

A photograph of the University of Johannesburg campus, featuring a large, modern, multi-story building with a distinctive architectural style of stacked rectangular blocks and balconies. The building is set on a hillside, surrounded by lush green trees and a well-maintained lawn. A person is walking on a path in the foreground. The sky is blue with some white clouds.

# Academic Responsibility and Universities' Role in Society

Presentation for the Magna Charta Observatory  
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2021-09-29

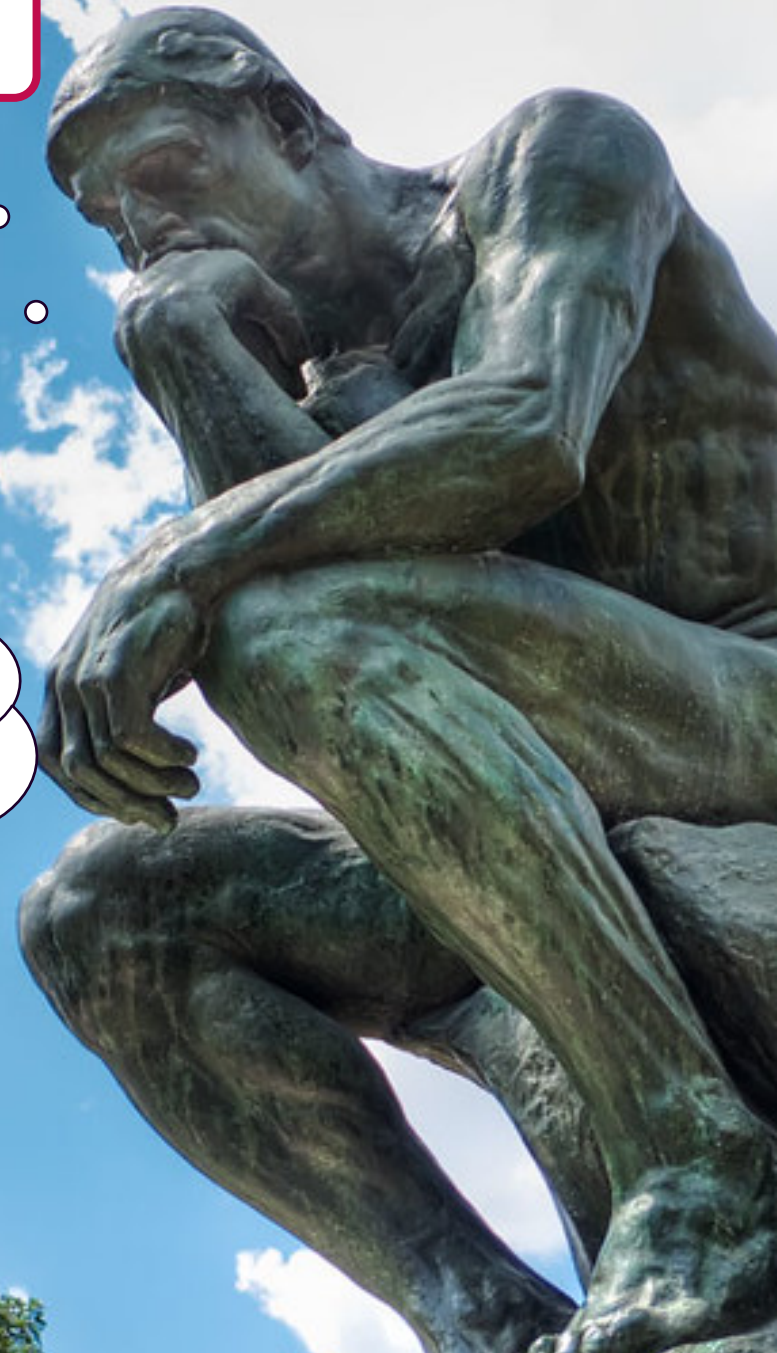




## Two key questions for academia

What are we  
good at?

What are we  
good *for*?

