

# The Woke Debate in Academia— What Could Take Us Further?

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**I** disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” These words are often ascribed to Voltaire. Wrongly, but they nonetheless show us the foundation of both freedom of speech and academic freedom. The latter, of course, is more limited than the former. Academic freedom is always subject to such conditions as integrity, quality, openness, falsification, and scientific debate. These conditions are largely *self-imposed* in order to maintain the credibility of academia, and hence its entitlement to this freedom.

Without it, the university machinery comes to a standstill. In their [2008 paper](#) for the League of European Research Universities (LERU), Geoffrey Boulton and Colin Lucas argue that “[t]he freedom to enquire, to debate, to criticize and to speak truth to power, whether it be the power of government, of those that fund the university, or those who manage it, is central to the vitality of the university and its utility to society.”

And in their joint [Code for Good Governance](#) (2019), the Dutch universities declare, “Universities traditionally stand for freedom of thought and speech, and the independent development of education and research. They are spaces where any question may be asked and answered in freedom. Each university strives for a culture in which people feel safe and an inspiring environment that enables the entire academic community, also including our students, to develop to its full potential.”

Throughout the history of science and scholarship, all this has never been a given. The newest kid on the block in the debate on academic freedom is the woke issue. Wokeness is an interesting but complex concept that is still far from fully formed, and it is one that has taken off partly as a result of the Black Lives Matter movement. Put briefly, wokeness is a strongly activist global protest in society and in universities as a reaction to injustices, past and present, toward minorities. Anyone who takes such injustices seriously is woke, or “has woken up.” And those who do not, whose eyes are shut, are putting themselves outside the academic debate, or will be kicked out.

There does not seem to be much leeway here. Given its close links to identity and racism, all too soon the discussion becomes personal, resulting in “cancelling” people or denying speakers the right to express their views in a university context (“*no-platforming*”). The current debate is threatening to make us into one another’s hangman: I am right, and you are wrong. We are turning ourselves into victims and perpetrators, and in doing so we are undermining our education and research.

## “Stay Woke”

And this is going on at a time when the world needs its universities more than ever before.

“Woke issues” are often language issues, because words are hardly ever neutral. But, besides language, there is also a movement toward “decolonization of the curriculum” (See also Fakunle, Kalinga, and Lewis, “Internationalization and Decolonization in UK Higher Education: Are We There Yet?” [in this issue](#)). We ask ourselves questions like: Are our textbooks diverse enough? Are there other voices than those of dominant Western writers? Is it primarily white male authors that are prescribed, or is there also a place for women and for authors of color? And can particular topics still be prescribed? Take, for example, a scientific approach to the history of slavery, which could be seen as overtly relativistic.

These are discussions that we need to have within our communities. Academic freedom is probably the subject on which emotions run highest within academia. But one

## Abstract

The current woke debate has the potential to cause a rift in our university communities. What can we do to avoid that, and how can we make sure that the debate makes us stronger as a community, instead of weaker? This article presents a few suggestions from a former university president.

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thing is sure: Without challenging discussion with those who hold a different opinion, there can be no education and no advances in scientific research.

Should “staying woke” not become a continuous task for *everyone* within the university?

### Open Discussion as a “Must”

So, how should academia go about that? This is an urgent question. The woke debate has spread from Anglo-Saxon countries to universities on the European mainland, without a clear instruction manual. It has already become an issue for the more traditional disciplines in many universities and programs. University administrators and boards have an important leadership role here. That is no easy role, but, as we all know, an easily governed university is no university at all (Boulton & Lucas, 2008). Lecturers and students, too, have an important part to play. The challenge is how we can treat one another respectfully without the debate losing its bite.

Here are five suggestions from the sidelines (the place where I, too, find myself as an emeritus university president):

- Academic communities should not wait for instances when emotions run high but need to take the initiative and have open conversations about wokeness, and give one another space. If *we* in academia cannot have that conversation, how can we expect it of the rest of society? Let the university set an example for the world.
- Involve first-year students, too, certainly in fields with a strong international and intercultural dimension, and have this conversation in the very first weeks of their program.
- Today’s universities are broadly accessible and many have also become global universities, with global communities. Some students and staff may even originate from countries that are at war with one another. The globalization of higher education is a huge benefit, and at the same time, it puts pressure on the ambition to create a university community. Students and faculty, therefore, must have the right to expect one another to be aware of their different histories, cultures, and identities.
- Universities are places for the new, the provocative, the disturbing, and the unorthodox. Be very cautious, therefore, in banning student-invited speakers. And if there is a real risk of the name of the university being misused, move the talk from the lecture hall to a space where students have their own say: student societies or debating societies (as Timothy Garton Ash once suggested).
- And finally, in decolonizing the curriculum, take care that the discussion does not focus predominantly on weeding out “old” or possibly “outdated” perspectives, insights, and arguments. Also consider whether *adding* new perspectives might not be a more effective approach. The history of science shows that it is ultimately the specific gravity of these perspectives, insights, and arguments, old and new, that will determine what will advance science and scholarship and what will have the opposite effect. ▲

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