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## University Values in Cooperation Projects

To what degree do, or should values underpin the choice of (a university's) cooperation projects and partners, and what are these values?

*The below is my contribution to a panel on 'Values in Global Cooperation' at the European University Association's annual conference on 29 April 2022. My remit was to provide an 'input statement' that addresses the guiding questions above and to participate in a panel and session discussion.*

*My 'input statement' (below) includes a few items that I skipped in my presentation, and is augmented by what I contributed in the subsequent discussion as well as by a few items that I didn't have a chance to bring up at the event.*

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Up front, I do not represent HKUST, Hong Kong University of Science & Technology. I speak in my personal capacity as a professor of the Chinese economy at a university in Hong Kong for almost 30 years. My frame of reference is HKUST, Hong Kong, and mainland China.

As a relative newcomer to the topic of 'university values,' I proceed by doing what academics do first, and that is to clarify the terminology. I am aware that I am talking to experts on university values, but I will start with a definition of "values," nevertheless, because I think it yields a couple of important insights. I will then identify relevant values and say how these values may impact on a cooperation with a partner.

If I look up the term "value"—or "values"—in the dictionary, I find many definitions, two of which would seem somewhat relevant. In a narrow definition, "values" are "one's [an individual's] judgment of what is important in life," or one's "principles or standards of behavior" (google search for "definition: values"). In a broader, sociological definition we are looking at "values" as "the ideals, customs, institutions, etc. of a society toward which the people of the group have an affective regard" (<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/value>).

My first take-away, from the broader definition, is that it is going to be very difficult to agree on a particular, joint value. You may be pro-immigration while I am anti-immigration, or the other way round. Nevertheless, I think we can overcome this difficulty of us all having different values. More on that shortly.

A second difficulty, which I think we cannot overcome, is that it's individuals who have values. Both the narrow and the broad definition refer to *people* as holding values. It's an individual's judgment as to what is important in their lives, and it's up to the collective of individual people to agree on their common value, or values. In other words:

Companies don't have values, people do.

Universities don't have values, faculty members, staff and students do.

I think that is crucial. Universities don't have values.

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So I am going to take a step back and proceed differently. I am going to ask: What are the values of our *profession*, academia? Not of an institution, but of our profession. And I think we can agree that we have *one* very clear professional norm—or value—and that is academic freedom.

Some, or many of us may not know what exactly 'academic freedom' means, may pay no attention to it, and may say they don't care about it, but the moment it's taken away, there is going to be an outcry—or an exodus. In my department at HKUST, within little more than one year, half the faculty members disappeared, or are disappearing. They may do so for various declared reasons, but in the end we all face the so-called "National Security Law" that was imposed by the Chinese so-called "Communist Party"—the CCP—on Hong Kong end-June 2020. We all suddenly started thinking about what that means for us in the exercise of our profession.

I consider academic freedom to be the one universal norm of our profession. Academics on the mainland—mainland China—value it equally. There may be the occasional exception but that only confirms the rule. In my conversations with professors on the mainland, I hear them complain again and again about things—from having to have the exams that they give pre-approved by the administrators of their—CCP-controlled—institution to restrictions on international conference participation—which, in the end, all reflect the absence of academic freedom. I think we can agree that 'academic freedom' is at the very core of academia.

Definitions of what we mean by academic freedom may differ, at the margin, but I think we'll have a significant area of overlap. I personally like the definition of academic freedom by Cary Nelson in 2010, when he was head of the American Association of University Professors, as 12 items of what academic freedom does do, and 12 items of what it does not do (<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2010/12/21/defining-academic-freedom>). Subsumed under these items are, implicitly, many of the values that I have heard at this conference.

In a second step you might want to argue that academia today is practiced within an institution called "university," and then transpose the professional norm to the university and call 'academic freedom' a university value. I would say that's a bit sloppy, but in the end I don't want to make too much of what exactly we call something, as long as it's clear: We have a professional norm. It is a prerequisite for our work. It's what we hold to be of utmost importance for the exercise of our profession. In as far as a university is an organizational form for the exercise of academia, protecting our professional norm should be a primary concern for the university administration.

To move on to societal values, rather than discuss and try to find out what values we collectively consider important, why don't we just go with the values that we already have

agreed upon as being of utmost importance to us as a society? I am talking about our codified values. Every country has them, enshrined in a Constitution or Basic Law, and we have them at the level of the EU, the European Union. Since this is a conference of the European University Association, I'll go with the EU values.