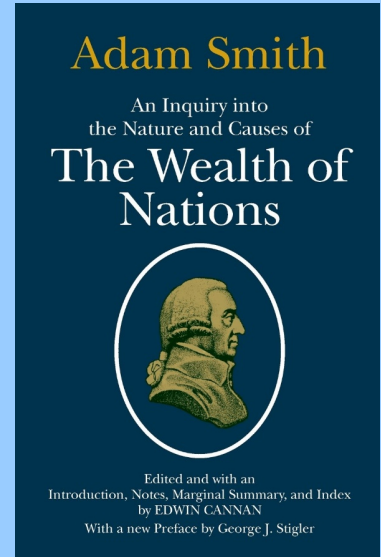


# *Our classic response to the 'good for' question*

*The 'invisible hand' argument: Free knowledge creation, if done well, will benefit society in the long run*

*So, a strong response to the 'good at' question will suffice also as a response to the 'good for' question*

*In support of this argument, we have many examples – and a well-developed conceptual framework*



**Immanuel Kant: *Academic Freedom***

**John Henry Newman:  
*Knowledge for its own sake***



**Wilhelm von Humboldt: *Curiosity-driven research***



## ***But still: A global unease about our role in society***

*“ Universities do not exist for themselves or for members of their academic communities in the first place. Their role and use is a societal one.  
... Is HE ready to move beyond present indicators of productivity in research and teaching and integrate scientific excellence with social responsibility?  
... The rise of ‘populism’ with its strongly anti-elitist and anti-intellectual tendencies makes universities look as standing apart ”*



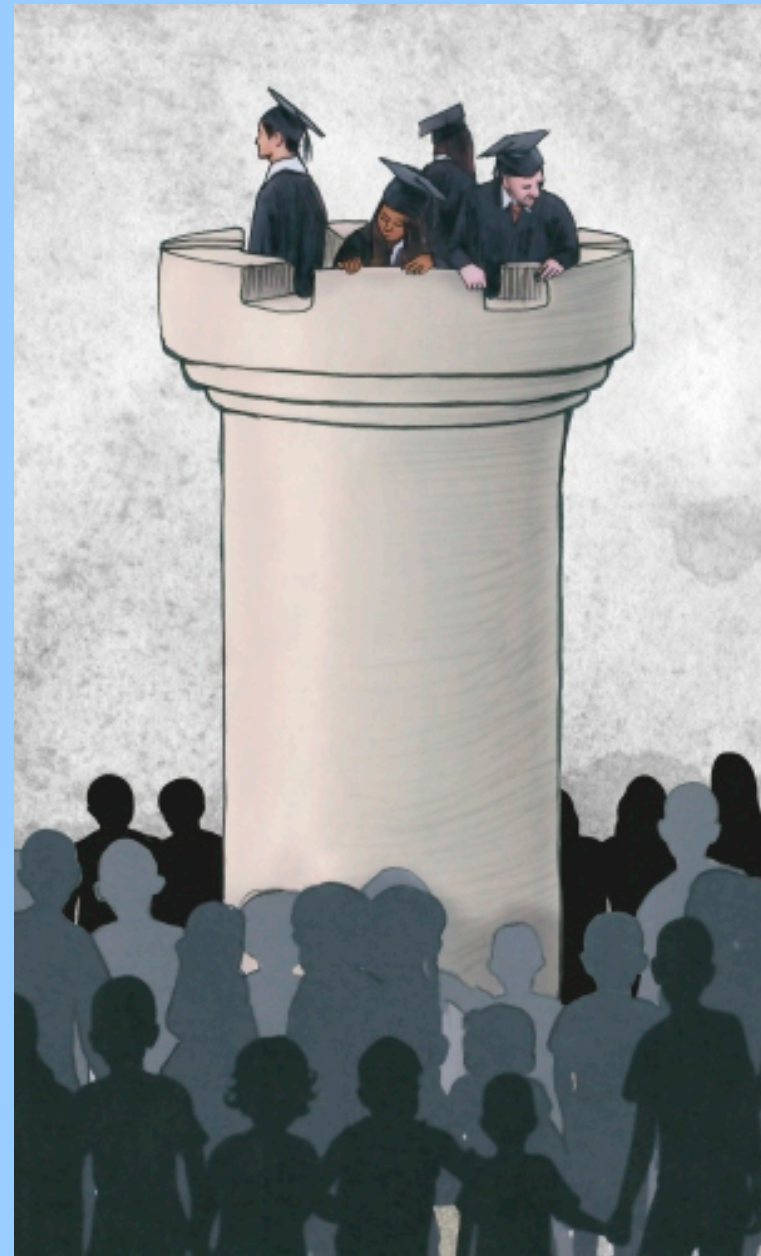
*The invisible hand argument might be true, but it cannot be the whole truth.*

