

Fulbright New Century Scholars Symposium on Higher Education
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Statements and Recommendations

Working Group Three: Higher Education and Social Cohesion--A Global Challenge

Universities produce more than knowledge and skills; they also affect the attitudes and behavior of society. By promoting informed debate and enforcing rules of civil discourse, by researching commonly-held assumptions and basing conclusions on the weight of the evidence, universities can provide a model of how differences in opinion can be heard with respect. This helps graduates know how to act in the world of commerce and government and to behave in the world of personal relationships, and in turn, facilitates social cohesion in a society.

On the other hand universities have had to withstand damaging forces from the external environment. They have been enlisted to promote aggressive definitions of nationalism. They have been reduced to narrow vocational functions. They have been utilized to consolidate the power of specific ethnic nationalities or religious views, enforce indoctrination, repress or deny competing world views. Universities themselves have become models of unprofessional behavior and misconduct through corruption. In some instances, discussion of social issues is avoided for fear or retribution. In these instances, universities can be said to have hindered social cohesion.

How are universities currently withstanding these challenges? The administration of a South African university was found to treat the complexity of the HIV/AIDS dilemma with simplistic technical explanations, but two departments of the same university were engaged in profoundly important reflection and questioning of common assumptions. Several universities in the Netherlands were found to be silent and inactive on the sensitive issue of immigration and Islam; but individual faculty were highly engaged on these issues as public intellectuals. Islamic universities in Indonesia were found to actively promote religious tolerance but at the same time, struggle with new forces intending to silence that tolerance and impose a single view. In the former Soviet Union universities were found to often be corrupt, yet in each, individual faculty resisted corruption despite the considerable pressures from senior colleagues, administrators and even family. In each instance, we found evidence that universities were likely to make social cohesion more difficult; and in each instance we found evidence that universities were modelling behavior likely to make social cohesion more possible.

Recommendations

Looking across these cases we have concluded that there are 11 characteristics necessary for universities to support social cohesion. Each university should have:

- Publicly available standards of student and faculty conduct
- a transparent process of adjudication for misconduct
- students and faculty broadly representative of the wider population
- curriculum which reflects social problems
- empirical research particularly on social issues
- commitment to forging linkages with the wider community
- multiple sources of finance aside from government
- proactive leadership that explains and defends the role the university
- public debate over sensitive issues
- academic freedom to ensure open debate and prevent retribution
- institutional autonomy so that it takes responsibility for its own policies

If all 11 of these characteristics were to pertain, it would constitute an environment sufficiently enabling for universities to play their proper social cohesion role. These policies deserve support from many different organizations, but UN agencies should have a leading role in promoting two of them: standards of faculty and student conduct and a transparent process of adjudication.