

Universitaris per la convivència – A plea for coexistence and freedom of expression

The undersigned, faculty members from different scientific disciplines and with diverse ideological sensibilities, are troubled with the conspicuous partisan instrumentalization of our universities to the extent that such instrumentalization affects our duties as professionals and our rights as individuals. In particular, we are concerned about our right to ideological freedom.

Throughout 2017, the governing bodies of many major universities in Catalonia issued statements addressed to the university community demonstrating a close alignment with the current political postulates of the Catalan government. Likewise, faculty, students, and administrative personnel received massive e-mails from pro-independence unions and from the governing bodies of their universities encouraging them, for example, to support the so-called “national stoppage” orchestrated by the Catalan government in October 3, 2017 (two days after the illegal referendum for independence was staged) – the only political strike promoted by the government in power that we remember. Additionally, we were notified that the academic activity would be suspended that day, thus violating our freedom to decide whether or not we wished to participate.

We have witnessed pro-independence symbols and partisan graffiti proliferating in buildings on several university campuses and being granted institutional support, while, on the contrary, the academic authorities have turned a blind eye to groups of constitutionalist students that have been victims of threats and aggression on campus. Even a cultural event – a talk on Cervantes sponsored by a non-nationalist organization – was suspended, alleging safety reasons, when participants were threatened by violent pro-independence radicals.

The governing bodies of our universities must, therefore, be held accountable for their support and tolerance of those actions and tactics. The members of university councils and governing bodies have been elected exclusively to lead their educational institutions in the best possible way so that teaching, research and transfer of knowledge are paramount. They must also ensure that these functions can be carried out in an environment where freedom is preserved and total respect for diversity guaranteed. As public institutions, Catalan universities must remain politically neutral and guarantee ideological freedom for all of its members. Ideological freedom is a fundamental right that enjoys full recognition in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, the Spanish Constitution and the Catalan Statute of Autonomy.

Partisan pronouncements issued by an educational institution are not protected by freedom of speech. Freedom of speech is exclusively an individual right. On the contrary, such pronouncements constitute an unacceptable instrumentalization of these institutions that contributes to increase a spiral of silence and to generate a sense of monolithic thinking that inhibits the free exchange of ideas in the public sphere.

Needless to say, the use of any form of violence or threats of violence, such as those described above, is incompatible with a democratic milieu and must always be condemned unequivocally.

In light of the foregoing, we request that the governing bodies of our universities and the Council for Higher Education of the Catalan government:

1.- Respect the obligatory principle of neutrality of any public administrative body, as well as the fundamental right to ideological freedom to which faculty, students and administrative personnel are entitled by refraining from promoting or issuing partisan statements and from allowing partisan symbols to be displayed on any university premises.

2.- Guarantee and promote freedom of speech for all members of the university community, respect the right to equality, avoid discrimination, and strongly oppose any action that denigrates people or groups because of their ideas.

3.- Take the necessary measures to raise awareness among the university staff about the importance of respecting different political sensibilities at all times. In this regard, it is particularly troubling that students may be unduly intimidated by a faculty member conspicuously demonstrating his or her partisan views.

We believe that these requests are essential for us, educators, who must be able to carry out our teaching and research responsibilities in complete freedom, and for universities as institutions responsible for fostering a public opinion that is respectful of ideological diversity, which is an essential condition for a true democratic coexistence.

Barcelona, October 3, 2018