*The benefits of the invisible hand are slow in coming and unpredictable in nature*

*By definition, the invisible hand is not responsive to societal challenges*

*From the point of view of societal need, the invisible hand argument looks like an abdication of social and moral responsibility*

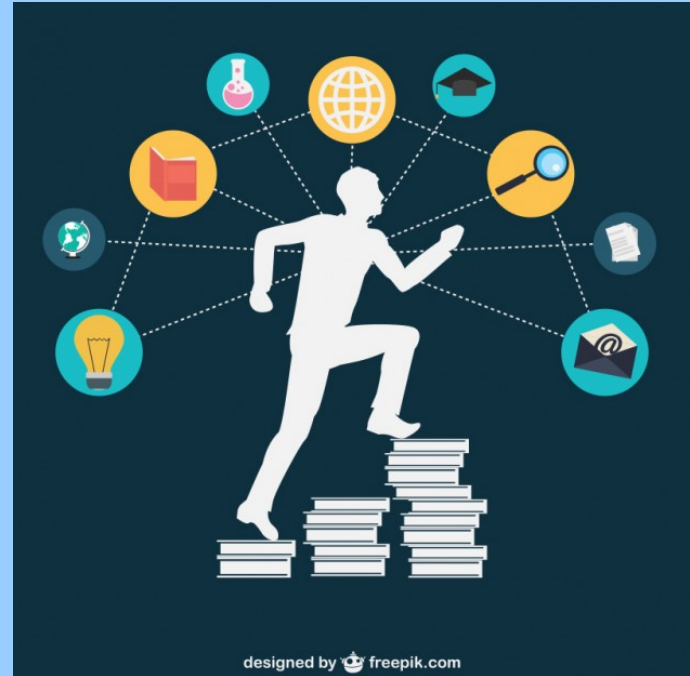
*- Which raises the larger question of our academic responsibility to society*



# *The Changing Mission of Higher Education*

This change has been happening for some time ...

Around the world, in various ways and under various names



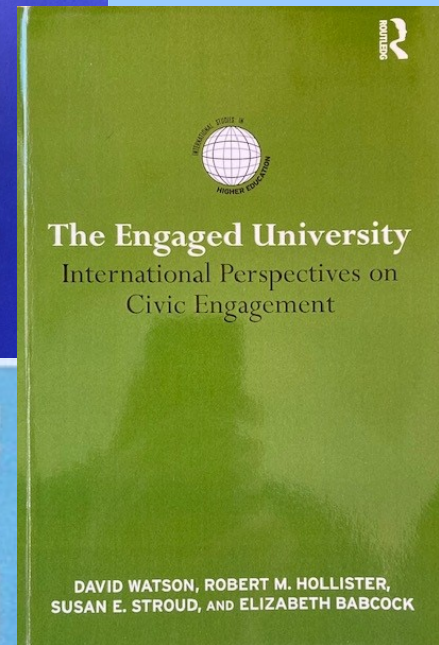
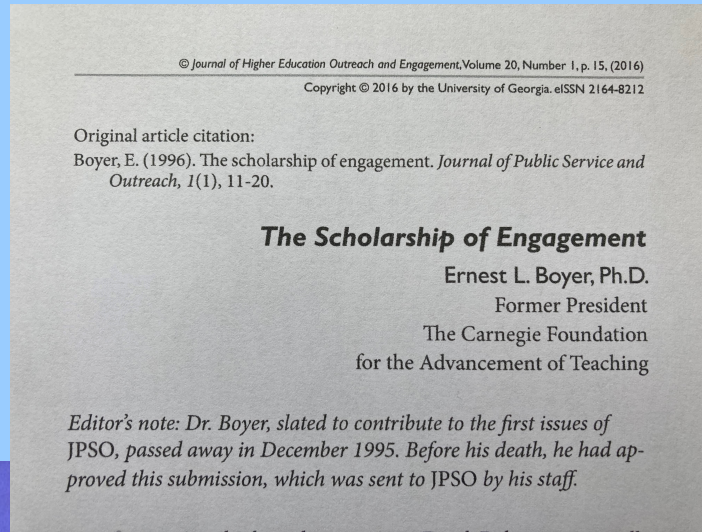
**I will give some examples, and then summarise them under one heading – academic responsibility**



