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Universities Beyond Neutrality: Reassessing Academic Responsibility through the Human Right to Peace

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Abstract

This article examines how the emerging human right to peace can be used to reassess the role and responsibilities of universities in contexts of war, violent repression, and student mobilisation. Moving beyond traditional understandings of academic neutrality, it argues that universities are not external observers of global crises, but actors embedded within the social, political, and epistemic structures that shape both violence and its contestation.

The article adopts a combined normative and empirical approach. It first analyses the legal and theoretical foundations of the human right to peace, understood as an enabling condition for the enjoyment of all human rights. It then applies this framework to contemporary developments affecting academic institutions, including the destruction of higher education in Gaza, the repression of academic freedom in Belarus, and the emergence of transnational student movements. Particular attention is devoted to the case of the University of Padua, selected through a form of convenience sampling and used as an illustrative entry point for analysing broader dynamics within the academic community.

Drawing on recent scholarship on academic responsibility and selective empathy, the article shows that institutional silence and selective engagement cannot be considered neutral positions, but constitute forms of normative positioning with concrete implications for the realisation of peace. At the same time, it highlights the role of academic communities as sites of contestation and transformation.

Building on this analysis, the article proposes a preliminary framework for assessing academic responsibility along epistemic, institutional, civic, and solidaristic dimensions. It concludes that universities should be understood as normative actors and calls for further research to develop more robust forms of academic accountability grounded in the human right to peace.

Keywords: *Human right to peace, universities, academic responsibility, neutrality, student movements, academic freedom*

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1. Introduction: The Human Right to Peace and the Responsibility of Universities

In an increasingly unstable international context, marked by recurrent armed conflicts and the erosion of multilateral governance, the question of how peace should be understood and operationalised has become increasingly urgent. While traditionally conceived as a political objective or strategic condition, peace is now increasingly framed within international legal and scholarly debates as a potential human right.

Although the human right to peace is not yet universally consolidated as a binding legal norm, its recognition has gained growing normative traction. The adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Right to Peace in 2016 (UNGA 2016) represents a significant step in this direction, affirming that peace constitutes a condition for the effective exercise of human rights. In this perspective, peace can be understood not merely as the absence of conflict, but as an enabling condition for the realisation of human dignity (de Zayas 2017).

At the same time, the contemporary global landscape reveals a widening gap between the articulation of peace as a normative principle and its effective realisation. The destruction of civilian infrastructure, the repression of dissent, and the targeting of academic communities in contexts such as Gaza, Iran, and Belarus highlight how the conditions necessary for peace are systematically undermined. These developments raise a fundamental question: if peace is increasingly framed as a human right, how can responsibility for its realisation be conceptualised beyond the state?

This article addresses this question by focusing on the role of universities. Traditionally conceived as neutral spaces of knowledge production, universities are increasingly recognised as actors embedded within broader social and political processes. As sites of knowledge production, civic formation, and public debate, they contribute to shaping how violence is understood, contested, or normalised (Slaughter 2004; UNESCO 1997; UNGA 2011). In this sense, universities cannot be understood merely as observers of global crises, but as normative actors whose practices have implications for the realisation of human rights, including the emerging right to peace.

Recent scholarship has problematised the notion of academic neutrality, highlighting the risk that universities may become complicit in systems of violence through silence or selective engagement. As argued by De Vogli and Lusiardi (2025), institutional responses to global crises are often shaped by forms of “selective empathy”, reflecting unequal recognition of suffering across geopolitical contexts. Similarly, Kagee and Manjra (2025) emphasise that neutrality in the face of systemic violence cannot be understood as

an apolitical stance, but constitutes a normative choice with concrete consequences.

Against this background, this article asks: how can the emerging human right to peace be used to critically reassess the role of universities beyond claims of neutrality? In particular, how can this framework be applied to evaluate their responsibilities in contexts of war, violent repression, and student mobilisation?

To address this question, the article adopts a combined normative and empirical approach. It first develops a legal and theoretical analysis of the right to peace, and then applies this framework to selected cases, including the destruction of higher education in Gaza, the repression of academic communities in Belarus, and the emergence of transnational student mobilisation.

Within this analysis, particular attention is devoted to the case of the University of Padua. This choice does not aim to single out the institution as an exemplary or exceptional case, but reflects a form of convenience sampling based on the availability of data, the accessibility of internal debates, and the author's direct familiarity with the institutional context. As such, the case of Padua is used as an illustrative entry point through which broader dynamics affecting universities can be explored.

