



**ETHICAL PRINCIPLES  
OF TEACHING AND STUDIES  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI**

# Introduction

Ethical principles encapsulate the values and ideals of a community. They express what the community wishes to commit to, what its activities are based on and what objectives it strives to reach. The purpose of ethical principles is to make visible the ideals pursued in all activities and to offer tools for assessing the achievement of shared values.

University activities are also guided by other norms besides ethical ideals and values. Legislation sets boundaries that may not be breached and defines rights of various parties which must be honoured. Regulations that promote good management and leadership and encourage efficient activities help to make practical procedures increasingly better suited to their purpose. While legislation defines the minimum requirements for operations, management and operational standards steer people towards efficient daily routines. Ethical principles partly deal with the same issues as other activity-guiding norms. Their formulation aims to both ensure and further increase the appropriateness, flexibility and quality of everyday work, but they also have another objective. Ethical principles express noble ideals of the nature and operations of the academic community and the way in which its members are taken into consideration when the ethical values and ideals are achieved in practice.

Listing values and ideals and formulating them into objectives is relatively easy. Identifying and realising them, however, is a great deal more difficult. A list of ethical ideals can be drawn up in one session, but converting them into signposts for the community's routine activities requires mutual commitment and perseverance.

The University of Helsinki recently drew up its first ethical principles for teaching and studies to be used by the academic community. This document does not present the principles as instructions or rules but rather as ideals to support activities. The principles are intended as tools which everyone, as members of both a single unit and the entire academic community, can use individually or with others to examine the starting point, objectives and problems of activities related to teaching and studies. The principles are not expressed as a complete ethical code for teaching and studies. Instead they support and inspire reflection and discussion at every level and in every context of academic work.

# Motto

## Teaching and studies – the core of the University

The university system came into being out of a fervent interest in learning through research. The University has always been characterised by the wish to learn from and share knowledge with others as well as to collaborate with others to generate new knowledge. This has proved to be an enduring idea: learning and teaching still form the lifeline of the University.

## Teaching and studies of high ethical quality: bases and features

Chapter 1, section 2 of the Universities Act defines the mission of universities to be to provide higher education based on research. This is linked to the universities' responsibility to conduct research and interact with the surrounding society. The Act requires universities to arrange their operations so as to assure a high international standard in compliance with ethical principles and good scientific practices.

The prerequisite and presumption of teaching and studies is that the provision of appropriate legal safeguards to all members of the academic community is ensured at every level of activities and in every situation. Legal protection encompasses equality, just treatment and the opportunity to appeal against decisions concerning oneself.

The ethical features of high-quality university teaching and studies include responsibility, mutual trust, transparent operations and joint learning.

# The three ideals of university teaching and studies

## First ideal:

Studies and teaching link the University's three tasks.

University teaching is based on research. During their education and training teachers learn to produce and make use of new information and knowledge. Academic teachers know how to utilise other people's research and develop their own teaching methods, set learning objectives and exploit research on teaching and learning to assess learning outcomes.

Teaching and research are intertwined: teachers are unable to teach unless they update their knowledge and competence through research and further education. Research, in turn, becomes detached from the surrounding society unless it is passed on through teaching.

Teaching disseminates research results to students. More importantly, it helps students understand the foundations of research data and learn research skills, both of which are vital for students to develop into academic experts.

Teaching is a key channel for spreading new information and knowledge and thus a major element in societal influence. It disseminates knowledge based on academic research throughout society and the world by training experts in different fields.

Teaching of high ethical standards links the three tasks of universities. It is based on research data that is relevant and up-to-date in terms of content and methodology, and introduces students to the research results and methods of each discipline. Studies prepare students for various social and global tasks. University education helps students perceive themselves as academic experts with the task of producing, imparting and utilising research data and skills in their own work.

Ethically high-quality teaching also involves revising and improving conventional practices depending on what is relevant to academic expertise in each given situation.



