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The global assault on universities is an attack on democracy

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Universities across the world are facing an intensifying wave of political interference, financial disinvestment and ideological attacks. These range from Hungary's expulsion of the Central European University from the country in 2019 to ongoing funding threats from the US government against institutions such as Columbia University in New York City.

As an academic who has worked in the United States, the Philippines and the Netherlands, I have observed at first hand the growing fragility of academic freedom across a range of democratic contexts. Today, even in the Netherlands — a country long seen as a beacon of academic liberty — higher-education institutions face deep budget cuts, which erode the underlying mission of universities to serve the public.

This global trend reveals a dangerous misunderstanding: education is being treated as a commodity, not as a constitutional obligation. If nations are willing to set benchmarks for gross domestic product for military spending, they should do the same for education, science and health. Universities are not luxuries; they are crucial democratic infrastructures. Their erosion signals broader democratic decay.

Societies must reaffirm universities as civic institutions, not merely economic engines. The survival of democracy itself depends on it.

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