Article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty—as well as the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights—lists the EU's six values ([https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/principles-and-values/aims-and-values\\_en](https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/principles-and-values/aims-and-values_en)): “human dignity—freedom—democracy—equality—rule of law—and human rights.”

These are our values. You'll probably say these are obvious. We take them for granted. We have imbued them with our mother's milk and we live them, daily. We go vote, and when our freedom of movement is restricted we complain and take the matter to the courts.

As members of a university—of an institution by and within our societies—we don't have to come up with a new list of values, we don't have to re-examine, we don't have to reinvent the wheel. And why should every university have its own, little private set of “university values” when we are all in the same profession, of academia? A rector declaring some value or values to be university values is pointless: Universities don't have values, faculty members, staff and students do. And a busybody at the top creating make-work schemes for everyone else to come up with “university values” is equally pointless: We already have our individually-held values, our professional norm, and our collectively agreed upon, codified values.

Beyond academic freedom and the six values of our societies, I would like to add a third set of perhaps more governance principles than values, which I think could be derived, at length, from academic freedom or our societal values, or from both, but I'll keep it short here. I would like to add the three governance principles of transparency, accountability, and academic self-administration.

Transparency and accountability start from our research and I think extends into university administration, in which, furthermore, we, the primary actors, should have a say. For example, I would like to see complete transparency regarding university finances, where does the money come from—in China studies from the regime that controls mainland China, via Confucius Institutes?—and where does the money go? At a public university, an obligation to be accountable to the tax payer should be obvious. And private universities that want to gain the public's trust cannot avoid transparency and accountability, either.

So I am operating with three sets of university principles, or values: academic freedom, the EU values—human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and human rights—and transparency, accountability, and academic self-administration.

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How do these values apply to cooperation with a partner abroad?

I want to offer three observations. First, our values are our values, and they are not limited to non-cooperation projects, or, the other way round, limited to just cooperation projects. They apply all the time, in all circumstances. Otherwise they are not our values.

Second, the question is how much are we willing to compromise certain of our values in order to achieve a specific aim, or specific aims, in a cooperation? That's an issue which affects not only academia. To achieve some of the EU aims—listed in Article 3—Article 2 is the values—of the EU Lisbon treaty—there will have to be a compromise with respect to values. For example, one of the four aims of the EU “within the wider world” includes “contribute to [...] the sustainable development of the Earth” ([https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/principles-and-values/aims-and-values\\_en](https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/principles-and-values/aims-and-values_en)). So if you want to prevent climate change, you may have to collaborate with the regime in mainland China, even though it clearly has not the slightest respect for human dignity, no freedom, no democracy, no equality—but the rule of elites—, no rule of law, and definitely no human rights. It's a gross human rights violator. And still you may find yourself collaborating because your aim is so important to you.

It's the same for academia: A cooperation partner may have no academic freedom, share none of the EU values, and have zero transparency, accountability to the public, or academic self-administration. So what do we do?

I think the only thing we can do is conduct a cost-benefit analysis. Say what the benefit is—at the end of the year the rector can claim that he or she has struck X new cooperation agreements and raised the profile of the institution and therefore deserves a salary bonus—and say what the costs are—academic freedom went out of the window, our most basic values went out of the window, we keep it all under the table, and we pay off the faculty involved.

My third point is that we can't come up with steadfast rules that tell us which cooperation agreements are acceptable and which are not. Different types of cooperation—a student exchange, a narrowly focused research project, a long-term collaborative effort in a field, or whatever else it might be—may warrant different decisions. It's not that one size fits all.

Decisions may also have to vary by discipline. It might be easier to collaborate in physics—where, for example, academic freedom might not be such a pressing issue—than in the social sciences. Decisions may differ from country to country. And what we feel is acceptable, and what is not, may change over time.

So instead of playing armchair theorists and invent rules, I think the way we should proceed is on a case-by-case basis—and be accountable for how we reach a decision and be transparent about our reasoning. When we decide to enter a specific cooperation agreement, say why we want it, write out the costs, including to our values, and put our reasoning in the public realm. Have faculty involved in the decision-making, which could perhaps also be done through an ethics committee. That's where I think the three basic governance principles are highly relevant: transparency, accountability, and academic self-governance.

Thus we'll develop a library of cases, and, if we document how each cooperation worked out over time, a set of case histories. From those, a body of “good practices” may emerge. There may be some wrong decisions, but we can't know up front; that's part of exercising our profession.

The point is that we can't have a black-and-white decision criterion. We operate in a gray area. Not to engage is not the way forward. Engage and pretend it's all OK, when it's not, is not the way forward, either. The way forward is to be explicit and public about why we

engage in a particular cooperation, and to be explicit and public about the costs, which include our compromised values.