---

### **Manifestations of the first ideal in the community:**

1. Teaching and research are not viewed as mutually competitive activities; instead, the academic community continues to develop ways to combine the two to their mutual benefit.
  2. Research-based teaching is inspiring because it provides the opportunity to share and generate research ideas, disseminate and test the results and relevance of the research as well as to interact with students.
  3. Teaching and studies take place in an encouraging atmosphere where the activities of different parties are appreciated.
  4. Teaching and studies are characterised by responsibility for one's actions, commitment to one's work and acknowledgement of the contribution of others.
-

## **Second ideal:**

Studies and teaching connect the members of the academic community together.

The University's tasks connect members of the academic community together. The goal of the University of Helsinki is to provide all researchers with the opportunity to teach and enable all teachers to carry out research. The University can show its appreciation for teaching by allocating time, space and resources to research conducted by teachers. For learning to be deeply insightful, students need to apply themselves and be able to concentrate on their studies. This must be taken into account when planning and implementing teaching. Self-development and joint learning are a must for anyone working in an academic setting.

Students become members of the academic community primarily by studying and attending lectures, but they also have a key role in linking teaching and research. In research-based teaching, students are given responsibility and expected to make an active contribution. Inquiry-based teaching offers teachers the opportunity to produce and develop research ideas, test the results with students, and familiarise students with academic thought. Academic research would be impossible without continuous recruitment of new researchers, and the only way to become a researcher is to participate in investigation and study with and alongside more experienced researchers.

Facilitating studies and designing, developing and implementing teaching call for support and other services, which are jointly organised by academic community members in charge of various duties as well as by teachers and students. The provision and implementation of teaching may be complicated if the people involved view things mainly from their own perspective. In the ideal case, the people imparting, planning and participating in teaching as well as those in charge of practical arrangements interact openly with one another, trust each other and organise their collaboration so that everyone's opinions and voice are heard. What all good practices have in common is that they promote the achievement of goals instead of preventing or hampering it.

Many different objectives are set for university teaching and studies. The University's goals are to educate experts, impart research results, develop academic maturity and promote global citizenship. The University's multidisciplinary nature and long history have resulted in a multitude of practices and numerous procedures. Harmonising and centrally organising the planning, provision and implementation of teaching and studies may increase efficiency. However, the push towards uniformity may turn against itself if the actions are not evaluated primarily according to the main objectives set for teaching and studies.



---

### **Manifestations of the second ideal in the community:**

1. Teaching and studies are considered to be key activities of the entire work community, and their implementation and quality is everyone's joint and individual responsibility.
2. Teaching is planned and implemented and studies arranged in a way that supports joint activities and open interaction.
3. The relationships between participants are based on mutual trust and appreciation shown for the expertise and competence of others.
4. Teachers and students commit themselves to joint activities and always do their best to succeed in the task at hand.

### **Third ideal:**

#### **High-quality academic teaching and studies demonstrate the University's high standing as a community.**

Teaching and studies do not characterise the university institution alone. As practical actions, they also reveal the University's nature as a research, study and work community. A poorly functioning, unhealthy community is incapable of maintaining high-quality operations in the long run.

A thriving community is characterised by its members having shared goals and its operating models serving to achieve common, goal-oriented interests. Activities that comply with this ideal are open, consistent and transparent. Work conditions and practices have been designed and arranged to facilitate carrying out tasks and to support wellbeing and coping. People in different positions feel that the procedures followed for different tasks are fair and just.

In terms of teaching, it is essential that teachers have a real opportunity to work independently, set objectives and influence their own activities and the related conditions. This ideal has traditionally been expressed as the 'freedom of university teaching'. What needs to be kept in mind when planning common objectives and methods is that responsible and committed activities can never be forced on people: all those involved should find the decisions to be relevant to their own work and tasks.

The academic community can be described with conflicting attributes. As a community, the university is both hierarchic and equitable. Its operations contain many features that remain unchanged for long stretches of time, but the university also continues to adapt to the challenges of the times. While science and the dissemination of research results through teaching and studies are based on sharing, comparison and competition are essential features of the academic community. The University puts an emphasis on its traditions but is proud to be dynamic. It has a firmly established organisation, yet new innovations only come into being in a creative environment that can open-mindedly let go of the past. In an ideal community, tensions are identified, and their impact can be openly discussed. This enables community members to devise practices that prevent conflicts from flaring up and obstructing operations and instead to encourage everyone to seek common benefits and opportunities to act in the best interests of all.

University studies offer the opportunity to learn from the top experts in each field. They characteristically require attendance and participation. However, for participation in teaching to be meaningful and motivating, the content and delivery of instruction must be of high quality. Research-based learning cannot succeed if students do not integrate into the academic community through interaction with teachers and other students. In terms of developing and sharing ideas and identifying



common procedures, it is important that students, teachers, researchers and other staff have the opportunity to interact and spend time together in unofficial settings and that the University encourages and supports its members to take part in such activities.

The University's communal nature can be seen in the large number of independent associations: the student union, nations, subject-specific student organisations, trade and research societies, guilds, study and other circles as well as recreational organisations. Most research societies and journals have emerged from within the University as a result of the academic community's activities. The notion of collegiality forming a part of the university concept is an intellectual and social resource whose value and significance are easily forgotten if activities are assessed using only quantitative criteria.

Active scholarly and other activities are a sign of the members of the academic community wanting to expand the University's role in society and the world. The academic community's internal activities reflect mutual respect and appreciation as well as consideration shown to others. The community can thus offer considerable support to an open society and the structures supporting it – especially when community members participate in various civic activities.

---

### **Manifestations of the third ideal in the community:**

1. The activities of people participating in teaching cooperation are based on mutual respect.
  2. Collaboration and mutual learning and sharing are valued and promoted.
  3. The participants' differing needs and expectations are taken into consideration in all activities, the aim being to tie these in with the common objectives.
  4. Individuals continuously assess their own actions from various perspectives. Criticism and suggested improvements are approached openly and positively, viewing them as resources boosting development.
-

# Ethical issues related to teaching and studies

Different types of unexpected problems may present themselves in the course of university teaching and studies. Sometimes they are best described as ethical issues. The following paragraphs offer examples of such issues and suggest aspects to take into consideration when discussing and settling such matters.

## 1 Freedom and responsibility

Freedom is a key value for academic studies, research and teaching. However, it can be abused. Everyone can freely choose their field of study, but in order to participate unrestrictedly in instruction leading to a degree, they must take part in a time-consuming and laborious qualification process. To ensure that people planning academic studies can make well-grounded decisions concerning their field of choice, the communication with applicants must be honest and factual to give a realistic picture of studies, their content and requirements as well as the preconditions for successful study results.

Good performance in the selection process boosts study motivation. Nevertheless, the field in which the right to pursue a degree was granted may not necessarily be the applicant's first choice, or actual studies may prove the choice to be unsuitable for the student. Motivation not only depends on students and their attitudes: the University and its teachers and researchers also play a major part in awakening or stifling students' interest in studies. A sufficient amount of constructive feedback given at different stages of studies is a key factor maintaining motivation. Students who feel that they are true members of the academic community and that their opinions and actions make a difference commit themselves to their studies and do their best, in contrast to students who feel that they are just instruments helping the University to reach its performance targets.

Students must be encouraged to tackle any flaws or development needs that they detect and point them out in joint discussions and decision-making. Something to keep in mind when evaluating operating methods is that decisions made in democratic social processes and in line with the University's Regulations define the boundaries and guidelines observed in joint activities.

