

Press Release

Quality of higher education under threat

The leaders of 47 universities from around the world discussed the impacts of the trend towards academisation and dangers to academic freedom at the second Hamburg Transnational University Leaders Council.

Hamburg, 9 June 2017. Worldwide, the demand for an academic education continues to grow. The result is the rapid expansion of higher education institutions; the private sector, in particular, is booming. In countries throughout the world, it is thus becoming increasingly difficult to safeguard the quality of higher education. This is a finding by the second Hamburg Transnational University Leaders Council. Forty-seven university leaders from Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe and North and South America came together to attend this Council in Hamburg from 7 to 9 June. They discussed and debated the consequences of the trend towards academisation and the future of higher education at the invitation of the German Rectors' Conference, the Körber Foundation and Universität Hamburg.

"Safeguarding the quality of educational programmes is one of the shared challenges we face, regardless of our very disparate national situations.", said Prof Dr Horst Hippler, President of the German Rectors' Conference, in summing up. "We want a fairer distribution of opportunities in life across the world. Ensuring that the rapid expansion of higher education institutions – whether they be private or state-run – does not come at the cost of the requisite standards is therefore a global issue we need to address."

Academisation trend demands clear-cut division of responsibilities between types of higher education institutions

The Hamburg declaration "Organising Higher Education for the 21st Century" was adopted by the Council's participants as an outcome of their discussions. This declaration emphasises that a clear division of responsibilities among the different types of higher education institutions is an important

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foundation for a coherent differentiation of the higher education landscape worldwide. The declaration highlights the special responsibility of research universities within the higher education system given their formative role in society. At the same time, it underlines the significance of all post-secondary institutions – no matter what their size, the basis of their funding or their mission and profile.

“Following on from discussions on the extremely diverse post-secondary systems, the next step must be to create transparency for international users of the system - students, parents, businesses, and above all, policy-makers - before efforts at convergence can be initiated in the political arena.”, says Prof Dr Dieter Lenzen, President of Universität Hamburg.

Academic freedom threatened in many countries

The university leaders examined threats to, and restrictions on, academic freedom in many countries around the world, including the example of the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest, which is under threat of closure. Council participants were unanimous in agreement that both the scope for personal development of individual teaching and research staff and the institutional independence of the universities from political control are vital to academic freedom.

“A society can only be free if we also respect the autonomy of the universities.”, says Dr Lothar Dittmer, Chair of the Executive Board of the Körber Foundation. “Where academic freedom is endangered, democracy as a whole is also under threat.”

In the name of the Council, the German Rectors' Conference, the Körber Foundation and Universität Hamburg have penned an open letter to the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán calling for the continued existence of the CEU not to be endangered. Discussions are scheduled to take place on 23 June between the Hungarian Government and the State of New York, where the CEU is chartered, regarding the continued operation of the university.

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Materials for download

- “The Hamburg Declaration – Organising Higher Education for the 21st Century”
- Open letter from the initiators of the Hamburg Transnational University Leaders Council to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán
- Group photo of Council participants

Further information

The programme of the Hamburg Transnational University Leaders Council, the list of participants and further information are available at
www.htulc.de

About the Hamburg Transnational University Leaders Council

The Hamburg Transnational University Leaders Council brings together university leaders from research universities around the world in Hamburg. The Council is a joint initiative of the German Rectors' Conference, the Körber Foundation and Universität Hamburg. Its central objective is to actively shape the process of global higher education development.

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