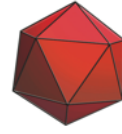




universität
wien



Department of Science and Technology Studies
University of Vienna

*Universities in democracy
Vulnerability and resilience in
increasingly authoritarian contexts*

MAXIMILIAN FOCHLER

UnIViT Professor's Forum
University of Vienna
06.05.2025

What do universities do in and for a democracy?



- Provide knowledge and expertise
- Contribute to societal debate and sense-making
- Educate (young) people to be critical citizens
- Develop new ways of seeing the world
- Internationalize and broaden horizons
- (and much more)

Universities in contemporary societies



- Unis and their members need autonomy
- But their success creates expectations and dependencies
- Unis exist in an *irreducible* tension field between autonomy and functionality

The authoritarian attack playbook



Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

Harvard is an Anti-Semitic, Far Left Institution, as are numerous others, with students being accepted from all over the World that want to rip our Country apart. The place is a Liberal mess, allowing a certain group of crazed lunatics to enter and exit the classroom and spew fake ANGER AND HATE. It is truly horrific! Now, since our filings began, they act like they are all "American Apple Pie." Harvard is a threat to Democracy, with a lawyer, who represents me, who should therefore be forced to resign, immediately, or be fired. He's not that good, anyway, and I hope that my very big and beautiful company, now run by my sons, gets rid of him ASAP!

3.29k ReTruths 15.6k Likes Apr 24, 2025 at 9:33 AM

- Accuse of distance to societal reality
- Meritocracy as „trojan horse“
- Allege one-sided politicisation
- Revert discourses, e.g. paint scientific concepts as ideology
- Demand state intervention to „restore“

“So choose an institution you care about [...] and take its side.”

Timothy Snyder (2017). On Tyranny. Twenty Lessons from the 20th Century. p. 22

Financialisation as vulnerability

- Even higher for European universities?
- „Attaching strings“ to funding can become a dangerous practice in an authoritarian context
- Diversification of income?
- Institutional „buffering“ is crucial

Narrow meritocracy as vulnerability

- Resist narrowing of quality criteria
- Remember that performance depends on structural conditions
- Do institutional processes reflect this?

Neutrality as vulnerability

- Neutrality is not a tenable discourse position when the playbook obfuscates the boundary between ideology and science
- Unis (and their academics) cannot be neutral against positions that are contrary to the logic of their existence

Vivid internal discourse as resilience

- How democratic is a uni as an organization?
- Fear and avoidance of controversial topics weakens institutional culture and resilience
- Crucial to establish rules for discourse and discuss red lines

Relevance as resilience

- Societal legitimacy is key
- Science communication and public intellectuals
- Less „elitarian“ forms of engagement, what difference does the university make in everyday life?

“So choose an institution you **care** about [...] and take its side.”

Timothy Snyder (2017). On Tyranny. Twenty Lessons from the 20th Century. p. 22
(my emphasis)