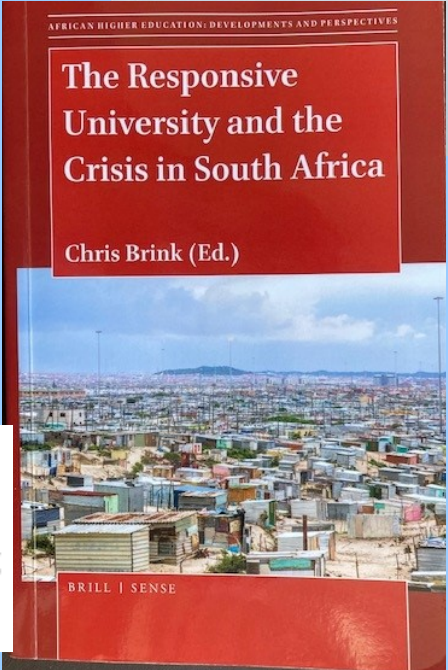
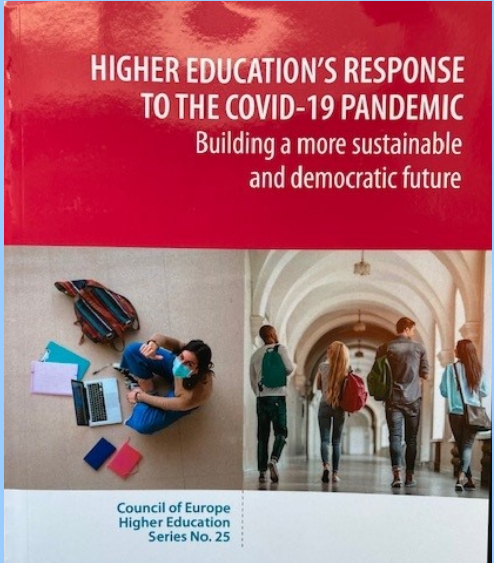
# Example 1: The idea of engagement

“[Our] outstanding universities and colleges remain, in my opinion, one of the greatest hopes for intellectual and civic progress in this country. I’m convinced that for this hope to be fulfilled, the academy must become a more vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic and moral problems, and must reaffirm its historic commitment to what I call the scholarship of engagement.”

Ernest L Boyer, 1996



# Example 2: The idea of responsiveness





## Example 3: The idea of research impact

- A new and additional category of research evaluation:
  - ‘What beneficial impact has the research of your university made on society at large?’
  - ‘And what evidence can you provide of such impact?’
- **Impact is about improving people’s lives. It could be in terms of the economy, technology, industry, innovation, health, culture, policy, services, ...**
- Already in place in a number of countries, and happening in others
- Not just ‘What are you good at?’, but also ‘What are you good for’



*“ Political decision-makers worldwide commit substantial amounts of public funds to support and foster scientific research on behalf of and for the society they represent. In return, they expect publicly funded research to generate some measure of impact. ”*

Global Research Council, 2019

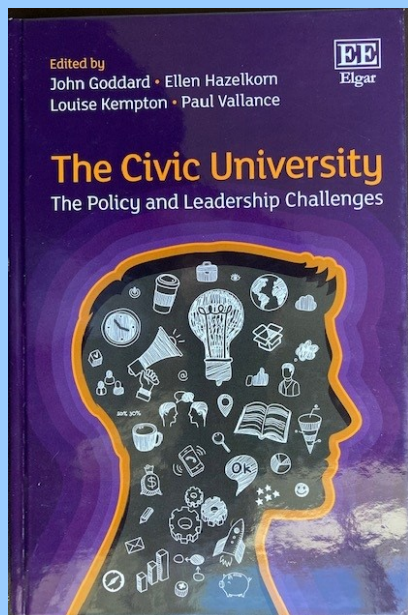
# Example 4: The idea of university social responsibility

“University social responsibility (USR) extends the traditional mission of universities in an endeavour to develop solutions for economic, social and environmental problems in society.”

