, that is, protection against external and internal threats and violations of academic freedom

Positive academic freedom

- Freedom **to**, that is, the freedom to promote and use specific values in academic activities



Positive academic freedom



Five forms of (positive) academic freedom

1. ***Sovereignty***, that is, individual autonomy that members of the academic community have to choose the values they believe in and the space they have to realize them
2. ***Unpredictability***, that is, the freedom of members of the academic community to choose their own theoretical and methodological preferences and the values they consider most relevant to their academic work, without these choices being controlled by others.
3. ***Mobility***, that is, the freedom of members of the academic community to choose their own academic areas of interest, to pursue their own career path, to decide for themselves where to study, where to do academic work, and which partners to collaborate with, all embedded in a unique, individual combination of values.

Positive academic freedom



Five forms of (positive) academic freedom (cont.)

4. **Factuality**, that is, the goal of members of the academic community – who pursue their academic interests, preferences and curiosity sovereignly and unpredictably, wherever and with whomever they wish – , must be to produce, interpret, apply and disseminate knowledge that helps all members of society to come to grips with the world and change it for the better.
5. **Solidarity**, that is, exercising academic freedom requires respect for and protection of institutions such as the university and the law. It also encompasses the recognition that academia is a community and that claiming academic freedom for oneself must be accompanied by claiming academic freedom for the entire community. Solidarity also entails social responsibility, i.e., the obligation to use academic freedom in the interests not only of the academic community, but of society as a whole.

EC President Ursula von der Leyen (Sept 2023): EU has matured into a 'geopolitical union'



Consequence:

Intensifying responsibilities for Higher Education & Research

- Economic and labour policies
- Trade policies
- Foreign affairs
- Security policies
- Defence policies

European competitiveness & fundamental values

Draghi Report (part B, p. 246):

The EU's efforts to hone its competitive edge need to be guided by European values.... These encompass fundamental values, including human rights, the rule of law and democracy, but also values of specific relevance to research and innovation, such as ***academic freedom***

HOW? – Align-Act-Accelerate: Rely on Europe's commitment to ***academic freedom*** and to a research culture which is responsible, open, curious and tolerant (Heitor Report, p. 21)





Strategic starting-point

“International collaboration is key to achieving the ambitions of the EU and its Member States in the area of Research and Innovation”

- European Commission (May 2021, Global Approach to R&I)
- Council of the European Union (Council Recommendation 14 May 2024)



However,
because of geopolitical tensions and security risks:

“Europe’s openness to international research collaboration increasingly seen as risking undesirable transfer and use of critical knowledge and technology”

Guiding Principle for Higher Education's Public Responsibility in Geopolitical Context

“As open as possible, as closed as necessary”

- Council Recommendation (May 2024) on enhancing research security:
 - EU Member States should develop and implement a set of policy actions to enhance research security. One of key elements of research security is to anticipate and manage risks related to undesirable transfer of critical knowledge and technology.

Risks attached to academic collaboration

- **Security** risks (military and broader national security risks).
Protection of national/European security is seen as part of the ethical responsibilities of science/HE
- Risk of losing Europe's **economic** competitiveness, e.g. through economic espionage through universities/research institutes
- Risk of undermining **human rights**
- Risk of weakening **research ethics**

Academic community's responsibility?

- **International Advisory Board STINT (Sweden)**

- Recommendation on a new approach to internationalisation:

- “For effectively navigating heightened complexity of the global context for international collaboration, higher education institutions must increase their capacity for analysis, international monitoring and awareness, and overall collaboration management”*

- (“Rationale for international cooperation in an increasingly polarised world”; STINT R 24-02)

Challenges for Realizing the Public Responsibility of Higher Education in a Geopolitical Context

- **Limited guidance** on academic community's geopolitical responsibilities at European and national level
- Higher education institutions are expected to **self-regulate** their geopolitical activities and responsibilities
- Higher education institutions and the academic community are left with a **great deal of uncertainty** about how to realize their geopolitical responsibilities
- To expect higher education institutions to take steps to realize their geopolitical responsibilities without contextual insights and adequate capacities may not only hinder the proper assessment of opportunities and risks but also end up having a **profound effect** on all fundamental values

Possible ways forward: making sense of global context

- **Former Rector TU Delft (Netherlands):**
 - Universities lack a foreign affairs department in their administration and diplomats among their staff
 - Governments need to support universities in developing a responsible internationalization strategy especially through their foreign affairs and diplomatic capacities, strategies, practices
 - This implies sharing international monitoring, and providing fitting advice, meaningful regulations, supportive framework conditions, etc.

Possible ways forward: institutional capacities

- **Perspective from university alliances (LERU & The Guild)**
- **Recommendations:**
 - Respect *university autonomy* for academic affairs
 - Universities should be *closely involved* in the development of any regulatory framework on risks in international collaboration.
 - As governments work with universities to create a *culture of responsibility* about international collaboration, this must be supported by transparent, up-to-date, and accurate *information* about which actors are of concern, and why.
 - Universities must develop *information* and *training* to increase the awareness of researchers about the risks of international collaboration.
 - Universities must develop a *holistic framework for risk management*, in collaboration between the different services involved and the researchers.
 - To foster a culture of responsible internationalisation, including managing risks around sensitive and often highly complex and intricate fields, *institutional peer learning* is of great importance.

Possible ways forward: institutional capacities

- **National guidelines**



- **Example:**

- **Norway (HK-dir): Guidelines and tools for responsible international knowledge collaboration**

(<https://hkdir.no/retningslinjer-og-verktoy-for-ansvarlig-internasjonalt-kunnskapssamarbeid>)

- General advice for institutional leadership and administration
- General advice for academic environments/groups
 - In case of difficult assessments, seek advice from support services at the institution and/or relevant authorities.
- International research and innovation collaboration
- International higher education collaboration
- Risk and security management at the knowledge institution
- Academic values and research ethics
- Export control, international sanctions and residence permits
- Information security and privacy
- Value mapping and valuation

Possible ways forward: institutional capacities

Perspective from University of Oslo (UiO)

- **Responsible international cooperation at UiO; detailed information on:**
 - Export control
 - Cooperation in education
 - Recruitment and reception of visiting researchers
 - Project initiation
 - Research integrity
 - Research data management



Remaining Issues for HE's Public Responsibility to Become a Reality in a Geopolitical Context



- **Determining risks**
 - Risks from which perspective? (political, academic, economic, fundamental values)
 - Whose risks? (government/politics, private sector, institutional, individual)
 - What level of risk is acceptable and what not?
 - Risks versus uncertainties
- **Role of fundamental academic values in academic collaboration**
 - Adhering to fundamental values condition for international collaboration or?
- **Lack of institutional/system level capacities and expertise**
 - Monitoring expertise and capacity
 - Risk management
 - Assessment and training capacity
- **Determining the level of academic freedom and institutional autonomy required for making HE's Responsibility for Society in a geopolitical context a reality**



Thank you very much for your attention!

peter.maassen@iped.uio.no

Research Group:

HELGA – Higher Education Leadership, Governance and Academic development