



# Trends in Higher Education

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## Message from the Publisher

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This issue of Trends in Higher Education focuses on the challenges faced by tertiary level institutions (TLIs) as a result of geopolitical developments taking place globally. It draws attention to how education policies and the governance of universities are affected by election outcomes, particularly in some of the populous countries. In addition, it looks at how continuing political instability, repressive legislation, and the exercise of 'soft power' affect higher education. In this regard, concerns relating to activism on campuses are also addressed especially in light of the war in the Gaza strip and the rise in antisemitism on campuses. Administrators, faculty, and students have all been affected by these events.

The discussion reveals how global and regional political events, public policy, legislation and government systems and decisions are having definitive impacts on higher education. Consequently, TLIs will have to (re)consider their internationalisation policies as they relate to research collaborations, staff and student mobility programmes, teaching and learning activities and engagement and advocacy roles, in the future. In such a volatile political environment, it is expected that some universities' global institutional rankings would be affected negatively by the "new" research and internationalisation agenda, which limits their collaborative efforts at all levels. In this regard, university administrators will have to take into account these new political developments and revise their strategic, operational and risk plans to match these new actualities.

This Bulletin focuses on political issues or concerns that would likely impact the sector as a result of public policy, and legislation, and government systems and decisions. Among some of the issues explored here include the role of universities' governing bodies, effects of the Israel/Gaza war on education, the soft power of universities, and managing the campus activism.

Happy reading!

## Trends in Higher Education – Political Issues

### Introduction

Political strife and violent conflicts continue to dominate in several African states (Niger, Sudan, Mali), the Middle East (in particular Israel/Gaza conflict with regional spillovers including Houthis in Yemen) as well as the ongoing Ukraine-Russia war have endangered lives and impacted livelihoods. These conflicts have the potential to cause resource stress, impacting global energy prices and affecting global supply chains thus, causing economic hardship which can weaken state capacity. In addition, there are rising tensions within the Caucasus region, Red Sea, and the South China Sea with a number of deteriorated situations globally according to the International Crisis Group (2024). Closer to home, there are other situations worth monitoring: Venezuela (competitive elections), Guyana (border dispute) and Haiti (instability), which can impact trade/trade deals and diplomatic relations. The results of the World Economic Forum (2024) Global Risks Perception Survey highlight a predominantly negative outlook relating to stability over the next two years that is expected to worsen over the next ten years - 54% anticipate some instability and a moderate risk of global catastrophes, 27% expect greater turbulence, 3% expect global catastrophic risks to occur in the short term and only 16% expect a stable or calm outlook in the next two years. Over a ten-year period, 63% of respondents expect a stormy or turbulent outlook and less than 10% expect a calm or stable situation (WEF 2024).

Election outcomes provide insights into the preference of populations for ideologically sound political parties and leaders who are expected to positively influence the contents and priorities of public policy and foreign relations.

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According to Inter-Parliamentary Union or IPU (2024) several Parliamentary elections are expected this year in over 70 countries including Azerbaijan, Belgium, Ghana, India, Mexico, Mauritius, Russian Federation, Seychelles, South Africa, Taiwan, United Kingdom, United States, and the European Parliament. Elections in some of these countries are expected to have significant geoeconomic and geopolitical implications. Concerns about mis/dis information and electoral manipulation is high in some countries. The full effects of the elections outcomes are likely to be seen in 2025 and will likely have implications for policy coherence on issues relating to climate, energy, and tech regulation.

Within the Caribbean region, Dominican Republic and Haiti are expected hold elections in May and December, respectively. Among the UWI-17 countries, no Parliamentary elections are scheduled for this year and thus, limited policy changes are expected but elections are carded for 2025 in Belize, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and St Vincent and the Grenadines as well as Guyana and Suriname (IPU, n.d.).

#### **Higher education in the ‘year of elections’**

Approximately 49% of the people in the world are heading to the polls this year (Ewe 2023). As such, questions about the role higher education will play in party campaigns and voters’ decisions and how will education and research be reshaped by the results are expected to be of grave concern for policy makers and leaders of TLIs. For example, higher education is not likely to feature predominately on election platforms in the United States or Indonesia whereas it may be a key talking point in South Africa elections. However, the effects on higher education would most likely be seen in election outcomes, in countries such as India, Mexico, Taiwan, European Union.

