

Transnational Academic Solidarity: The Responsibility Virus and The Power of Agency Alliance

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Transnational academic solidarity has become notable in global higher education, which is faced with disparate crises. Professors often take an active position to mitigate social and political challenges at home or abroad (Macfarlane, 2013). Their activism, however, can be impeded by the “responsibility virus” (Martin, 2003), a phenomenon characterised by irreconcilable over- and under-responsibilities within multi-stakeholder initiatives, where agency fades and failures ensue. This paper examines multi-agency dynamics and dilemmas in the academic and civic communities of Austria, Czechia and Poland, which have been coordinating and manifesting support for their counterparts in Ukraine. By leveraging data from semi-structured interviews, as well as institutional and media reports in these countries, this study examines what compels institutional and human agencies to ally and succeed in enabling solidarity and support across borders and cultures in times of crisis.

Full paper

Academic solidarity is manifested in various epistolary and humanitarian terms conveying compassion and the offering of aid to vulnerable colleagues and communities at home or abroad (Kneur et al., 2022). Camaraderie and cooperation are often more feasible locally than internationally, especially when geopolitical tensions and cultural barriers become insurmountable (May, 2007). Without political support, mutual trust and cross-border communication and charity, transnational solidarity can become illusory, rather than real (Korkman, 2022).

As knowledge producers and social actors (Macfarlane, 2013), academics are prone to creating problems, as much as mitigating them (Gorodnichenko et al, 2022; Korkman, 2022). Current Russo-Ukrainian war exemplifies how professors sometimes rely on limited cultural knowledge to make overconfident and erroneous judgments about geopolitical situations they scarcely understand (Gorodnichenko et al., 2022; McLaren, 2022). Academic activism can also be diverted by governmental or corporate authorities, who see solidarity-building as a threat, rather than a solution (Oleksiyenko, 2024). Constricted by fear of over- or under-reaction to complex challenges in domestic and foreign politics, professors can appear powerless to help their colleagues abroad.

This paper examines the dilemmas of transnational academic solidarity through the lens of over- and under-responsibility tensions, defined by Martin (2003) as “the responsibility virus”, which usually divides, rather than consolidates stakeholders’ commitments and responses. By examining instances of solidarity manifested during the 2022-24 war in Ukraine (Oleksiyenko, 2024), this paper considers the drivers of transnational solidarity acts expressed through the activism of professors, students, and their community networks in Austria, Czechia and Poland. The author conducted content analysis of online reports and social media statements to identify how recognition of solidarity and partnership-building was communicated locally and internationally. This was followed by unstructured and semi-structured interviews with academic and civic participants in the three countries. The respondents’ reflections on their experiences and the challenges associated with consolidating stakeholder interests and commitments were noted, tabulated, compared, analysed thematically and discussed collegially.

The preliminary data analysis suggests that academic solidarity depends on the nature and understanding of the crisis abroad, as well as on perceptions of civic responsibility to engage in local and/or transnational activities. Some activists preferred to differentiate their academic/civic roles and domestic/foreign responsibilities in order to maintain discursive freedom, while separately making meaningful contributions to societies and academia. Others saw campuses as inseparable from society and thus viewed their academic and civic roles as being closely integrated. Organizational skills, community experiences, and disciplinary orientations had an impact on the level of agency consolidation resulting in concrete/material support to scholars at risk. Given that some academics prioritized their responsibility as guardians of universal academic values, their collegial support was simultaneously directed at affected colleagues in the aggressor and victim states. No matter where they were coming from, scholars at risk were viewed as needing immediate support to fulfill their research and teaching obligations.

The alignment of institutional and individual manifestations of solidarity is often an outcome of collegial mobilization and coordinated resource solicitation across different levels of governance. In some cases, consultations were organized through inter-divisional councils. The institutional engagement was often prompted by departments and individuals, who had already established partnerships with their counterparts in Ukraine. Some university presidents became significant enablers of

institutional support to refugee scholars and students through discretionary funds in their budgets. Consolidated efforts were invariably stronger when a convergence of resources was achieved with additional aid from the government. The universities organized web-based platforms to report on the structure and outcomes of the mobilised and distributed resources. Solidarity manifestations often came in waves (in response to geopolitical or budgetary changes), rather than in the form of sustainable and open-ended investments. With a stronger agency of university authorities in Czechia and Poland, the Ukrainian students played a humbler role. In Austria, the students took a more proactive role with authorities being less regulative. Some student leaders succeeded in engaging resources from civic and business communities, city and regional governments, and other campuses. This was important at times when the university resources were on the ebb.

Ultimately, the alliance of institutional and human agencies appears to achieve more success within universities where academic activists have trustworthy domestic and foreign partners, credible publicity, and a legacy of value attached to civic responsibilities. The comparative case study is useful in analysing variances in agency manifestation and consolidation as transnational academic activism moves from chaotic humanitarian aid actions to institutionally structured resource management. The emerging analytical framework illuminates key elements in the analysis of agency dilemmas in transnational higher education.

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