The provision of courses and other forms of instruction always ties up resources and generate costs. Enrolling in a course signifies acceptance of the conditions and

method of providing the course. To ensure that students know what they are committing themselves to, sufficient information about the content, objectives, implementation and evaluation of instruction and learning must be given well in advance to help students plan their studies. It should be made clear to students that enrolling in a course is equivalent to a promise: breaking such a promise complicates the allocation of resources and provision of instruction and may deny another student a place in the course.

Students are entitled to special arrangements due to illness or disability. When organising studies, it should be taken into account that both students and teachers may fall ill. Students have the right to receive instruction irrespective of the teacher's condition. Consequently, faculties and units providing teaching must ensure that they have substitute procedures in place. Students cannot be required to participate in studies if sick. Any supplementary assignments given to students due to their absence may not be unreasonable in scope or exceed the workload required of those who participated in the course.

## **2 Further development of teaching and studies**

Teaching is an essential part of university activities, but people in different positions view it from different perspectives. As a result, teaching is sometimes subject to conflicting expectations. The increasingly common notion of a service-industry society may lead to universities being seen as providers of teaching and study services, which must be customised to everybody's liking. Students' expectations and academic teaching may be discordant.

The discrepancy between expectations for academic teaching and the reality can be unravelled by considering the basic task of universities. Universities are not service providers: they are academic communities that bring together different players. University teaching and studies do not exist only to produce professional competence but also to help students evolve into members of the academic community. Although the degree structures and course descriptions indicate the content of studies and the material that students are expected to learn in the course of their studies, the objectives of university studies are flexible by nature. Scholarly research is characterised by the impossibility of knowing the research results in advance, without prior investigation. Similarly, the final results of studies cannot be determined in advance. The content of studies and the method of completion depend on the discipline and are influenced by research on learning. The content and methods must be revised from time to time to ensure that they serve the objectives set. Students cannot request solutions best suited to their individual needs. They must commit themselves to their studies and their development as well as participate in them. The University is to provide teaching

and studies in a way that ensures that students are welcomed and integrated into the academic community.

University studies aim to educate professionals in various disciplines who can work and make decisions independently. In terms of professional development, it is important for the skills advancing this objective to improve during studies. Students should thus have the opportunity to complete some of their studies as distance learning. Extending the range of distance learning options is justified especially in view of the goal of increasing international cooperation, teaching between campuses and teaching provided by research stations. However, measures must be taken to ensure that distance learning and independent study do not lead to a decline in learning outcomes or in the isolation of students from the academic community. Even the most fantastic campus facilities are useless if members of the academic community do not consider them the home environment of their community.

It is in the University's interest to develop teaching and study skills as well as to support teachers in upgrading their expertise in diverse ways. The prerequisite for successful and meaningful development is that the University's nature as an expert organisation is taken into consideration in all activities. Activities of high quality and standards can be created and promoted only if this is based on internal motivation. In other words, the work of others cannot be improved by force or on their behalf. Respect shown towards the work and expertise of others is crucial to maintain motivation. Support services must be arranged in such a way that development does not become an end in itself but is based on the autonomy of science and teaching.

### **3 Conflict between research and teaching**

The argument that people in academia should be allowed to do what they know best is sometimes put forth with reference to the flexibility and economy of activities. This is used to justify the practice of letting some people focus solely on research and having others concentrate on teaching. In the course of their studies, students must present their own work or research to others or teach their peers. Disseminating information, supervising others, teaching and producing shared knowledge are elements of expert duties in many fields. Most university duties also require such skills, which is why they should be taught during both undergraduate and postgraduate studies. From this perspective, a strict division between research and teaching is artificial and does not match the current demands set on expert duties. The motivation of university teachers and researchers is based on a real interest in their work. It is difficult or impossible to maintain motivation if teaching and research are pitted against each other.



