Democratic Values and the University

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Beyond Resilience: Universities as Active Value-Driven Agents in a Changing World

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DRU
DEMOCRATIC ROLES OF UNIVERSITIES

Horizon Europe Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions
GA 101236527

Agenda

1. **Democratic Roles of Universities (DRU)**
   Project Overview
2. **Democracy: continually reinvented**
   From ancient Greece to modern political science
3. **Five theories of modern democratic thought**
   Pluralist, participatory, liberal minimalist, deliberative, agonistic
4. **Democratic values in university governance**
   The Portuguese case, 1974–2026
5. **Universities as democratic infrastructure**
   Why independent enquiry matters to democracy
6. **A reciprocal obligation**
   What universities give democracy – and what democracy owes them

DRU Project overview

Why is DRU important?

Is this what it means to live in a democracy?
How can the meaning of democracy and the conditions for its promotion be (re)conceptualised?

DRU's ambition: develop a holistic approach to the democratic roles of universities

Explore innovative ways to use university resources to benefit democracy

We need to understand what academic and non-aca organisations do based on common problems that cut across diverse national contexts, practices, and capacities.

Develop criteria to assess whether practicies effectively enhance democracy

DRU
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Thematic Work Packages

Democratic values

WP2: Democratic values and their institutionalization



Amélia Veiga
(UPORTO)
PI of DRU

Practising democractic values

WP3: Governance instruments



Tim Seidenschnur
(Kassel University)

WP4: Participatory research and citizen science



Zsuzsanna Géring
(BGE)

WP5: Education in a hospitable university



Marie-Agnès Détourbe (INSA Toulouse/UT2J)

WP6: Civic engagement by neighourbly university



Susan Wright
(Aarhus University)

Consortium members

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Project beneficiaries

U.PORTO · AARHUS UNIVERSITY · UNIKASSEL VERSITÄT · INCHER International Center for Higher Education Research · UNIVERSITÉ TOULOUSE Jean Jaurès · Durham University · UPTEC SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY PARK OF UNIVERSITY OF PORTO · GLOBAL STUDENT FORUM · ESN Erasmus Student Network · TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL Hungary · REDHILLS DURHAM MINERS HALL

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Collaborating organisations

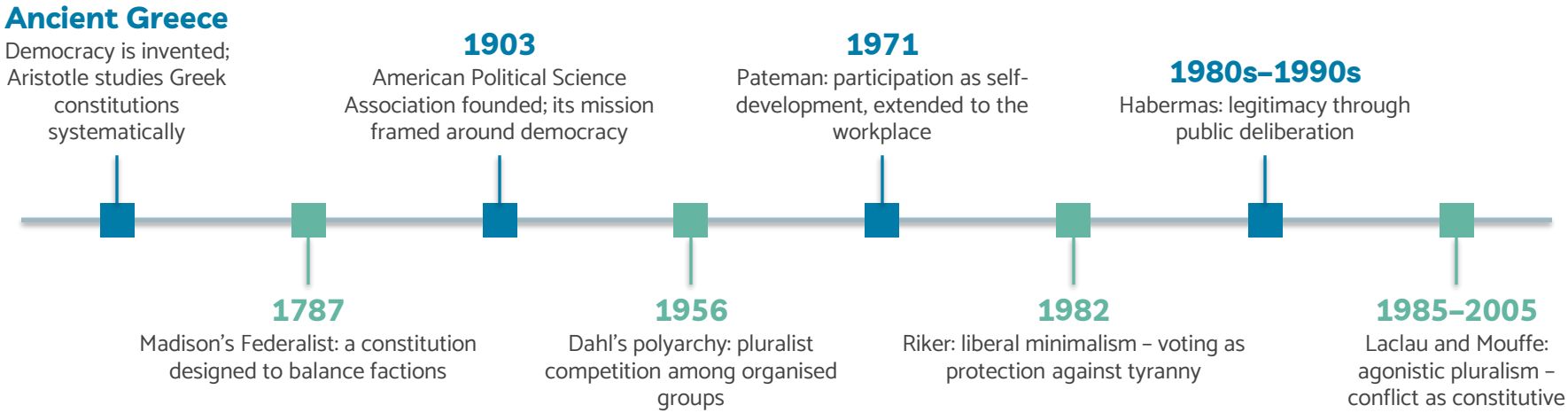
OBSERVATORY MAGNA CHARTA UNIVERSITATUM

From ancient Greece to modern political science

How democratic thought has evolved, and the theories that dominate it today

01

Democracy: a venerable idea, continually reinvented



Source: Hilmer (2011), 'Modern Democratic Thought'.

Five theories dominate contemporary democratic thought

Pluralist

Dahl (1956, 1961); Lindblom (1977)

Government by competing groups, secured by citizens' rights, checks and balances and party competition. Later revised: business holds a 'privileged position'.

Key values

Political equality · freedom of expression and organisation

Participatory

Pateman (1971); Macpherson (1977); Barber (1984)

Participation develops citizens' capacities and sense of efficacy, and should extend beyond government to the workplace and community.

Key values

Self-development · empowerment · shared power

Liberal minimalist

Arrow (1962); Riker (1982)

No 'general will' can be aggregated by voting; democracy is a method for citizens to control leaders and prevent tyranny.

Key values

Liberty · protection against tyranny · procedure

Deliberative

Habermas (1984–1996); Rawls (1993)

Legitimacy comes from reasoned public discussion, in which preferences are formed and a common good is sought.

Key values

Inclusion · public reasoning · consensus

Agonistic

Laclau and Mouffe (1985); Mouffe (2000, 2005)

Conflict is inherent to 'the political'; institutions should tame antagonism into agonism rather than impose consensus.

Key values

Pluralism · contestation · cultural recognition

Source: Hilmer (2011), 'Modern Democratic Thought'; WP2 – DRU preliminary analysis of democratic values.

Participation: the contested concept

Is voting enough?

Liberal minimalists: voting is the 'central act of democracy' – a protective device for citizens, not the expression of a common good (Riker, 1982).

Must citizens deliberate?

Deliberative democrats: discussion and debate shape preferences, so that legislation affirms a common good rather than merely registering private wills.

Should participation reach work and home?

Participatory democrats: an expansive idea of participation that includes the workplace and the household (Pateman, 1971; Gould, 1988).

Theory shapes practice

To live in a democracy involves the ongoing, everyday experience of participation, mutual recognition, and the legitimate exercise of dissent.

Democratic values in university governance

The Portuguese case: from participatory democracy to managerialism – and back to contestation?

02

Three phases in Portuguese university governance

1974–1988 → **2007 · RJIES** → **2026 · Law No. 32/2026**

Participatory democracy

- After the 1974 Carnation Revolution, 'democratic management' became a pillar of anti-fascist liberation
- The 1988 Autonomy Law institutionalised parity and collegiality in the University Assembly and Senate
- Rectors elected by their academic peers

Theoretical lens
Academic life as a substantive exercise of democratic citizenship (Pateman, Barber)

Liberal-minimalist and managerial

- New Public Management culminates in the Legal Regime of Higher Education Institutions (RJIES)
- Collegiality marginalised in favour of efficiency, effectiveness and accountability
- Power concentrated in the Rector and a General Council with external stakeholders

Theoretical lens
Democracy reduced to aggregating preferences; academic citizens become stakeholders (Riker, Dahl)

Participatory-agonistic

- A response to the democratic deficit of the RJIES
- Direct universal suffrage for the Rector across four constituencies; gender parity
- Student Ombudsman, mental health support and anti-precarity measures

Theoretical lens
Tensions between managerial efficiency and democratic mission are openly contested (Mouffe)

Source: Veiga, 'The Portuguese case', WP2 – DRU meet 6 (11 September 2026).

Synthesis: the evolution of democratic values

	Post-1974 / 1988	RJIES (2007)	2026 reform
Theoretical model	**Participatory (Pateman, Barber)**	**Liberal-minimalist / NPM (Dahl)**	**Agonistic / participatory (Mouffe)**
Core value	Collegiality, parity, self-governance	Efficiency, accountability, performance	Representativeness, direct suffrage, equity
Type of democracy	**Substantive and cultural**	**Procedural and instrumental**	**Rebalanced procedural-substantive**
Definition of autonomy	Protective shield for scientific and political freedom	Contractual management, market-oriented	Reinforced autonomy linked to social responsibility

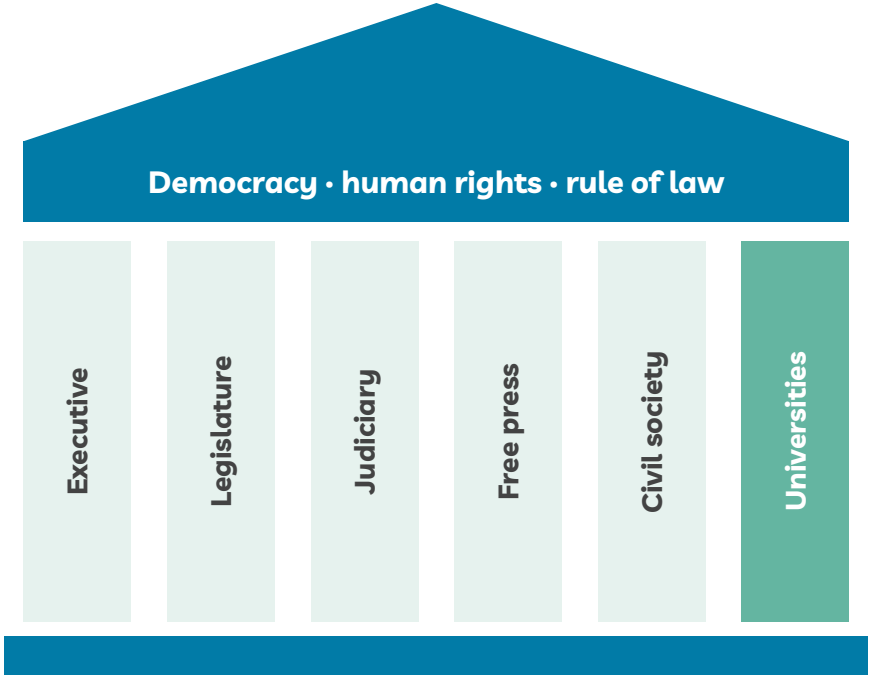
Source: Veiga, 'The Portuguese case', WP2 – DRU meet 6 (11 September 2026).

Why democratic values matter for universities

Universities as democratic infrastructure – and the obligations that run in both directions

03

Universities as democratic infrastructure



When that wider structure is weakened, universities are usually affected as well.

How universities disperse power

- Training professionals who can question official decisions
- Producing analyses that can contradict government or corporate claims
- Placing independent expertise inside courts of law, the media and public debate

Source: de Rijcke (2026), Nature 657, 876–879.

A reciprocal obligation

The relationship between democracy and the University is never neutral: it can be a virtuous alliance or a vicious circle.

What universities give democracy

- Forming critical citizens
- Producing knowledge for social progress
- Providing scientific evidence for public policy
- Combating disinformation
- Sustaining a pluralism of ideas
- Promoting social mobility

Daniels, What Universities Owe Democracy

What democracy owes universities

- Political, institutional, material and symbolic conditions for critical knowledge
- Institutional autonomy and academic freedom
- Adequate funding
- Models of good governance and management

Veiga, A Página da Educação

'When these conditions degrade, it is not only the University that weakens: democracy itself loses its mechanisms of protection against authoritarianism.' [my translation]

Sources: Veiga (2026), A Página da Educação, p. 95; Daniels et al. (2021).

Independent enquiry under pressure

A world order in rupture

Mark Carney (Davos, 20 January 2026) described a world order marked by the erosion of rules and the return of the law of the strongest.

Universities and democracies face a strategic choice: resign themselves to isolation and grow weaker, or join forces to build something new, fairer and more sustainable.

Veiga (2026)

Hungary 2017–2020

Research funding moved from the national academy to a government-steered network; the Central European University forced out to Vienna (2019); the EU Court of Justice found the law incompatible with EU law (2020).

United States Recent years

Changes to research-funding mechanisms and priorities in climate science and gender research; environmental and public-health expertise sidelined.

Netherlands 2025

The national academy warns that budget cuts push research from independent to commissioned work, criticises a proposed screening law, and documents self-censorship.

Elsewhere Ongoing

Grant language rewritten towards competitiveness, innovation and national security; reduced access to public data on climate and health.

Sources: de Rijcke (2026), Nature 657, 876–879; Veiga (2026), A Página da Educação, p. 95.

Honouring democracy's obligations to the University

Values-based realism

WP2: Democratic values and their institutionalization

Keep fundamental principles, while being pragmatic about the diversity of interests and the need for gradual progress (Carney).

For democracies and universities, this means engaging with the real world: acting collectively, with clarity, honesty and pragmatism, and promoting critical knowledge to counter the hegemony of *solutionism*.

Veiga (2026)

WP3: Governance instruments

Democratic values promoted and strengthened in how universities are governed

WP4: Participatory research and citizen science

Knowledge produced and shared openly

WP5: Education in a hospitable university

Diversity integrated into the life of the institution

WP6: Civic engagement by neighourbly university

Universities active in their communities

Above all: creating spaces to imagine, investigate and test alternative scenarios, contributing to the future of democracy.

Source: Veiga (2026), 'E se as democracias levassem a sério as suas obrigações para com as Universidades?', A Página da Educação, p. 95.

‘Defending the University is, obviously, defending democracy; and protecting democracy means guaranteeing the University the space and the means to exercise its critical function to the full – a function indispensable to deepening the relationship between knowledge and emancipation.’

Amélia Veiga, *A Página da Educação*

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