Within the United Kingdom, the polls give Labour a big lead over the Conservative Party, which is generally hostile to universities. According to Basken et al (2024), the Conservatives are

unlikely to shift their perspective on university funding, where the tuition fee cap has been frozen at £9,250 since 2017. Conversely, the Labour party has indicated that it has dropped its policy to scrap fees and criticised the funding status quo. A recent report on higher education funding notes that “any increase to the frozen domestic tuition fees was seen as “anathema” to many voters” thus, suggesting that there are political constraints to policy changes (Jack 2024a). Additionally, the sector is concerned with policy changes around student visas as there has been a fall in international recruitment that in turn, impacts funding. Overall, the subject of availability of public finances will affect policy, regardless of whichever party wins the elections.

In the United States, higher education is not likely to be a decisive factor in the 2024 voting. Nevertheless, the election outcome would likely give one of the parties full control of Congress and shift power among states. Generally, the Democrats have emphasised boosting student aid, student loan debt forgiveness, and improving racial and gender equity in admissions and hiring, while the Republicans have pressed for restrictions on immigration and international partnerships and appointed partisans to their governing boards. Historically, both parties supported academic research although Republicans are reconsidering that according to Basken et al (2024). Consequently, the election outcome could have major implications for the sector.

Voting in the European Union Parliamentary elections will occur amid the resurgence of the right/far-right across the continent. Forecasters are thus anticipating the Parliament with a populist right coalition of Christian democrats, conservatives, and radical right members thereby, affecting foreign policy (Cunningham et al 2024). For the higher education sector, Basken et al (2024) drawing on a report from the European University Association (EUA) state that European politics is becoming gradually more important for the sector as there is increasing advocacy for greater power over higher

education. The EUA in a policy paper prepared ahead of the EU elections, stated that universities should be consulted prior to the introduction of new legislation to ensure that it will not “hinder” education and research activities (Basken et al 2024). In addition, it laid out a set of priorities for the sector including improved policy coordination, sufficient and predictable funding and investment, the enshrining of academic freedom and “open international cooperation” to support institutional development and transformation (EUA 2024).

### **Role of university governing bodies**

Over the last few years, the role of public institutions including university governing bodies have been questioned. Research was undertaken in 2023 for the Council for the Defence of British Universities on how higher education was talked about, how institutional decisions were reached, and how governance was conceptualised and enacted. The authors conducted 47 in-depth interviews with current and former members of university governing bodies (i.e. board-led or council-led oversight of higher education) in England (Morgan 2024).

The *Report* notes that governing bodies were at their strongest when adopting an explicitly co-operative and inclusive approach and drawing on a range of views and experiences (Council for the Defense of British Universities, n.d.). Moreover, the report identifies that individuals expressed deep commitment to providing the best strategic oversight for their institution, but they were not always able to optimise their contributions. This was related to hierarchies within board membership and often mediated by demographic profiles relating to age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. The findings also point to the “financialisation of governance activity” in which budget setting and knowledge of accountancy was critical. Further, there was a disconnect from educational principles and the campus community. The report drew attention to participants’ concerns about the culture of secrecy and distrust,

pressure to comply with management spin, and disempowerment due to lack of preparation and clarity about roles. These signs, the report notes, is part of larger trend towards management co-optation of the governing body and the normalisation of market-based approaches.

The *Report* identifies that some governors are eager to reactivate discussions about higher education as a public good and advocate more explicitly on behalf of staff and students. Looking ahead, it will require governing bodies to balance regulatory and legal compliance measures with seeing the university as more than a corporate entity (Morgan 2024).

### **The soft power of universities**

It may be argued that universities are a source of soft power, which they exercise through student and staff exchanges, joint programmes, branch campuses, but also through international student recruitment. For example, China has sought to promote international exchanges and cooperation, with 45 countries so far agreeing to the mutual recognition of higher education degrees (Jack 2024b). This has enabled China to attract international students, mainly from the developing world to study at its top universities. The Asian Universities Alliance, a 15-member group focused on staff exchange and research collaboration, as well as the network of the government-funded Confucius Institutes could be viewed as tools of soft power. Further, China has targeted its scholarships to Indonesia as part of an attempt to influence the Muslim world as well as on the African continent as a way of securing suitably qualified and socialised local workforce for Chinese firms in Africa (Jack 2024b). It has also been expanding its presence in the Gulf States. Similarly, Russia has increased the number of its scholarships offered to African students over the past decade presence. These education links encourage greater communication, interaction, and collaborations in the long term as well as influence ideological perspectives.

There are questions about the effectiveness of soft power via education. The Soft Power Index, published annually by the UK's Higher Education Policy Institute (Hepi), counts the number of serving national leaders (monarchs, presidents, and prime ministers) who undertook higher education in countries other than their own (Jack 2024b). The findings show that the UK briefly topped the rankings in its first year, 2017, before it was overtaken by the US, which has held on to the top spot since with France third. The "legacy of empire" accounts for those countries' domination of the top three spots according to the article.

Increasingly higher education leaders fear the impact on the sector based on diplomatic crisis. In Canada, for example, after the prime minister accused the Indian government of being complicit in the murder of a Sikh leader, university leaders worried that the diplomatic row could lead to a decline in Canadian universities' recruitment of Indian students. Jack (2024b) notes that the "sheer size of that cohort represents one of the many tools of soft power that India has at its own disposal" and could adversely impact the country's higher education system, if India were to pull its students out of Canada.

### Legislating teaching divisive concepts

Several bills from across the United States seek to affect the teaching of critical race theory, gender and American history in college classrooms that lawmakers have labelled "divisive concepts" (SCUP Spring 2023, Myskow 2022). Pen American (2023) notes that since 2021, nearly 100 such measures have specifically targeted college and university campuses. These bills could not only harm colleges and threaten their independence which is critical to academic quality and integrity, but also affect their reputation and finances and in turn, their accreditation.

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<sup>1</sup> See Sullivan 2022.

The Individual Freedom Act (previously named the Stop W.O.K.E Act) is an example of the legislative threat mentioned above. The Act, which restricts how racism, oppression, and other race-related subjects may be taught, was signed into law by Florida Governor in April 2022. The impact on higher education was swift. At the University of Central Florida (UCF), an assistant sociology professor cancelled two of his courses (Race and Media, and Race and Ethnicity) for the 2022 fall semester (SCUP Spring 2023) and another professor cancelled a graduate course. This created an unusual gap in the sociology curriculum, which affected almost 69,000 students at the university (Golden 2023).

Moreover, UCF indicated that the university would take disciplinary action against any faculty member who breached the tenets of the Individual Freedom Act as it could lead to a loss of state funding (US\$32 million) linked to graduation rates and other metrics (Golden 2023). The University of Florida circulated a presentation to faculty members about understanding the new law and directing them to "enable students to reach their own conclusions without instructor bias," which means "not imposing personal views about controversial topics" (SCUP Spring 2023).

Although there has been attempts to block the enforcement of the Act at public universities, the Republican-led administration filed a notice of appeal that seeks to stay the injunction.<sup>1</sup> This has provided a boost of confidence for some faculty members at UCF to re-commit to teaching courses on race (Golden 2023).

### Managing campus activism

There is growing pressure on universities and colleges to confront issues of prejudice and hate. However, the war between Israel and Gaza have seen the growth of campus protests by students and others. Columbia University and the University of California, Berkeley have been regular sites for conflict involving students,

faculty, and administrators on issues like academic freedom, funding of campus programmes and student groups. Dirks (2023) notes that the question of campuses as proper venues for political speech and action is not new however, the “tensions inhabiting the campus culture wars of the past two decades have finally collided with the politics of the Middle East” creating a climate of antisemitism around campus activism.

Some institutions have formed or expanded task forces on antisemitism, and Islamophobia by tightening security, clarifying reporting procedures, and improving mental-health supports as well as examining speech codes and student-conduct policies. They are comprised of faculty members, experts, and sometimes students. Other TLIs have become hotbeds of activity with student protests using tactics such as sit-ins, occupying buildings past normal hours of operation, and directly targeting campus programmes and partnerships with Israel<sup>2</sup> as seen at George Washington University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Brown University, Rutgers University, Syracuse University among others. Additionally, students complaining of antisemitism have sued several universities, including the University of Pennsylvania, the University of California system and its Berkeley campus, New York University, and Carnegie Mellon University (Mangan and Hicks 2023). Moreover, more than two dozen colleges are under investigation by the U.S. Department of Education over complaints of antisemitism or Islamophobia.

As the conflict rages, universities have found themselves at the centre of debates about their roles - to speak with “moral clarity” on controversial current issues or to uphold institutional neutrality or to adopt academic modes of thought into the curriculum. Both Dirks (2023) and Basken (2023a) draw attention to university presidents testifying before a House congressional hearing on antisemitism and their

apparent hesitancy on if students should be punished for calling for the genocide of Jewish people. The backlash, according to Mangan and Hicks (2023) led to the resignation of University of Pennsylvania president and was a factor in the resignation of Harvard University president.

At the state-level there have been attempts to encourage campus leaders to be neutral on the current conflict. For instance, in Utah the governor indicated he did not want leaders of public colleges speaking out about the Israel-Hamas war, or any other current events following a resolution by the Board of Higher Education that required colleges and their leaders to remain neutral on such topics. Public colleges in Florida were ordered to “deactivate” campus chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine. Furthermore, some donors have abandoned or threatened to quit supporting institutions over their inadequate responses to the violence in Israel and Gaza. This included several companies indicating they will not hire US college students who had commented on the conflict. The threats to students and curbing of donations had the desired effect as some universities (Harvard, Penn, NYU and Cornell) updated the statements on the conflict to be more critical of the Palestinian position and thus, more in alignment with Israel (Basken 2023b).

The importance of civil discourse and communication, cross-cultural dialogues, collaboration of community-service projects have been emphasised by diversity and inclusion officers. Based on their investigations, Mangan and Hicks (2023) note that TLIs have failed to address complicated geopolitical issues and that antisemitism is among the most urgent and challenging issue facing campus leaders today.

#### **Effects of the Israel/Gaza war on the academy**

Arising out of the conflict between Israel and Gaza, there has been disruptions to university in both Gaza and the West Bank. With institutions such as the Islamic University of Gaza, Al-Azhar

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<sup>2</sup> See Mangan and Hicks (2023) for examples.

University, and Al-Israa University sustaining serious damage to its buildings, it is believed that “every single higher education institution in Gaza have either been destroyed or severely damaged since the invasion began” (Jack 2024c). Nevertheless, some universities in the West Bank (e.g. Al-Quds University) have been delivering education through distance learning and have tailored in-person teaching to address safety concerns.

It is reported that scholars have been unable to reach their colleagues or students as power has been cut-off, many non-local students are trapped, overseas academics have fled, and international conferences cancelled. Lem (2023b) reports that a number of staff and students have been detained by Israel under “administrative detention” (meaning they are being held without trial) and Jack (2024c) relates that hundreds of academics and students have been killed. Israel academia has also been affected with Havergal (2023) noting that large numbers of researchers having been called up to serve in the country’s military.

The deliberate targeting of academics and universities (“educide”) means that for Palestinian universities the role of shaping national identity and contributing to community development has become more challenging. Jack (2024c) highlights that institutions were already operating in very difficult space with problems in procuring lab equipment and chemicals, journals, frequent denials of visas for students and scholars. The conflict has made it worse. Moreover, the damage done in just over three months to the sector will take ten-to-twenty years to recover from according to Professor Neve Gordon, vice-president of the British Society for Middle East Studies (Jack 2024c).

