



The public engagement of academics

Findings of a working group at the University of Lausanne

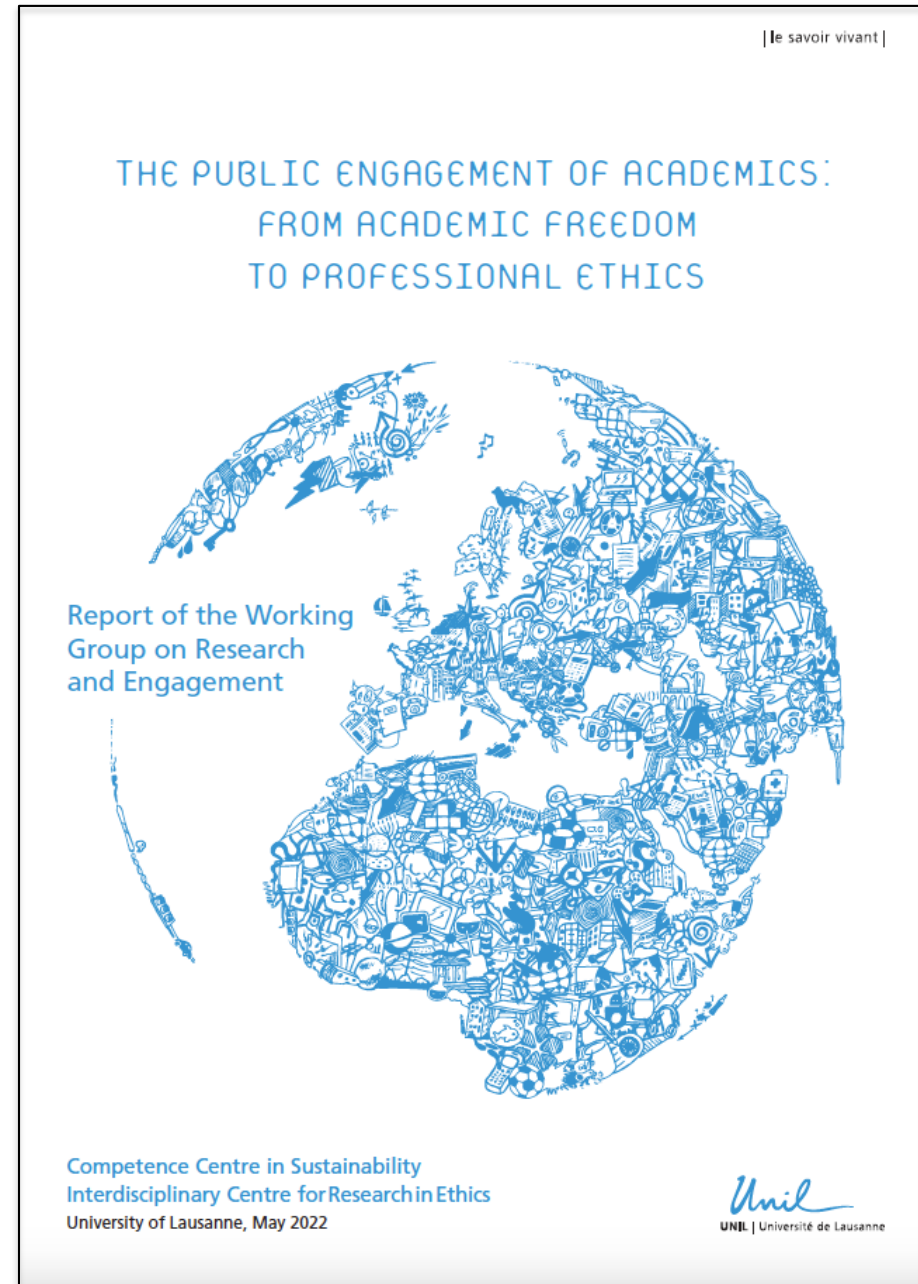
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Context

Working group:

- > Constituted in February 2020
- > 12 members
- > Case studies and literature reviews
- > A panel debate
- > A survey
- > Several focus groups
- > A report

<https://www.unil.ch/centre-durabilite/en/home/menuinst/recherche/recherche-et-engagement.html>



Why take up this issue?

Public engagement by academics is not a new phenomenon, however, we are witnessing :

- > An increase in (and democratization of) public statements by the research community.
- > A transformation of methods: social media, sometimes provocative and frontal statements, calls for academic activism, civil disobedience, etc.
- > An upsurge in internal and external questioning of University management and political authorities.

