

editorial: activism in higher education

On Education

The 22nd issue of on_education explores controversies and problems related to activism in the context of higher education. This issue critically examines questions such as: the legitimacy and rationales of different forms of activism of academics and students, for instance in the context of recent campus protests, the limits of academic freedom, the role of academics and universities in fostering social change as well as the paradoxes and pitfalls of ideals of value-free science. In light of recent public controversies sparked by these and other questions, it seems that the social and political function attributed to higher education in democratic societies is undergoing a crisis, which forms the background for this issue of on_education.

Keywords: activism, editorial, education

At numerous universities across the globe, students engaged in extensive demonstrations against the Israeli government's military actions in Gaza, which commenced in response to the terrorist attack perpetrated by Hamas on October 7, 2023. The disciplinary action taken by university administrations against these protesters was justified on the grounds that, in some instances, anti-Semitic rhetoric and slogans in support of Hamas were being disseminated. In opposition to the universities' robust intervention, including the police evacuation of protest camps, as well as the suspension and expulsion of students, a considerable number of academics have articulated their solidarity with protesting students. For example, Haslanger et al. (2023) at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) posit that "blocking students from engaging in planned activities contradicts MIT's commitment to 'cherish free expression, debate, and dialogue in pursuit of truth' (from the Values Statement)". In conclusion, they state: "It is extremely disturbing how fast the values we agreed to cherish have been so blatantly violated."¹ In Germany, scholars from Berlin's universities have also expressed support for the students following the police evacuation of the protest camps. An open letter currently signed by over 1,000 academics states: Regardless of whether we agree with the specific demands of the protest camp, we stand before our students and defend their right to peaceful protest, which also includes the occupation of university grounds (ZDFheute, 2024, own translation). The open letter has prompted a vigorous public discourse on the question of whether academics and students should be entitled to engage in activism and, if so, whether they should adopt a neutral or at least balanced stance in doing so.² In times of great polarisation and in the context of recent events at higher education institutions these are urgent questions: what are the limits of academic freedom? How are students, academics and administrative staff allowed to engage politically? How are the boundaries of political activism and social engagement defined? When students, academics and administrators engage in political activism, are they acting primarily as individuals or citizens who have the right to protest in democratic societies, or must they align with or represent the official position of their university? Where is activism located – at the individual or institutional level? Given the fact that academics and rectors from different parts of

the world have been dismissed or had to resign because of their stance on the war, to what extent is it possible to dissent from official or hegemonic discourses without fear of disciplinary consequences?

While the Gaza war protest is a highly contentious contemporary issue, the subject of activism in higher education is not a novel one. Martinez-Benyarko et al. (2023) state: “Throughout the history of higher education, students have engaged in activism, demanding institutions to change, adapt, and become more equitable.” The 1968 movement is particularly worthy of note for the demands it made. In the contemporary era, students demonstrate a proclivity for activism, striving to advance the rights of all, condemn discriminatory practices against minority groups, and advocate for the prevention of climate catastrophe. And scholars and scientists in general regularly feel obliged – as academics – to engage in activism; Scientist Rebellion is a case in point. Whether this is wise, even legitimate, is debated, however, both within and outside of academia: is activism compatible with the Weberian notion of value neutrality and the objectivity (supposedly) required in science and academic research generally? Does academics’ activism and public advocacy risk undermining the public’s trust in science, as it comes to be seen as ‘tainted’ by personal convictions, and in higher education, which may come to be seen as indoctrinatory? Should scientists therefore strictly separate their professional role and their role as citizens? Or, as others suggest, do academics rather have a special responsibility, at least concerning some issues, to engage in activism and/or public advocacy? In other words, do academics even have a responsibility to use their knowledge and expertise to contribute to social change or to voice critique to controversial social/political issues (Rahbari et al., 2024)? Scholars who propose this challenge the notion of the university as an isolated ‘Ivory Tower’, often detached from the political and social events of the world. And does this in fact follow naturally when one takes one’s own research and that of fellow academics seriously? More fundamentally, defenders of academic activism argue that science and academic research have never been ‘value free’, and always political; the idea of neutrality itself served and continues to serve political purposes. In short: higher education now finds itself at the heart of a heated public debate. It even seems that the social and political function attributed to higher education in democratic societies is undergoing a crisis, which forms the background for this issue of on_education.

The Editorial Team

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1. See also the skeptical thoughts on the selectivity of the contemporary protests by Johannes Drerup, Michael Merry und Viola Siegmeier: www.philomag.de/artikel/whataboutism-als-gespraechsstrategie
2. See <https://soziologie.de/aktuell/news/stellungnahme-der-dgs-zu-mediendarstellungen-von-akademikerinnen-im-rahmen-politischer-proteste-zum-israel-gaza-konflikt> a critical response: