

11 October 2022

The Myth of “University Values”

Carsten A. Holz

The widespread embrace of “university values” is problematic and distracts from the central value of our profession, academic freedom. Rather than brandish a host of values, universities should emphasize academic freedom and implement good governance principles to safeguard academic freedom and the exercise of our profession.

“[Values](#)” are “principles or standards of behavior; one’s judgement of what is important in life.” In a [broader, sociological definition](#), “values” are “the ideals, customs, institutions, etc. of a society toward which the people of the group have an affective regard.” Both definitions have in common that it is individuals who hold values. It is an individual’s judgment as to what is important in their lives, and it is up to the collective of individuals to agree upon their common value(s). In other words, universities don’t have values; faculty members, staff and students do. And with that, the concept of “university values” becomes problematic.

Universities don’t have values, members of a university do

University values and values of the profession

Shifting attention to the individuals within the university and their occupations, the question becomes: What are the values of our *profession*, academia? Academics will probably agree that the central value of our profession is academic freedom.

Most times, academics will not be overly concerned with academic freedom. But the moment academic freedom is taken away there is an outcry, if not an exodus. In the author’s Social Science Division at the Hong Kong University of Science & Technology (HKUST), within little more than one year half the faculty members have disappeared. The departures coincide with the imposition of the “National Security Law” by the Chinese “Communist Party” on Hong Kong end-June 2020. In the face of, in the extreme, life imprisonment in mainland China for exercising one’s profession, academic freedom suddenly takes center stage.

Academics in mainland China equally value academic freedom. The issues they raise—from research limitations to having to seek administrators’ approval for their course syllabi, exams, and international conference participation—all reflect the absence of academic freedom. Academic freedom is a universal pre-condition for the exercise of our profession.

Since our profession is exercised mostly within the organizational form of a university, the values of our profession transfer to the university. Without academic freedom, a university is no more than a research and teaching factory of directed laborers.

One value distinguishes universities: academic freedom

University values and societal values

Universities are part of societies. Members of a society hold values. The values which all members of a society subscribe to are codified. For example, Article 2 of the European Union (EU) Lisbon Treaty lists the [EU's six values](#): human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and human rights.

Even if universities could hold values (which they cannot), why should every university have its own, private set of values when we already have, as a society, agreed upon a codified set of values? What would be the rationale—never specified—for the particular choice of university values? And does some university manager declaring their set of university values today really make every member of the university adopt, internalize, and live these values tomorrow, just as a cult leader's declarations become the creed of their followers?

University-specific sets of values appear a farce

University values and good governance principles

Rather than having university managers compose long lists of university values, consider a set of good governance principles (or “organizational values”) that support academic freedom and serve the exercise of our profession: transparency, accountability, and academic self-administration. Such governance principles become particularly relevant when academic freedom or the exercise of our profession is threatened.

For example, when HKUST managers decided to open a second campus in mainland China, transparency would have meant that they could not [blatantly ignore issues of academic freedom](#) (a proclaimed [HKUST core value](#)). Accountability would force HKUST deans to abide by university regulations which state that “sabbatical leave with full pay may be granted to eligible academic appointees” rather than to re-define “sabbatical leave” by requiring faculty members to “[make up for their teaching duties](#)” (also violating HKUST's core value of “integrity”). Academic self-administration might have prevented a HKUST president from declaring “1-HKUST” a core university value; “the entire HKUST family work[s] together as an integrated and holistic team” is more reflective of a manager-directed production line than of academic freedom.

In their current form, university values have no practical implications. Few are the academics who can reel off their university's values. Managers ignore their declared university values at will. Enforcement mechanism—which would also hold managers to their declared values—are missing. And who would want a morality police?

Rather than having university managers compose long lists of inconsequential university values, consider a set of good governance principles

University values under a totalitarian regime

Academic freedom is not absolute. [Cary Nelson's 2010 list](#) of what academic freedom does and does not do includes “Academic freedom does not protect faculty members from non-university penalties if they break the law.” That is precisely the stance taken by a

[spokesperson for the University of Hong Kong](#) in September 2019: “There are no boundaries to research and studies, provided that they are within the law.” Nobody knows what is “within” the “National Security Law.”