Structure of the report

1. Definitions and clarifications

1.1 Definition of engagement

1.2 The place of academics in the public debate

1.3 The notion of neutrality

2. Engagement at UNIL: practices and perceptions

2.1 UNIL 2021 survey

2.2 Focus groups

3. Discussion of issues related to academic engagement

3.1 Academic freedom and duty of confidentiality

3.2 Interventions in the public sphere and best practices

3.3 Engagement from an institutional perspective

3.4 Supporting engagement: ways forward

Definition of engagement

Broad definition: any form of interaction with the extra-academic world.

Report's definition:

Engagement = a process, statement or action that is both **public** and **normative** in content (ethical, social or political evaluation or prescription).

- Narrower than just interaction with the extra-academic world
- Broader than activism

Engagement can be thought of not as a discrete category, but placed on a **continuum** ranging from the *purely factual* to the *purely normative*.

Legal context at UNIL

Law on the University of Lausanne (LUL) of July 6, 2004

Art. 2

Missions

The University's missions are:

- a. to transmit knowledge and develop science through teaching and research;
- b. to promote the development of intellectual life and the dissemination of culture;**
- c. to encourage the next generation of academics and scientists;
- d. to promote the valorization of research results;
- e. to prepare for professions requiring academic training;
- f. to organize continuing education in its areas of competence;
- g. to perform a service function for the community and to stimulate social debate**

A controversial issue ...

Why does engagement trigger reactions? (case studies)

- > Perceived abuse of the "authority" offered by the status of researcher.
- > Unclear separation between scientific results and personal opinions.
- > Statements deemed contrary to scientific consensus.
- > Participation of members of the academic community in actions of civil disobedience.
- > Criticism of federal or cantonal authorities



A controversial issue ...

Arguments against (in the literature)

- > jeopardizes their ability to do their job properly
- > contradicts the neutrality or objectivity of science
- > undermines the credibility of scientists and science in general

Arguments in favor (in the literature)

- > responsibility of researchers/ duties as citizens
- > a lack of engagement could be detrimental to society
- > some form of engagement is unavoidable (strict distinction between facts and values is not tenable; not taking a stand is also taking a stand)

Science neutrality

- > The notion of neutrality is often associated with the idea of a **"value-free" science**, isolated from social influences.
- > Recent developments in the philosophy and sociology of science show that **such an ideal is not only unattainable, but also undesirable (at least for some authors)**.
- > As this notion is often the source of misunderstandings, we prefer the ideas of:
 - Research of objectivity (methods and procedures)
 - Scientific deontology (duties related to the research profession)
 - Transparency about our own values.

Academic Freedom

- > **General freedom of expression.** Legal limits:
 - Reputational damage, hate speech, calls for violence, etc.

- > **Academic freedom:** research, teaching, expression
 - Protects academics from censorship and institutional, political or ideological interference.
 - Same legal limits as general freedom of expression
 - Is accompanied by deontological duties related to the research profession (scientific integrity, ethics of academic life)

Recommendations to individuals

- > Requirement for **clarity** and **transparency** with respect to:
 - The role that is assumed (expert, researcher, citizen, etc.)
 - The field of specialization
 - The nature of the assertions made (scientific facts, personal opinions)
- > It's hard to keep roles and discourse registers clearly separate at all times
 - But transparency is an ideal to be pursued as best as possible in each situation, according to possibilities and context.
- > The risks of loss of credibility must be taken into account, but the literature is rather reassuring in this respect.



Recommendation to the institution

- > Situating rather than regulating the voice of researchers
 - No top-down, a priori regulation of public statements of researchers
 - Supporting the drive for clarification and transparency

- > Promoting a «culture of engagement»
 - Developing conditions conducive to engagement, in good conditions and according to best practices
 - Propose tools for effective engagement, adapted to the academic context

Key messages from the report

- > The WG supports the engagement of researchers, which is part of the university's mission.
- > It affirms the importance of defending academic freedom and freedom of expression for academics
- > Academic freedom does, however, come with individual and institutional responsibilities (academic deontology).
- > The role of the institution is not to regulate a priori, nor to settle controversies, but to provide sound and clear conditions for the academic debate.
- > The University of Lausanne should promote a "culture of engagement" and a working climate conducive to this under the right conditions.

Thank you!

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