

Preface

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Is there a global community? And what is the role of universities.

The idea of community is a fundamental lens through which to understand human interaction and organization across history, extending from religion to politics, from economic systems to legal frameworks, and from social structures to the cultural networks of artists and creatives. Whether in the Christian fellowship of believers, the Muslim ummah, or the civic community of citizens bound together by a shared contract of trust between the governed and their government, the concept of community reflects a deep anthropological impulse toward collaboration, that is part and parcel of human existence.

Universities, in particular, exemplify this principle. They function not only as centres of knowledge production but also as dynamic communities in which diverse individuals – scholars and students alike – converge, exchange ideas, and collectively shape intellectual and social progress. In doing so, they complicate a central tenet of community theory as articulated by Ferdinand Tönnies in 1887, especially his distinction between *Gemeinschaft* – the organic, affective, and ‘natural’ bonds of community – and *Gesellschaft* – the rational, instrumental, and regulated structures of modern society, a reaction to the changes brought about by industrial modernity and its effect on individuals. Universities arguably blur the divide: they institutionalize knowledge through formal structures and rules while simultaneously cultivating shared identities, intellectual solidarities, and forms of belonging that resemble communal ties. In this sense, they do not simply fit within Tönnies’s framework but subtly transform it, revealing how modern institutions can sustain both rational organization and meaningful community.

It is in this sense that the idea of the university as a community – one in which scholars and students work together and “learn to respect,

to consult, to aid each other” (Newman, 2014:101) – has taken deep root within our intellectual tradition. A university is, by definition, a collaborative endeavour: it emerges from the community that surrounds it, cultivates an internal community of knowledge and innovation through the vibrant co-mingling of students and scholars, and, in turn, exerts a formative influence on the wider society in which it is embedded. It also constitutes a comprehensive articulation of diverse modes of knowledge production, whether anchored in disciplinary structures or organized around broader, problem-based approaches.

In this regard, the community of knowledge that arises from the convergence of different perspectives, methodologies, and toolboxes – from physics to theology, biology to literature, sociology to engineering, biotechnology to law – enables the university to act as a powerful agent of societal transformation. The character of the internal academic community profoundly shapes how the wider social community evolves. At the same time, this internal community is never isolated from external forces; rather, it exists in constant interaction with them. Whether at the level of the region, the nation, or humanity at large, the university both reflects and shapes the character and quality of its broader environment, reinforcing the reciprocal relationship between knowledge production and social life.

T4EU represents an alliance of knowledge that is equally a community, grounded in a wide spectrum of shared engagement – educational, scientific, and societal. Each member university, itself a community, contributes organically to the broader impact of a diverse yet interconnected collective endeavour aimed at advancing the common good, fostering growth, and promoting the conditions for a good life. Through this interplay, *T4EU*'s communities enhance the alliance's capacity to act as a powerful instrument for strengthening the fabric of the European community. Yet this impact does not stop at national or even continental boundaries. Because science and education are inherently global endeavours, the alliance ultimately aspires to contribute to the betterment of the global community. This, however, raises an important question: is there such a thing as a global community, and what role can the university play within it?

It has become something of an *idée reçue* to speak of an inevitable global condition. Technological developments have drawn the world closer together, binding us in dense networks of economic, social, political, and

even emotional interdependence. Our lives are continuously mediated by digital connectivity, and events unfold with immediate, shared visibility across the globe. The September 11 attacks reshaped global consciousness, as audiences worldwide experienced shock and grief in unison. Conflicts and wars are no longer confined to regional actors, financial crises reverberate across borders with uneven consequences, and climate change affects all, albeit in profoundly unequal ways.

And yet, this notion of a global condition can too easily become a discursive device that obscures the rich and heterogeneous diversity of human experience. Hannah Arendt perceptively reflected on the mapping of the globe in the wake of European expansion and lamented its consequences. As she writes in *The Human Condition*: “They went to enlarge the earth, not to shrink her into a ball” (Arendt, 1998: 250).

Few terms in academic vocabulary are as charged as “the global.” It signifies both a condition and a strategy; it is a source of anxiety as much as a project of expansion; it expresses a desire for recognition while also implying mechanisms of exclusion. Philosophically, the global recalls what Martin Heidegger described as “the gigantic” (*das Riesige*) – a condition marked by the collapse of distance and the representation of life across unfamiliar and far-reaching contexts. Yet one must be cautious not to efface the very diversity that defines global reality. To invoke the globe without qualification risks reducing the uneven and complex fabric of the world to the weightless abstraction of the balloon globe playfully manipulated by Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator*.

To speak of the global – or to speak for it – is therefore an ethical undertaking that demands attentiveness to difference and a respect for plurality. In this light, cultivating a genuinely global, or international, intellectual ethos becomes a defining responsibility of one of the most resilient institutions in human history: the university. If there is such a thing as a global community, it is not a fully realized, harmonious whole, but rather an ongoing project – fragmented, unequal, and continually in the making. It exists not as a given condition, but as a horizon shaped by human interaction, shared challenges, and the fragile willingness to recognize interdependence across difference.

Universities occupy a uniquely powerful position within this unfinished project. As communities of knowledge, they are among the few institutions capable of sustaining dialogue across borders, disciplines, and cultures while preserving the plurality that defines human experience.

They do not dissolve difference; rather, at their best, they create the conditions under which difference can be engaged critically, respectfully, and productively. In doing so, they challenge simplified notions of the global and instead cultivate a more grounded, reflexive understanding of interconnectedness.

The *T4EU* alliance exemplifies this role in practice. Not merely a network of institutions, it is a community of communities that brings together diverse academic traditions, social contexts, and intellectual approaches into a shared space of collaboration. Its strength lies precisely in this diversity: by fostering meaningful exchange among its members, *T4EU* contributes to shaping a European academic and civic space that is open, dynamic, and outward-looking. At the same time, its ambitions extend beyond Europe, recognizing that the responsibility of knowledge does not end at regional boundaries.

In this light, *T4EU* can be understood as a microcosm of what a global community might become – not a uniform structure, but a constellation of interconnected communities committed to the common good. Its work demonstrates that the global is not achieved through abstraction or homogenization, but through sustained collaboration, mutual recognition, and shared responsibility. The role of universities, and of alliances such as *T4EU*, is therefore not simply to participate in a global community, but to actively build it: carefully, critically, and with an enduring respect for the diversity that makes such a community both possible and necessary.

Bibliography

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