

EUROPEAN CONSULTATION ON BIG ISSUES IN THE UNIVERSITY

SUMMARY REPORT

Woltersdorf, near Berlin, 23-25 March 2018

MAIN FINDINGS

Three basic questions were asked during the working sessions:

1. what are the big issues?
2. what can we do?
3. how can we help others?

A. ISSUES IDENTIFIED BY STUDENTS

Note: possible ways of addressing the issue are written in italics.

1. Gender-issue/discrimination (LGBTQ, feminism, sexism, gender-equality, refugees,...)

- Should students get involved in “fights for rights” on campuses? When some student groups lobby for student-life related issues? – why wouldn’t we? Are we hypocrites? What prevents us to get involved? Some also argue that Christianity is at the core of many of the problems that have to be tackled on campuses (eg. issues of equality).
- Victim-culture and micro-aggressions
 - *Manifestations and statements, peace-units in demonstration*
 - *Engage through the writing of essays / stories*

2. Crisis/ threats to democracy (populist parties, Catalonia crisis, Czech situation, ...)

- Is the university/faculty involved in that?
- University/students and their history of revolution
- Political stuff is touchy/polarized, difficult to discuss amongst students of different opinions (Cataluña crisis for example)
 - *Writing a letter to the dean/president addressing issues*

3. Environmental issues: Clean-energy, rubbish, clothes/furniture/...

- Spending natural resources carefully; looking for alternatives
 - *Use reusable dishes at events/ organizing second-hand-market*
 - *Using alternatives*
 - *Repair workshop (bikes, small machines, ...) – organize a talk about the issue*

4. Social integration of foreigners/"cursed" people

- Refugees, administrative and technical staff are not very visible, there are also homeless people coming to university building to find shelter, ...

- International students; actively seeking contact und dialogue, a lot of loneliness can be observed.
 - *Join the programs for these people that are already there*
 - *Thank-you program for staff*

5. University fees – social justice

- Issue for a lot of people especially foreigners
- Poor and rich parents – social value of studying: not all disciplines are equally valued (market value of medicine, law and engineering as opposed to humanities for example).
 - *Help them out with money (taking care of them) – IFES sponsorship-program?*
 - *Participating in demonstrations (sign with a Bible verse); instead no group-meeting – the group leader could strongly encourage the IFES participants to join*

6. Food (veganism and alternative lifestyle)

- Making up their minds about the world and the environment
- Discuss “historical” issues of why the situation of animals is the way it currently is (exploitation, greed, etc.)
 - *Having a vegan/vegetarian option of food in your groups*
 - *Develop a responsible and informed Christian thinking about the issues addressed by anti-species activists.*

Overall approach to these issues:

- Participating as a Christian–without your IFES group
- Rooting the topic in the Bible
- Engaging in conversations with people/groups on campus

B. ISSUES IDENTIFIED BY STAFF

Through the working group, the staff identified three major issues:

1. Love and sex
2. Hope - resigned individualism, loss of hope and loss of fear, future will be the same whether they do well or not, apathy, lack of drive, production-line degree
3. Comfort - Generation Snowflake, mental health issues

One of the questions raised was, “are Christians ambassadors of Hope?” Christians struggle with all of these issues themselves, so how can we help?

1. Love and sex

Christian students have different wrong answers, ‘happily ever after’, ‘find your soulmate’, sex will be great (as a reward for living a chaste life). We need to help students think beyond ‘black and white’ answers: Christian students ‘parrot’ the pastor, non-Christian students parrot the professor. We need to help them to think critically, remembering to point them to

Christ. We also need to avoid Christianity becoming a self-help guide – we don't want to encourage Generation Snowflake¹.

How can we help?

- Challenge attitudes and assumptions
- Provide teaching and training on this subject at conferences
- Encourage Christian students to move beyond 'what we are against' - Glynn Harrison 'A Better Story'
- Counteract the view that if you're single then you're a deficient human
- Provide pastoral support for students as they encounter these struggles and challenges
- Offer one-to-one sessions in which staff can demonstrate honesty and vulnerability to encourage students develop their own accountable friendships
- Help students (perhaps particularly male students) to go deeper with their friends

2. Hope

The importance of living distinctively and authentically with hope in our society. We need to be sensitive to our society and familiar with the language of the culture so that we can speak into it.

"As an atheist I was interested in how you could have hope in the face of struggle, rather than why you could be happy when everything was great (because that's obvious)".

How can we help?

- Encourage students to pray and see that God is sovereign and has placed them where he has, even when they don't feel that God is using them.
- Hold talks like those run by IVCF/USA (Passion-talks).
- Work with students to help them see that there is meaning in their studies even if it doesn't lead to a career: there is value in now, rather than just in the end result
- Challenge the evangelism-strategy that says, 'I need to have a perfect life so that people will be drawn to Jesus' – teach students to model faithfulness in the midst of suffering.
- Offer discipleship and mentoring.
- Provide better training on discipleship for staff - authenticity of relationships being modelled. Going from belief in Jesus to faith in Jesus. Helping students to be okay with not knowing what God is doing.
- Provide courses on active listening for staff.

¹ Generation Snowflake, or Snowflake Generation, is a neologistic term used to characterize the young adults of the 2010s as being more prone to taking offense and less resilient than previous generations, or as being too emotionally vulnerable to cope with views that challenge their own. WIKIPEDIA

3. Comfort

We're not very good at emotional health in the church. We focus a lot on spiritual health, but not on emotional health. We're poor at recognising breakdowns coming.

How can we help?

- Provide better training for staff on mental and emotional health
- Provide better training for staff and students on time-management, stress-management etc.

Do general secretaries provide training and pastoral care for staff? Are staff being disciplined so that they can disciple others? How much of that is scheduled into the working week? If we expect staff to work like machines, then we're also going to treat the students as machines and be surprised when they break.