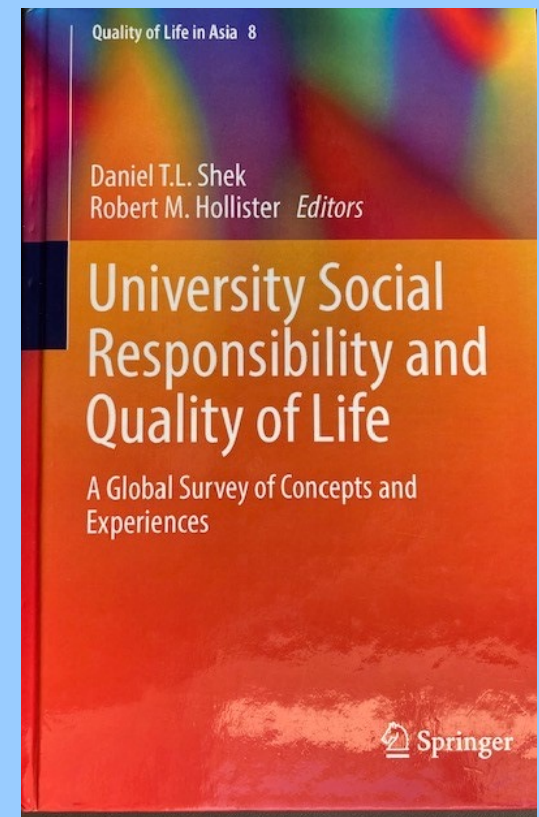
<http://www.usrnetwork.org/about-usrn/background>



**USR  
NETWORK**  
University Social Responsibility Network



**Civic University  
Network**

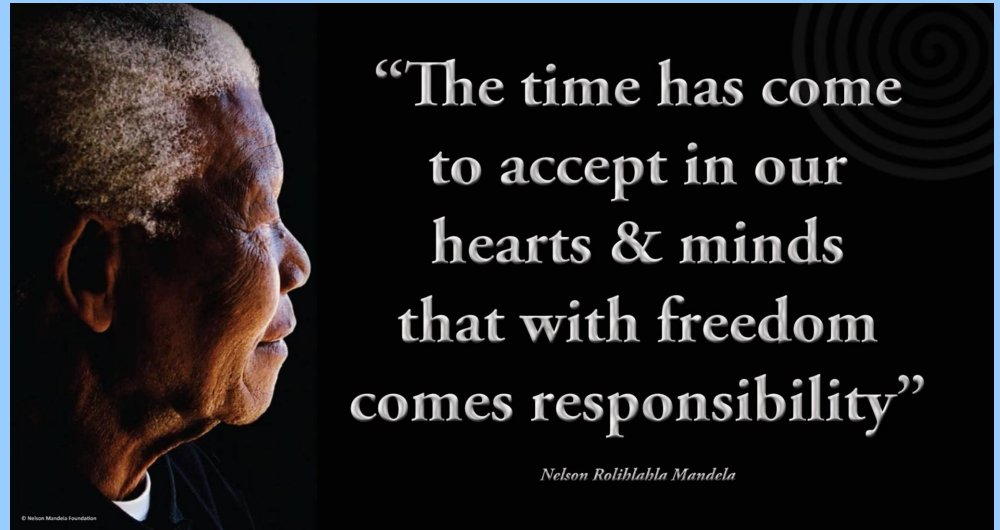




## ***In Summary: The idea of Academic Responsibility***

**No freedom comes without responsibility**

**Why should we think that academic freedom is any different?**



**We spend lots of time talking about academic freedom**

**It is time to give equal attention to academic responsibility**

**Our responsibility to society**

***Well done to the updated Magna Charta  
Universitatum for leading us in this direction***



### **MCU 1988:**

- **Autonomy**
- **Independence**
- **Academic Freedom**

### **Updated MCU 2020:**

- **Reaffirms the 1988 principles**
- **But adds the principle of responsibility to society**

### **MCU 2020:**

*“Universities acknowledge that they have a responsibility to engage with and respond to the aspirations and challenges of the world and to the communities they serve, to benefit humanity and contribute to sustainability.”*



**And finally, from MCU 2020:**

*“Universities require a reliable contract with civil society”*

**To which I would add:**

*“... the basis for which should be the principle of parity between academic freedom and academic responsibility”*

**Thank you**

