

UNIVERSITIES BALANCE NEUTRALITY AND ACTIVISM



SCAN CARD · 09

DESCRIPTION

Universities operate in politically and socially sensitive environments. Issues such as climate change, migration, social justice and free speech generate growing expectations that universities take visible public positions. As universities become more engaged in societal challenges, their activities attract greater public attention and scrutiny.

Different stakeholder groups may hold conflicting expectations about how universities should respond to contested issues. As societal polarisation increases, universities will be forced to make more explicit choices about their role in value-based debates.

RELEVANCE

How universities position themselves affects trust, legitimacy and willingness to engage from different groups. Remaining neutral may be perceived as avoidance; taking positions may expose institutions to polarisation and backlash.

These perceptions influence who chooses to engage with universities, whose voices are included in dialogue, and how universities are viewed as partners in addressing societal issues.

NEED

Universities need clear governance principles defining the boundaries between academic freedom, institutional neutrality and public responsibility. Staff and students also require guidance and protection when engagement activities become politically sensitive.

This requires explicit decisions about when and how institutions speak, act or remain neutral in contested contexts. Without clear positioning, universities risk inconsistent responses, reputational instability and reduced trust from different stakeholder groups.

CATEGORY

Political · Social · Ethical

SIGNAL STRENGTH

Medium



SCANNING METHOD

Media analysis · Institutional review

SOURCES

EUA (2023) University Autonomy in Europe IV · Ben-Porath (2024) Depolarize Your Students · UNESCO (2021) Reimagining Our Futures · Council of Europe (2015) Student Engagement