

Group 3: Role of Higher Education in Supporting the Public Good

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Higher Education and Social Cohesion

Higher education is associated with both private and public benefits. Public benefits include the preparation of an educated workforce, the creation of knowledge through research and development, the advancement of standards based on professional integrity, cultural preservation, and the encouragement of independent criticism of public policy. While these functions are considered part of the public good that justifies public investment in higher education, how they are carried out often have profound implications for social cohesion.

This project will investigate the impact of higher education on social cohesion in various national contexts. One will investigate ways in which a university in South Africa is able to bridge religious and ideological ‘fault lines’ surrounding different views as to the sources and amelioration of HIV/AIDs. Another will investigate how Islamic universities in Indonesia have responded to the breakdown of inter-religious harmony during the nation’s transition to democratic rule. A third will investigate the degree to which European universities are able to adhere to professional standards in the face of traditional administrative controls. In a last project, faculty and administrative personnel in Georgia and Kazakhstan will be interviewed about how they balance threats to their honesty, ethnic tolerance, and academic freedom.

Each case constitutes an example of universities under external pressure, and in each case several basic questions will be asked. How well are universities able to maintain their own standards in the face political and social challenges? To what extent can universities contribute to the social good under these conditions? To what extent might their contributions add to or detract from wider social cohesion?