According to the University of Helsinki's policies, all researchers teach and all teachers conduct research. This principle and its implementation also work in the best interest of every researcher and research group. Teaching imparted by a specialist is the best way to distribute the latest knowledge – and possibly the only way to obtain it without being among the international insiders in the field of research. By participating in teaching and involving students in research, researchers can inspire students in the early phases of studies and boost their interest in the research field and topic that they represent. Becoming a part of a research group is a very concrete sign to students of their belonging to the academic community. Unrestricted interaction between science and teaching promotes the continuity of world-class research and contributes to attracting talented and motivated young researchers to research groups at the University of Helsinki.

## **4 The University as a work community**

The nature of the University makes it in many ways a unique work environment. Studies form an entire stage of life lasting for a fixed period. What this means for the University is a large annual turnover in its membership: graduating students leave the University, while those newly admitted embark on their studies. The University's work community is also characterised by the wide range of tasks performed by its members and the varied content of work between faculties, even for the same job title. In addition to permanent staff, the University has a large group of employees with fixed-term contracts. As a work environment, the University is hierarchic and exceedingly competitive. Success is measured, and it constitutes an important benchmark. Many of the University's characteristics make it a challenging work community and set special demands on management and open communication. This all affects the provision of teaching and studies. Identifying risk factors and discussing them openly, listening to all parties and taking their viewpoints into consideration help to prevent problems. A confidential atmosphere also supports the community when it needs to take a stand on difficult questions and settle conflicts between parties.

The University's nature as a community that emphasises competition and success may make setbacks and failures seem overwhelming. To prevent the drawbacks of competition, the academic community must practice and maintain a sustainable approach to work. In addition to emphasising individual performance and success, attention should also be focused on developing ways to work and succeed that have a positive impact on the whole community.

Students experiencing difficulties are also members of the academic community. While many services are on offer, problems cannot be simply delegated to experts. Similar to any good and just community, members of the university are responsible for one another. Caring and interaction are features of a healthy community. Teachers are not supposed to act as psychologists, but should show that they care by being interested in the students, their studies and their study progress as well as in any obstacles to study. We must ensure that no one is left alone to deal with problems. The University offers a wide range of help and support. Cooperation is often needed to settle matters.

Teaching and studies may involve problematic issues that people dare not tackle or report. Students, fixed-term employees and teachers at lower levels of the hierarchy are afraid to point out problems because their position may be unfavourably affected. Students find it difficult to disclose study-related flaws or to report teachers who behave inappropriately or neglect their duties because their study performance and progress may depend on the teacher's favourable attitude. As a result, major problems may go unnoticed for a long time. A community that strives towards high quality must encourage people in different positions to identify flaws and weaknesses and report them. Any problems detected must be immediately addressed, and work on settling them should focus on creating constructive solutions instead of finding culprits.

Correct behaviour and the appropriate handling of duties are key elements of the teaching profession. Excessively close relations with students endanger the impartiality of teachers: students must be able to trust that everyone is treated justly and equally. The superior must ensure that each employee behaves professionally and that no one ends up in a disadvantageous position, is treated negatively or faces undesirable consequences for having pointed out flaws or weaknesses. Every member of the work community must be familiar with the appropriate practices and be a good example of professional conduct. The correct approach in individual situations should be discussed and defined as a part of normal, everyday communication within the community.

Expertise does not arise from solely attending lectures, reading books and conducting one's own research. Learning from the actions and example of teachers and other experienced members of the academic community is key to the development of academic expertise. Not only do students adopt good practices, they also take up poor procedures. Anyone working and interacting with students should aim to be a good example and promote the dissemination and establishment of ethically excellent procedures. Teachers must not take advantage of less influential community members to promote their own interests.

WWW.HELSINKI.FI/UNIVERSITY

This publication is on the internet at:  
[www.helsinki.fi/opetus/eettiset-periaatteet/en](http://www.helsinki.fi/opetus/eettiset-periaatteet/en)

on the University of Helsinki intranet at:  
<https://flamma.helsinki.fi/en/HY276134>



UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI