

Academic freedom and meaningful international cooperation are needed to safeguard good health and well-being globally



The World Health Summit (WHS) Academic Alliance currently comprises 28 leading universities and scientific organizations from all continents. Although they work in very different local environments, the members of the alliance are united in their goal of promoting equity and quality in health and on the principle that research and implementation should benefit all global citizens.

The COVID-19 pandemic reminded us, at a high and painful cost, that in an interconnected world “no one is safe until everyone is safe”¹. Without mutual collaboration and shared responsibility (also known as multilateralism), it is impossible to protect or improve global population health². Human physiology, disease mechanisms, and the principles of prevention and medical countermeasures are the same everywhere. Thus, scientific insight, combined with global cooperation for implementation, is an indispensable and invaluable resource for improving health worldwide.

We are currently witnessing an alarming increase in attacks on open, inclusive science³. The spread of erroneous information and deliberate misinformation threatens scientific progress and erodes public trust in countermeasures for urgent health challenges⁴.

Moreover, trends to reduce national support for global health initiatives and multinational organizations, including the World Health Organization⁵, are causing major negative impacts on the development and implementation of common health policies, with long-ranging consequences for peace, prosperity, health and well-being, especially in the most vulnerable regions and populations^{6,7}.

Dedicated to improving global health for all human beings, the WHS Academic Alliance calls on all national governments, academic institutions, representatives of the private sector and civil society organizations to keep supporting international cooperation and multinational organizations in all sectors crucial for the health and well-being of national and global populations.

We urge governments, as well as the other global health stakeholders, to seize the opportunity of a substantial change in the international health landscape and its funding, scope and organization to nurture strong partnerships and jointly strengthen health systems. If we work together to generate and implement new ideas, a paradigm shift toward a more transparent, distributed, resilient and sustainable global health ecosystem can be achieved.

The WHS Academic Alliance reiterates that improved health everywhere, based on scientific approaches, is a central prerequisite for prosperity, peace and well-being locally, nationally and globally – as laid down in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-Being).

We also call for the protection of academic freedom, the independence of research and education, and the free pursuit of science, including research, training and advocacy. We highlight the urgent need to counteract misinformation, which is prevalent in the social media era⁴. To inform evidence-based policies and effective action to improve public health, the WHS Academic Alliance underscores the critical role of multinational collaboration among researchers and universities in generating and sharing scientific knowledge.

We call on governments and policymakers globally to take on responsibility for populations, addressing health priorities together, and to base their approaches on independent scientific evidence. To achieve this, we propose the following three policy recommendations.

Define, respect and safeguard academic freedom

Academic freedom is not absolute – it has ethical, societal and financial boundaries that need to be outlined by political choices in an inclusive, evidence-based process. Within these boundaries, scientific advances provide indispensable guidance to address the most pressing issues of global health, among others. No matter how tempting it may be to interfere with the scientific process, history provides

ample examples showing that societies which refrain from undue influence on topics and results of academic activities have a sustainable competitive advantage⁸.

Here we propose two actions: first, safeguard the political independence of state institutions funding and organizing research; and second, avoid interfering with the contents, aims and results of research.

Support international collaboration and multilateral institutions working for global public health

The strongest threats to population health, including infections and non-communicable diseases, are global phenomena that do not respect political borders. For these to be addressed effectively and efficiently, national priorities must be coordinated with requirements from global threats and with international responses. Multinational mechanisms are required to coordinate health responses to global threats. Global health diplomacy, intertwined with foreign policy, has a vital role to play in global health, as an increasingly influential factor in the definition of security and defense policies, development strategies and trade agreements.

Here we propose three actions: first, develop and redesign multinational institutions in the global health sector; second, match the competencies of these institutions to their tasks; and third, establish transparent exchange of health information.

Fight misinformation and disinformation to counteract the decrease of trust in science

Around the world, people are encountering mis- and disinformation, which can have a significant impact on the development and application of relevant health measures, for example in the context of a pandemic, and thus destabilize societies⁹. Disinformation (deliberate false information), in particular, is used increasingly to advance specific political and commercial interests. A healthy and prosperous world requires concerted

activity toward strengthening widespread access to trustworthy scientific evidence. Science can fulfil its unifying role and contribute to global health only when there is a solid and broadly shared consensus on findings and evidence.

Here we propose two actions: first, support the generation, curation and dissemination of valid, evidence-based information; and second, suppress the spread of disinformation⁹.

What should and what can we do as members of the global academic community? Scientists search for insights that are untouched by time and beliefs. These insights can give solid and independent guidelines for survival on this earth, and they unite people across all borders and religions. But this comes with a responsibility to build bridges and provide concrete advice even in turbulent times. We must reach out to other stakeholders of societal change – whether in politics, the private sector or civil society – and develop approaches and solutions in collaboration with them, and we need to hold ourselves and the other players accountable for the outcomes.

The WHS Academic Alliance is committed to keeping attention on the critical role of the above policies for global development during the annual Summit in Berlin and the Regional Meetings taking place every year in different cities around the world. We, citizens of the globe, have no choice than being united to act

on science, through global partnerships and multilateral collaboration.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.