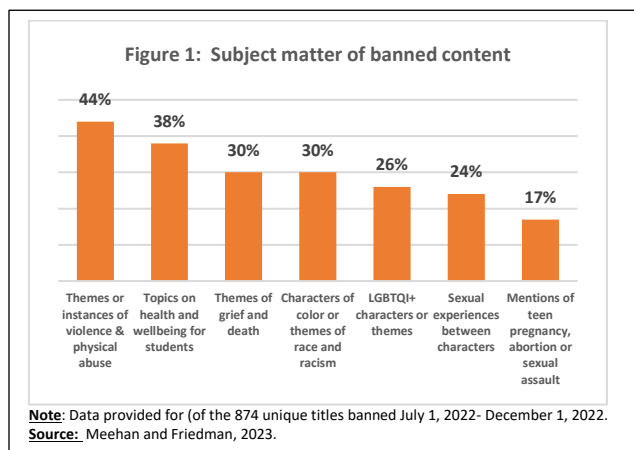
The ongoing war is likely to result in a wave of new academic emigration (Lem 2023a). It is likely that scholars (Palestinians in the West Bank, or especially in Jerusalem, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and Israelis who are not comfortable with the nation’s “increasing move

to the right”) would seek to emigrate. The article highlights that Palestine’s population is highly educated however, those leaving might find it difficult to migrate to Europe and North America, countries which are likely to put in place political test for visa applicants. In addition, for institutions that receive funding from sources aligned with Israel there may be demands for scrutiny during the recruitment process.

Both Jack (2024c) and Saad (2023) note the critical role the international academic community will have to play in rebuilding the sector by offering support to Gazan academics and Palestinian students for equal rights for research and the right of movement.

### **Banning of books**

Although the banning of books has not impacted higher education, SCUP (Fall 2023) alludes to the possibility of higher education having to deal such requests. The banning of books at schools and libraries is a reaction to state laws dictating the kind of books that are allowed. According to SCUP (Fall 2023), book bans and requests to ban books are on the rise in the United States with the American Library Association (ALA) reporting that they received 1,269 book challenges or demands to censor library books and resources. Pendharkar (2023) notes that book bans were reported in at least 32 states with most bans between July and December 2022 concentrated in Florida, Missouri, South Carolina, Texas, and Utah. The subject of the banned books for 2022 generally focused on violence or physical abuse, including sexual assault; LGBTQ+ identities; and characters of colour and themes of race or racism (*see Figure 1*). Of the reported book ban cases in the last half of 2022, 74% (or 1,085) are connected to organised efforts of advocacy groups; elected officials; or enacted legislation (Meehan and Friedman, 2023).



The findings from a 2023 Ipsos/NPR poll of K12 teachers and the general public on school boards and state lawmakers implementing book bans or restricting what is discussed in the classroom is insightful. The survey found that:

- 69% of all Americans, say they oppose state lawmakers passing book bans and 60% of K-12 parents and 64% of Americans saying the same for individual school boards.
- 62% of K-12 parents and 67% of Americans say they oppose state lawmakers restricting what subjects teachers and students discuss in the classroom.
- 81% of K-12 parents say they support teaching about the history of slavery, racism, and segregation in public schools.

Against this backdrop, SCUP (Fall 2023) has suggested that institutions closely monitor bills and acts that would lead to the banning of books.

## Conclusion

The current developments taking place in the political environment, globally and regionally have serious implications for the operations of the higher education sector, in the future. To that end, it is advised that institutions closely monitor the effects of electoral outcomes on changes to public policies and legislation by governments and their agencies, which in turn can affect curriculum, teaching, and activism, the very core of the academy. Given the increasing negative perceptions of political stability in the public domain, universities are further advised to

(re)examine research collaborations, funding opportunities, and student and staff mobility programmes. This will require higher education institutions to rethink their policies and practices and adjust to the new dynamic taking place in the sector.

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### UWI "Triple A" Strategic Plan:

Did you know the theme for the UWI "Triple A" Strategic Plan Phase II is **Revenue Revolution**?

To learn more about the Plan, click on the following link <http://www.uwi.edu/uop/strategic-plan-about-plan>