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How to ensure that the institution's values survive a change in institutional leadership, and are present and lived?

If the values don't survive a change in institutional leadership, then they weren't university values to begin with and something is very, very wrong in how your institution is being run.

For example, one of the core values of my university, HKUST, is 1-HKUST (<https://hkust.edu.hk/about/mission-vision>). What do you think that is? One dash HKUST. Well, a previous president came up with it and it's supposed to mean something like the entire HKUST family works together. There are some more words, a jumble of well-sounding phrases which make rather little sense to me. That president is long gone. The value is still on the books. Some of the other "core values" and the rhetoric about them is little better. How much respect do you think I have for HKUST's leadership when their revealed core value appears to be silliness?

As I said before, the academic profession has one core value: academic freedom. I suggest the institution's leadership focus on that and make sure it is well defined, the implications are widely known, and the necessary mechanisms are in place to protect it.

If you have a laundry list of other "university values" and you don't live by them, if you don't legitimize them through faculty and student consent—hard to obtain as individuals' values differ—, if you don't put them into continuous awareness of those who constitute the university, if you don't have an ombudsperson or an ethics committee to address violations of university values, if you don't have enforcement mechanisms in place, and if you don't periodically review your "university values" as the values of our societies change, then you are not serious about your "university values."

How can "science diplomacy" be mobilized to promote values?

It is not the task of science to "proselytize."

Depending on your university's mission—presumably some variation on the "quest for truth"—scientific inquiry has a clearly defined task—and it is not "to promote values."

Values are lived. In a specific cooperation, we may want to be clear about our minimum requirements for engagement and spell them out in clear and unapologetic fashion. Then conduct periodic reviews of if these requirements are still met. The minimum requirements will likely be different from one type of cooperation to another.

For example, in the case of a student exchange, I probably have very low minimum requirements. I suggest to put our students who go to a partner university overseas through a mandatory course on the politics and society of that country. Not some general course with a

bit of history and plenty of sightseeing recommendations, but a course that directly confronts, with our values, the system that our students move into. A course that interprets the ‘other’ from the point of view of our values, and that has the potential for highly critical discussion. I would like to see student awareness raised beforehand rather than dropping them unawares into an abyss of indoctrination under a totalitarian regime. And a student exchange that’s about giving students a free trip abroad so that they can learn mathematics during the day and party at night isn’t what I think we should be organizing.—Similarly, put students coming to us from a partner institution through a mandatory course that confronts them head-on with our political system and our values.

I would also like to add that many professors on the Chinese mainland hold values that are very similar to ours, and feel as strongly about academic freedom as we do. I would prefer not to on our side burn bridges to such individuals because of some greater political cause. It’s not us vs. them, it’s one humankind, and abandoning those who share our values to isolation under a totalitarian system is not a step that I favor.

### How to deal with an erosion of values?

You need enforcement mechanisms.

I wonder if a university’s declared “values”—none clearly defined and enforceable—are being taken seriously by anyone. I wonder how serious rectors are about their own proclaimed university values, especially given my experience at HKUST. Rectors may not even want their well-sounding values to be enforceable as it would limit their own discretionary powers.

At HKUST, the leadership a few years ago agreed to set up a second campus in Guangzhou, just across the border on the mainland. The Guangdong provincial government provides the land, constructs the buildings, and pays the running costs. All that HKUST has to do is to organize academia on that campus. One of the many ‘core values’ of HKUST is “academic freedom.” I haven’t seen a single thought given to how this HKUST core value is going to be nurtured and protected on HKUST’s mainland campus.

Whatever rationale for the mainland campus I have seen made no sense to me. What I have heard, and read, seemed so illogical, that I ended up writing a 15-page critique (<https://carstenholz.people.ust.hk/CarstenHolz-CritiqueHKUST-GZcampus-25Jun2020.pdf>). Today the mainland campus is up and running. I haven’t heard anything about it for a year or so and have no idea what’s going on.—Remember transparency, accountability, and academic self-governance? Zero. All I can think of is: HKUST in Hong Kong is—or used to, pre-pandemic and pre-CCP takeover of Hong Kong—well integrated with Western academia. Its faculty bring their experience and international networks to the Guangzhou campus, and right next to the Guangzhou campus sits a science & technology park. HKUST then appears to simply be used by a totalitarian regime to transfer Western knowledge onto the mainland, perhaps to develop it further on the mainland, and to transform this knowledge into mainland economic and military power.