

Higher education should help to provide “Ethical Competence”

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Distrust of expertise and research, of established political institutions, of the free media and maybe also of the democratic system as such seem to be on the rise in many countries. Several research institutes report a shrinking support of democracy and increasing support for nationalistic, authoritarian and also xenophobic political parties. Established measures of political freedom and democracy around the world show a falling tendency. Democracy, the respect for the rule of law and human rights seems to have peaked about ten years ago. Add to this the many large-scale corruption, tax evasion and fraud scandals that have been revealed recently, such as the Panama-papers and in the International Football Association (FIFA).

Despite many ambitious anti-corruption campaigns and programs, established measures of this particular social ill show no tendency for it to decline. On the contrary, in many countries, corruption seems to be on the rise. We have also seen ethically dubious behaviour in the business world, not least from large companies in countries known for their low levels of corruption such as Volkswagen in Germany and TeliaSonera in Sweden and Finland.

Survey measures show that there is a perception that current society is deeply unjust, because the political and economic elites are not acting for the common good, but are instead arranging things to benefit themselves and their allies. As an

example, almost eighty percent of the population in the United States agrees that there is widespread corruption in their government. And a fairly high level of interpersonal trust is essential to a well-functioning and prosperous society.

The elites that have become distrusted have one thing in common: they have almost without exception been trained at leading universities. In other words, there is not necessarily anything wrong with their knowledge, technical competences and intellectual abilities. Instead, the deficiencies are in their ability to understand and practice critical ethical behaviour. Some universities and colleges have recently come to realize the importance of this issue. However, the central questions of ethics are either missing or given a very modest role in most higher education institutions.

Transparency International estimates that 6bn people live in countries with a serious corruption problem. Internationally, the health sector is particularly hard hit by corruption, from medical personnel requiring bribes to companies who sell fake medicines. One can literally say that many people in the world are dying of corruption. In addition, one of the main reasons that people say they are dissatisfied with their lives (aka “unhappy”) is that they perceive themselves to be living under unjust and corrupt public institutions. The lack of ethics and the prevalence of corruption in the public sector is probably the biggest obstacle to social and economic development. Conversely, one can say that the most important asset of a society is the ethical quality of its public institutions.

The well-known American political scientist Francis Fukuyama has argued that it is a “natural instinct” for people with a public position of power to use it to benefit his or her self, family, friends, clan, tribe, allies, co-ethnics or economic interest. To not indulge in favouritism, but to act impartially, in the public interest and in accordance with laws and regulations is, says Fukuyama, something that must be learned and trained.

This is why the values IAU promotes – equity, ethics, integrity, solidarity and the principles of sustainable development need to

be practiced. Core values such as democracy, legality, integrity, fairness, freedom of opinion, and freedom of information form a solid basis for a good society and for health and wellbeing of its citizens. This corresponds closely to the IAU Strategic Plan 2016-2020. Our joint challenge spells implementation.

With this in mind, a few years ago, the Compostela Group of Universities, an international network of 68 higher education institutions took an important decision based on an initiative from us. In its so called Poznan-declaration, this university network recommended that critical ethical thinking should be included in all educational subject areas—for example, for doctors, economists, lawyers, teachers, and biologists. It should thus not be confined to special courses in philosophy but integrated in all forms of professional educations.

This declaration was unanimously adopted at the network's General Assembly in Poznan in 2014, and has therefore been named the Poznan Declaration. It has since been supported by several other key organizations, including Transparency International, the World Academy of Art and Science, the World University Consortium and the Library of Alexandria.

It is now important that this initiative can be moved from vision to reality. Given the above mentioned situation of increasing distrust in expert knowledge, in research, and in many professions, not to say in the democratic system as such, it is now time to urge all universities and colleges to make sure that critical ethical thinking becomes an integrated part of all their educational programs. When the next generation of leaders starts meeting the challenges and dilemmas they will encounter, it is our responsibility as educators that when they leave our universities and colleges, they are equipped with a working "ethical compass".

The **Poznan Declaration** can be found at <http://revistas.usc.es/gcompostela/en/activities/PoznanDeclaration.html>