



🔗, ALL ARTICLES, EDUCATION POLICY, FEATURED, ILLIBERALISM

🔗🔗 **Why we must resist
illiberalism's attacks on higher
education**

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Andrea Pető breaks down illiberal leaders' specific strategies to undermine academic freedom, and offers suggestions for how academics, and citizens, can resist illiberal attacks on higher education

Many of my colleagues working in higher education are confident that illiberalism will not impact on tenured academics, their academic freedom and the status of higher education in the global higher education landscape – or, rather, theirs is a sleepwalking approach to illiberalism. For their optimism seems to me unfounded.

The **threats to academic freedom** in other countries offer insights into the script we can expect illiberalism to follow in the field of higher education. These countries include European Union member Hungary, from where my university, the **Central European University** (CEU), was forced to escape to Austria.

Illiberal states have introduced a number of policy measures in the field of higher education. These include direct control over university finances, deleting previously accredited study programmes, and inventing new disciplines. All these were first **tested in the Hungarian laboratory**.

For illiberals, higher education is not a space for critical reflection and the transfer of knowledge. Rather, it is a place to quickly and efficiently educate an adaptable workforce. It is a site to rule and dominate to achieve their ideological aims. Illiberals often couch this dismantling of the traditional university structure in the language of neoliberal managerialism, with words like 'excellence', 'impact' and 'social outreach'. This makes it difficult to fight against.

The four strategies of illiberalism

Illiberalism uses **four strategies** when it comes to higher education.

Breaking academic norms

The first is breaking the academic norms, or undermining established norms regarding academic freedom. Illiberal governments shut down gender studies and other academic programmes they consider irrelevant in labour market terms.

The Hungarian government used this argument in 2017 when they deleted a two-year MA in gender studies from the accredited study list. This was despite the fact that the

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Bending the rules

The second is **bending the rules**. This means using existing laws (or policies) to undermine institutional structures. For instance, the government might use existing institutional regulations to diminish funding or close independent units. It might circumvent democratic election processes for university leadership, and parachute in new leaders who are close to the government.

The domination of most of the Hungarian higher education system happened in a period of just two weeks, during which the government appointed loyal commissars to university boards.

Extra-legal methods

The third strategy is the use of extra-legal methods, such as personal and informal threats, rewriting regulations for ideological purposes, delegitimising certain forms of inquiry and applying certain parameters – like manipulating the volume of student enrolments. All these may be generally relevant to higher education but their application may allow for administrative discretion over what is taught.

De-specification

The fourth is de-specification. This involves reorganising educational programmes: integrating or dissolving programmes through the redefinition of teaching content. This is also a form of ‘discourse capture’ whereby, during the reorganisation process, outside bodies and selected experts define and redefine teaching content in order to promote ideological aims.

In the case of gender studies, this has involved rebranding educational programmes and courses as ‘family studies’. It is a process of de-specification which has been carried out in countries from Russia and Türkiye to Hungary.

Lessons for Israeli universities

Academics in Israel think that their academic ivory tower will resist the earthquakes caused by illiberal higher education policy. Their hopes are unfounded. They are based on the illusion that there have been illiberal tendencies in higher education before, such as its privatisation. This has allowed parallel education structures to develop, in which the content is different from what is available in public higher education. It has also resulted in the appointment of commissars to leadership positions.

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government sets a clear path for transforming the country, including its higher education, in an illiberal direction. It has introduced evaluation and scholarships not based on merit. It has connected the right to study with military service. All this has caused internal political conflict, and resulted in mass protests in Israel.

That academic freedom will result in further securitization of higher education. Classroom video surveillance systems installed. Campuses will overuse free digital appli

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Academic institutions and actors are global. The spread of these illiberal tendencies is therefore likely to happen faster than before. The examples from illiberal states like Hungary may be easy to implant in Israel. However, they will bring the danger of further global isolation, and a decrease in Israeli higher education academic exchanges.

Comments

“Control of resources we must resist illiberalism’s attacks on higher education”

Illiberalism in higher education operates outside of the previous consensual knowledge from . It does not aim to produce facts nor to create a mirror image of reality. It is in its nature to control educational resources, maintaining and possibly extending its power structure. Ultimately, it wants to make sure nobody else has access to the resources.

Anonymous says
May 22, 2023 at 10:49 am

In non-democratic states new political regimes have emerged from the re-articulation of the relationship between the state and citizens. This has led to the construction of new spaces. In these states, studying becomes a privilege rather than a human right. Citizens need to use these spaces to fight for the right to access resources. In this case, they must get access to higher education and determine the content of that education, as they did in 1968.

Saikkonen, S. & Välvirronen, E. (2022): The trickle-down of political and economic control: Illiberalism uses pseudo-scientific arguments to support its ideological aims. However, the desire for academic freedom, and humans' passion for learning, open up the possibility of intellectual resistance based on an alliance of students and faculty. We must do this even if it means establishing temporary alternative institutions, without official authorisation, or moving into exile from one European Union member state to another, as has been the case for the Central European University.

Valivirronen, E. & Saikkonen, S. (2021). Science communicators intimidated: researchers' freedom of expression and the rise of authoritarian populism.
https://jcom.sissa.it/article/pubid/JCOM_2004_2021_A08/

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