C. ISSUES IDENTIFIED BY ACADEMICS

The academics' working group identified the following big issues:

1. Freedom of speech: for academics, as the fashion of trigger warnings might come to Europe
2. Worldview diversity: the silencing of non-mainstream perspectives
3. Trust – linked with marketization of universities
4. Bridges should be built between theologians and academics in order to engage in a respectful and informed manner

1. Freedom of speech

It is explicitly said that you are not supposed to talk about politics and religion. Therefore, Christians are being shut out of discussions. Freedom of speech comes at two levels: the challenge of being a Christian professor and the general challenge of teaching on topics that might be upsetting.

Free speech and religious freedom are issues of law. This should be kept in mind whilst engaging, it isn't "simply" a question of opinion.

In some countries, such as Hungary, there is a rigid emphasis on the teacher as the absolute authority. How do we shift from a 'Prussian' style of education to a Western European style of education? How can we foster learning that is not rote learning?

2. Worldview diversity

The Christian worldview and materialistic worldview clash strongly. We come up against debates like those surrounding advances in genetics.

In countries like Armenia, there is the even challenging question of whether it is possible to be an academic and a Christian at the same time.

Never approach people with different worldviews as a caricature, as the enemy that needs to be defeated, they will know and reject it. Instead we need to engage in a substantive way. We need to read authors who have already thought through these topics from an evangelical perspective, e.g. Peter Singer. In the arts, we should read more books on

science fiction and dystopian futures – picturing what the world looks like or could become. Non-Christians are also interested in these things and it would open up discussion.

3. Trust

Trust is a big issue in universities: people generally don't trust each other. Attitudes of mistrust are present across the university, with the students, teachers and administrative staff.

Students often behave as customers – “I am paying £x, so I need to get the degree”
Funding: because the government gives money, they feel the need to track e.g. retention rates. Salary etc. Customer satisfaction. UK-National Student Survey – ratings, comparing, commercial from beginning to end.

A question that was asked by the discussion group is: where did critical thinking start? The Reformation? What can a Christian perspective on critical thinking be?

4. Bridges between Christians and the Academy

We need to encourage theologians to speak into wider issues. How can we make this happen?

Be a small light in the darkness. Treat students with justice. Don't compromise.

Some churches don't see any of these big issues as relevant to them because instead they are focussed on their own growth. This means that we can feel alone in our struggles, but IFES can connect us to others – we should make the most of this network.

5. When theological persuasion and engagement may conflict

An important issue that was discussed was the potential conflict between long-held theological stands that can either be seen as conflicting with academic research, or conflict it directly. The best example being 6-days creationism, to which some people in our IFES constituency hold strongly, whereas others consider it outdated. There is a need to think deeply about that kind of “old” issues that are still preventing many people to engage meaningfully, and this is also caused by the strong influence of wealthy groups which can publish books and videos which are not necessarily representative of a theological consensus. IFES movements need to be aware of this aspect and if necessary think about that for their training events and in the way the work with and alongside academics.

SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS

Overall, these are 13 Big Issues identified by the consultation (not ranked):

- Gender-issue/discrimination (LGBTQ, feminism, sexism, gender-equality, refugees,...)
- Crisis/ threats to democracy (populist parties, Cataluña crisis, Czech situation,...)
- Environmental issues: Clean-energy, rubbish, clothes/furniture/...
- Social integration of foreigners / “accursed” people
- University fees – social justice
- Food (veganism and alternative lifestyle)
- Love and sex
- Hope
- Comfort
- Freedom of speech
- Worldview diversity
- Trust
- Bridges between Christians and the Academy

The participants were aware that the issues identified for Europe are not necessarily the same as the challenges encountered by IFES friends in the wider world. However, it is worth noting that some of these issues might well emerge in other contexts in the coming years.

There is a certain degree of overlap between the issues identified by the different working groups; however, staff members focused more on broad issues of personal development and spiritual life, than on systemic issues. This demonstrates that their perspectives tend to be largely pastoral, perhaps to the detriment of the issues students themselves are aware of on the wider academic scene.

Importantly, staff members expressed that issues concerning the wider academic community often impact Christian students as well, yet they are not always adequately equipped by their movements to face these challenges.

This overlaps with the observation made by the academic participants who said that there is a lack of engagement of the theological networks with the issues of the university.

During the consultation, we joked a few times about the fact that trends in the university often start 10 years before they reach wider society. Yet many churches are already 15 years behind society, at least in their awareness of contemporary changes and challenges. This leaves us with a 25-year culture gap between students and church members/leadership, which could well account for the frustration expressed during the meeting that there is a lack of understanding from all parts.

This represent a real issue also explain why many students aren't sure whether engaging their campus is a legitimate part of their identity as Christians.

Many participants also remarked that there is a tension in many student groups about the activities that fit into the calling of their groups: are they on campus to nurture Christian students only – with their legitimate and often unmet needs but often with a sort of

“Sunday-school +” approach – or whether their activities should take their campus as a whole more into consideration.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CONSULTATION

Possible actions for IFES to explore in the years to come:

- We should make sure cultural challenges are addressed in a meaningful, biblical and informed way during our events and in our publications. Are we able to invite speakers that demonstrate this to students? Can we make sure we provide them with “value-added” content which is more than what they would get in their churches? – in this respect, Glynn Harrison’s talk at Presence 2017 with mentioned several times as a good example, as well as the Bible & Culture program lead by Tim Vickers.
- We should consider how to encourage national movements to ensure their staff are adequately trained to engage the university. Several staff members noted the importance of helping students to engage with their disciplines, yet felt that they were not well equipped to do so.

Respectfully submitted,

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