

INTERNATIONAL APPEAL

FOR THE PROTECTION OF ACADEMIC INDEPENDENCE

Now that cooperation between the private sector and public universities has all but become the norm, in Europe as elsewhere, it is time to ask some basic questions: What is a university? And what is its role in society?

Universities grew out of the idea of establishing a place where freedom of research, education and scholarship is protected and beyond venal influence. They serve the common good and in turn are supported by the community. Directly linked to this founding idea is the academic ethos that preserves the institution of the university as a special place, free from political, ideological and commercial interests. Freedom of teaching and research is protected by the Swiss Constitution.

Against this background, it is self-evident that a public university should neither cooperate with nor accept sponsorship from institutions associated with public scandal or unethical conduct. That is damaging to the academic reputation of any university. And it impinges upon the independence of the scholars concerned, particularly those directly funded by such institutions, undermining their status as guarantors of independence and ethically-minded scholarship.

The University of Zurich was born of this same spirit of independent thinking in 1833. It is “the first university in Europe to be founded by a democratic state instead of by either a monarch or the church”. This proud claim stands to this day on the university’s website. The question is: are today’s universities still sufficiently independent in an age of cooperation and sponsorship?

In April 2012, the Executive Board of the University of Zurich concluded a cooperation agreement, *in camera*, with the top management of UBS (Union Bank of Switzerland). The agreement entails sponsoring of the university by UBS to the tune of 100 million Swiss francs and the establishment of a “UBS International Centre of Economics in Society” within the scope of the university. Neither the public nor the research and teaching staff were asked their opinion. The agreement between the university and UBS was concluded secretly in the spring of 2012.

This procedure brings the issue of sponsorship into sharp focus. The Executive Board of the University concedes that the bank is using the university as a platform to further its interests. However, UBS is a particular case of a business that has been shown in the past to have engaged in unethical practices. The fact that the bank was able to place its logo at the University of Zurich has nothing to do with scholarship and everything to do with marketing.

It is a glaring example of the problematic nature of academic sponsorship. But there are many more instances, in other European countries, of questionable university sponsorship deals. In one case, in June 2011, Deutsche Bank had to withdraw from a controversial sponsorship arrangement because of justified public criticism. This shows that sponsorship involving specific vested interests and secret deals – in contrast to altruistic patronage and donation by benefactors – represents a threat to the impartiality of university research and teaching. The very academic ethos is at risk.

As citizens, researchers, academics and students, we appeal to the leaders of the universities and all who bear responsibility for our educational institutions, at home and abroad, to safeguard the precious heritage of free and independent scholarship, and to avoid endangering the academic ethos in controversial collaborations.

Please support this appeal with your signature and help make fellow citizens and academic colleagues aware of the issue. Signatures please on www.zuercher-appell.ch Thank you very much.

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