While some academics have been arrested or prevented from leaving Hong Kong, university managers adapt. As [one academic documents and then summarizes](#): “Managerial conduct in Hong Kong universities replicates a well-known reflex of officials in all dictatorships: working towards the Führer. Rather than wait for instructions to be delivered from on high, university authorities anticipate them, or invent them, hoping thereby to curry favour with the new boss.” At HKUST, university managers are chosen by the University Council, whose members are chosen by Hong Kong’s chief executive, who is chosen by the mainland regime.

Under a totalitarian regime, academic freedom is absent: Academics must guess, under threat of imprisonment, where the regime’s invisible “red lines” are and self-censor accordingly, or they can regurgitate regime propaganda and be safe. Principles of good governance are absent. The values of members of the society are not reflected in the “laws” imposed by the regime, nor in the operation of the university. Universities’ task is to further the regime’s agenda.

Under a totalitarian regime, academic freedom makes way for censorship

University values and cooperation with universities under totalitarian regimes

In cooperation projects with universities under totalitarian regimes, values are routinely compromised. This is not unique to academia. Article 3 of the EU Lisbon treaty includes in the four [aims of the EU](#) within the wider world to “contribute to [...] the sustainable development of the Earth.” Addressing climate change will necessitate cooperation with the rulers of the People’s Republic of China where there is clearly no respect for human dignity, no freedom, no democracy, no equality, no rule of law, and no human rights: The regime grossly violates all six EU values (and [has possibly committed crimes against humanity](#)).

One is left with a cost-benefit analysis. In academia this means comparing the benefits of cooperation—say, the rector can boast that they have struck yet another cooperation agreement—to the costs—academic freedom went out of the window, our most basic values went out of the window, we kept it all under the table, and we paid off the faculty involved. Different types of cooperation, from a student exchange to a narrowly focused research project or a long-term collaborative effort, may warrant different decisions. Decisions may have to vary by discipline and by country. Mitigating measures may be taken: For example, a student exchange need not only mean learning mathematics during the day and partying at night in an exotic destination; our societal values and the missions of our universities could lead to a requirement for exchange students to take a critical comparative politics or liberal studies course as part of the exchange program.

Values imply gray decision-making areas. Humans are not equipped with explicitly formulated hierarchical rankings of values and a complete set of trade-offs addressing all possible circumstances. Good governance principles help: Accountability means explaining the rationale for the cooperation, academic self-administration to run it by a faculty ethics committee, and transparency to create a history of (argued) precedents open to public scrutiny.

*Good governance principles are especially important in
cooperation agreements with universities under totalitarian regimes*

University values and values in science

Freedom from long lists of empty university values does not imply scientists without values, let alone value-free science. A recommendation encountered in Hong Kong to in the face of the “National Security Law” simply present the facts but not to evaluate or even take a stand oneself, i.e., to conduct “value-free” science, misses the point: Already the choice of topics taught and the choice of facts covered is shaped by values. And any coverage of the Hong Kong independence movement, no matter how “factual,” might yet fall foul of the “National Security Law” (which, furthermore, applies worldwide).

Personal values and the values of our societies make particular research meaningful to begin with. Policy recommendations—to improve some individuals’ well-being or to make the world a better place—have meaning only in the context of our (typically implicit) values.

Nobody will be thinking of some particular set of university values when choosing a research topic. No journal article concludes “In the light of my university’s values X, Y, and Z, the findings of my research imply...” Rather than a misplaced preoccupation with university values, university managers’ focus should be on safeguarding academic freedom so that faculty members and students can freely engage in inquiry and intellectual debate, whatever their personal values are, without fear of censorship or retaliation.

Carsten A. Holz is professor in the Social Science Division, Hong Kong University of Science & Technology, and in the academic year 2022/23 visiting professor in the School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University.

E-mail: carstenholz@gmail.com, cholz@princeton.edu

URL: [https:// carstenholz.people.ust.hk/](https://carstenholz.people.ust.hk/)