



By: The Editorial Board

US universities facing a severe reputation crisis - are administrations capable of overcoming the crisis, and if so, at what cost?



US universities are facing a multifaceted crisis after a series of protests and controversial decisions by their administrations regarding the Israel-Hamas war, all of which put their reputations at risk.

Trust in higher education has been in sharp decline for years. High tuition fees are the principal cause of universities' deteriorating reputation and lack of confidence.

However, a part of this has been the radical activism of politically motivated student organisations, which many find unacceptable as the setting in which academic institutions are supposed to function.

A Gallup survey from last July showed that Americans' confidence in higher education has plummeted. Just 8 years ago, 57% of Americans had confidence in higher education, and 5 years ago, it dropped to 48%.

This year, it was only 36%. This mistrust is evenly expressed in the gender and social structure and even in the political orientation of the respondents, which is a sign that it is deeply rooted and widespread.

To fight for the return of trust, universities have a difficult task ahead because the crisis comes from everywhere, not only from one or a few segments of society. Some future research will no doubt register a further decline of confidence in the reputation of universities when they take into account attitudes of their administrations and particularly student expressions regarding Israel's war against Hamas.

Cancelling donations

Turbulent events at universities in the past month of conflict in Israel have already led to the withholding of millions of dollars in donations from large companies and wealthy individuals.

There is a long list of those who have closed their check books, upset that the administrations of some universities have

hesitated to condemn Hamas terrorism in Israel but instead supported their rebel student groups that have defended the Palestinians.

The subsequent corrections and new and amended announcements, with which the administrations wanted to amortise the wave of dissatisfaction among donors, did not help much either.

Harvard President Claudine Gay has had at least 3 such attempts, under pressure from donors and her predecessors in office, to condemn Hamas terrorism.

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Higher education is a highly competitive industry. Donations amounted to about \$60 billion last year. Therefore, in this business, reputation is the factor that determines the status of each institution.

It is hard to gain but easy to lose, which many US universities will experience possibly as early as the forthcoming enrolment year. "It is possible that schools who disappoint their audiences will suffer longer-term reputational harm. That could affect enrolment, faculty recruitment and retention, donor support and more," said Sandy Lish, higher education crisis management expert.

Tolerance towards outbursts of hatred

Many university administrations were at odds with the explosion of pro-Palestinian rallies on university campuses and the display of anti-Israeli sentiments.

These administrations observed everything from the standpoint of not assessing the current global issues. Maintaining an aseptic attitude towards global events has led many of

them failing to react situation of not reacting to the terrorist act committed by Hamas in Israel.

Many remained tolerant of the outpourings of hatred and anti-Semitism at pro-Palestinian protests, considering that freedom of speech at universities was inviolable, practically limitless.

We have a situation of "hate speech masquerading as free speech", as Jonathan Gray, president of the New York company Blackstone, one of the billionaires who did not refuse donations to the University of Pennsylvania, said, despite his disagreements with the views of the university's president, Elizabeth Magill.

It appears that a state of insecurity, which has developed in many American institutions, is primarily the responsibility of administrations. Their reluctance to state their position regarding Hamas terrorism as a result of their long-term policy of non-interference in global crises opened up space for outbursts of violence and hatred, which they are currently not able to handle.

Dilemmas of future students

Prospective students about to enter the university admission process could be worried about the general insecurity at universities and even give up on the decision to enrol. Even physical security is at stake.

At Tulane University, 3 students were injured in a confrontation between pro-Palestinian and pro-Jewish protestors. The FBI launched an investigation into a flood of anti-Semitic email threats sent to Pennsylvania University, and charged a Cornell student on the same grounds.

Future students, supporters of both sides in the conflict in the Middle East, stay away from such an environment together with other moderate peers. At the same time, those who took sides in the conflict, together with their families, will select the future university based

on whether the university administration declared itself pro-Jewish or pro-Palestinian.

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The First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of speech continues to be a cover used by university administrations to justify their unwillingness to take a stand on issues regarding the events their students frequently and occasionally explosively declare opinions.

Years of the dominance of maximum political correctness in the policies of US universities have led to administrations shying away from even condemning terrorism when it occurs, not wanting to offend those in their environment who might think that it is not terrorism or justified, similar to what happened in the past weeks.

They have already felt the consequences of this policy after losing millions of dollars in donations, the principal source of their budgets. The reputation of many of them is in an unstoppable decline, which will inevitably affect the number of future students and thus the income.

The recovery of the lost reputation will take a long time and require the university leadership to change their policies and attitude towards principal events or stop ignoring them as they have been doing in the past.