

"We have a duty of expression": Faculty perspectives on the democratic value of universities.

Anna Ólafsdóttir, Sigurður Kristinsson

University of Akureyri, Akureyri, Iceland

Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This study explores how universities contribute to democratic value. Using philosophical analysis and interviews with university faculty in Iceland, it builds on Kristinsson's account of the democratic value of universities, distinguishing between instrumental, contributory, symbolic, and intrinsic value (2023). Interviews revealed how knowledge creation in universities can lead to better and more ethical decisions, how universities nurture democratic culture, and how they provide public discourse with objective truths. They contribute through professional education, consultation, civic engagement, and by providing neutral platforms for public discussion. Symbolically, universities embody free expression and reasoned debate. Intrinsic value lies in democratic governance, though actual practices may differ. Academics see themselves as "guards" of democracy with a civic "obligation to interfere". Overall, the interviews indicate how universities can play a vital role in addressing global threats to democracy, and their analysis clarifies systematically the democratic value of critical education and scholarship at universities.

Full paper

Introduction

The 2020 Magna Charta Universitatum update signals universities' commitment to democratic principles (Magna Charta Observatory 2020). Combining philosophical analysis and interviews with faculty at three universities in Iceland, this study seeks to explain how universities have value for democracy. The paper outlines the study's theoretical background, methods, findings, and implications for the role of universities as guardians of democracy.

Background

Recent academic discourse underscores the role of universities in nurturing democracy (Bergan et al., 2016; Brink, 2018; Daniels, 2021; Goddard, 2009; Goddard et al., 2016; White, 2017). The revised Magna Charta Universitatum emphasizes universities' duty to uphold democratic values amidst rising global challenges (Magna Charta Observatory 2020). Threats, including governmental interference, rule of law erosion, and misinformation proliferation, undermine trust in democratic institutions (Kloubert, 2015; Lührmann et al., 2019; OECD, 2022; Somer & McCoy, 2019) and tensions exist between universities'

democratic mission and market-driven agendas, impacting public engagement (Brown, 2015; Collini, 2012; Giroux, 2018; Nussbaum, 2010). Despite challenges, universities stand as bastions of truth, fostering critical thinking and debate essential for democratic citizenship (Arendt, 2005; Árnason, 2022; Beatson et al., 2022; Chambers, 2021; Feldt et al., 2024; Jónasson, 2008; Sorensen, 2015), as well as intellectual freedom crucial for individual and societal growth (Callard, 2017). Globally, universities serve as bulwarks against totalitarianism (Habermas, 1987; Jaspers, 1959). As social constructs, universities are shaped by diverse groups of stakeholders (Kristinsson, 2023), including academic faculty. Their ideas can therefore shed important light on the democratic value of universities.

Methods

Twenty-six faculty members from three universities in Iceland were interviewed, reflecting diverse backgrounds in social, natural, and technical sciences. Analysing responses through Kristinsson's model (Figure 1), the research distinguished between extrinsic and intrinsic democratic value of universities.

Figure 1. The democratic value of universities (Kristinsson 2023)

By synthesizing philosophical analysis with empirical research, the study elucidated how faculty perceptions enrich understanding of universities' democratic significance.

Results

Instrumental value was exemplified by respondents' perspectives on knowledge creation with positive consequences for the quality of decisions and general welfare. Similarly, discussions of fostering democratic competence and culture emphasized educating students about democratic values, critical thinking, and civic engagement. The commitment to truth emerged as crucial, underscoring the importance of independence from external influences.

Respondents highlighted universities' contributory value to democracy, emphasizing their role in professional education, expert opinion, civic engagement, and impartial public discourse facilitation. They also suggested universities symbolize democratic ideals as realms of freedom and through collegial governance. Universities were viewed as a citadel of free expression and experimentation. Discussions on collegial governance revealed divergent views, suggesting its symbolic value might exceed its practical application.

The intrinsic value of universities lies in their embodiment of democratic ideals, reflected in organizational structure and governance. Respondents described universities as democratic institutions, albeit with ambivalence about the authenticity and effectiveness of democratic practices. While doubts exist, many noted that democratic governance was valuable, suggesting universities' role as manifestations of democracy. However, the notion of universities as essential to democracy was less clear. Still, one respondent likened university staff to "guards" of democracy with a "duty of expression".

Discussion and conclusions

Respondents highlighted universities' function in providing reliable knowledge crucial for informed decision-making in various spheres such as politics, economics, and labor movements, aligning with Daniels' discussion on universities as sources of knowledge amidst societal challenges (Daniels, 2021). They emphasized how university education and innovation enhance societal well-being, thus reflecting current emphasis on universities' direct engagement with local communities, fostering collaboration and dialogue (Bergan et al., 2016; Goddard et al., 2016; Magna Charta Observatory, 2020). White (2017) and Árnason (2022) highlight universities' critical function, resonating with respondents' views on universities as spaces for ethical knowledge creation, independent from special interests. Critical thinking and commitment to truth was said to nurture democratic competencies, which aligns with scholarly discourse (Arendt, 2005; Chambers, 2021; Nussbaum, 2010; White, 2017).

Respondents' discussion of universities' contributory value to democracy through research, teaching, and expertise, resonates with the "civic university" (Goddard et al., 2016), and their ambivalence towards collegial governance fits patterns of declining academic citizenship (Feldt et al., 2024; Sorensen, 2015). Finally, the idea of universities as "guards" of democracy with an academic "duty of expression" echoes Jaspers' (1959) and Habermas' (1987) perspective on universities as the "intellectual conscience" of society.

Overall, these interviews with faculty in a small, democratic country indicate how universities can play a vital role in addressing global threats to democracy, and their analysis clarifies systematically the democratic value of critical education and scholarship at universities.



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