

Protecting Freedom of Speech in Higher Education in Wartime

Public statement by Vice Presidents, Commissioners and Heads of Diversity and Inclusion Units in Israeli Universities, May 5, 2024

Democracy, critical thinking and diverse discourse are the heart and soul of higher education. Academia has a crucial role in shaping the character and perceptions of graduates towards their full participation in civil life by instilling democratic norms of fairness, justice, equality and diversity. In addition, academia plays a leading role in shaping public norms and values, a role it must not relinquish.

The war of October 2023 has polarized the discourse between different groups in Israeli society, resulting in a difficulty to tolerate controversial viewpoints that contradict the common public narrative. This difficulty is acutely felt in the higher education system: recent studies and surveys point to ongoing fear by members of minority groups on campus to express their views freely, and a tendency for self-censorship.

Precisely in these challenging times, however, it is essential for Israeli higher education institutions to stringently protect free speech. The Israeli higher education system has been facing repeated attempts by external entities to curtail the discourse of the academic community, including demands to impose sanctions against those who had expressed themselves in a manner inconsistent with the mainstream narrative. Demands by the Council for Higher Education to report on students' social media posts, the arrest and interrogation of a faculty member following a social media interview, and hearings in Knesset committees about a post published by another faculty member – are all examples of unprecedented events that took place over the past few months. At this time, we in academia must stand fast and unwaveringly defend the freedom of speech and academic freedom – within the boundaries of the law, which prohibits, among other things, incitement to violence, racism and terrorism – and to provide our full support to members of the academic community threatened by silencing.

As leaders of the field of diversity and inclusion in our universities, we hereby express our resolute commitment to continue charting a clear policy on freedom of speech, one that reflects the values of tolerance, recognition and inclusion – particularly at this time. We remind that the power of democracy lies especially in its ability to defend human rights in times of crisis. Indeed, history has taught us that in emergencies, democracies are particularly vulnerable to long-term damage. Silencing and limiting the freedom of speech of individuals severely harms the values of democracy, and may affect society for generations to come. Our duty is, therefore, to serve as society's moral compass, to defend democracy in war and peace, to uphold the values of diversity and inclusion, and to protect the right to freely express opinions – as profoundly controversial as they may be – without fear of persecution or prosecution.

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