In this sense, the analysis does not seek to provide a comprehensive or comparative assessment, but rather to identify patterns, tensions, and emerging practices that may be relevant across different academic settings.

The case of Padua is therefore not exceptional, but indicative. It provides a lens through which broader dynamics affecting universities globally can be analysed, illustrating how academic institutions are simultaneously sites of mobilisation, contestation, and hesitation. More broadly, it reveals how the responsibilities of universities are shaped by the interaction between governance structures, political pressures, and bottom-up initiatives emerging from within academic communities.

The article ultimately argues that, when interpreted through the lens of the human right to peace, universities cannot be reduced to neutral observers of global crises. Rather, they emerge as normative actors whose practices, silences, and institutional choices contribute to shaping the conditions under which peace is either realised or undermined. In this perspective, the defence of academic freedom and the promotion of peace are not parallel commitments, but mutually constitutive dimensions of a shared human rights project.

2. Legal and Theoretical Foundations of the Right to Peace

The legal foundations of the right to peace can be traced to the structure of contemporary international law, within which the preservation of peace has long been established as a central objective. Article 2(4) of the Charter of the United Nations enshrines a general prohibition on the use of force, reflecting a foundational commitment to maintaining international peace and security (UN Charter 1945). This commitment has been progressively reinforced through the development of international criminal law, particularly with the definition and activation of the crime of aggression under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. By establishing individual criminal responsibility for serious violations of peace, these developments contribute to framing peace not merely as a political aspiration, but as a legal imperative (Akande and Tzanakopoulos 2018; Kreß 2018).

The juridification of peace has deeper historical roots. The notion of “crimes against peace”, articulated in the aftermath of the Second World War, already reflected the understanding that aggressive war constitutes one of the gravest violations of international law (Antonopoulos 2001). This principle has been progressively consolidated through subsequent legal developments, including the Kampala amendments to the Rome Statute, which have translated the prohibition of aggression into a more concrete framework of individual accountability (Akande and Tzanakopoulos 2018).

Alongside these developments, the idea of peace as a human right began to take shape within the United Nations system during the 1980s. The 1984 Declaration on the Right of Peoples to Peace, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, affirmed that the preservation of peace constitutes a fundamental obligation of states and a prerequisite for the full realisation of human rights (UNGA 1984). In parallel, the work of Héctor Gros Espiell and Antonio Papisca, further developed the conceptual foundations of the right to peace, framing it as an emerging entitlement grounded in human dignity and in the interdependence of all human rights (Gros Espiell 2025; Papisca 2025). These early contributions laid the groundwork for a progressive reconceptualisation of peace within the human rights framework.

Within this evolving trajectory, the articulation of a right to peace can be understood as a normative development internal to the logic of international law. In this perspective, peace is not external to the human rights system, but constitutes one of its essential conditions of possibility.

This trajectory culminates, albeit in a still incomplete and contested form, in the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Right to Peace in 2016. The Declaration affirms that peace constitutes the foundation for the realisation of all human rights (UNGA 2016). Although it is not legally

binding, its adoption has been widely regarded as a significant normative step in integrating peace within the human rights framework (Guillermet Fernández and Fernández Puyana 2017). In this sense, the right to peace is often situated within the broader category of so-called third generation or solidarity rights, characterised by their collective dimension and progressive development (Vašák 1977).

The legal status of the right to peace nevertheless remains contested. Some scholars question whether it can be considered a fully-fledged human right, pointing to its indeterminate content and the absence of clearly defined duty-bearers (Schabas 2017). Others, however, emphasise its normative potential as part of an evolving human rights framework. In this regard, Paolo De Stefani (2025) highlights how the logic of human rights increasingly permeates domains traditionally reserved to state sovereignty, including the regulation of war, thereby challenging the classical separation between peace and armed conflict. From this perspective, acts of aggression resulting in loss of life may also be understood as implicating violations of the right to life, as reflected in the interpretative practice of the Human Rights Committee.

More broadly, the right to peace can be interpreted as part of a wider humanistic project grounded in emancipation, solidarity, and practices of nonviolence, extending beyond strictly legal frameworks into the realm of social and political action. It thus emerges not as an external addition to international law, but as a conceptual development rooted in its existing principles and oriented towards their progressive transformation.

At the same time, the persistence of armed conflict, authoritarian repression, and large-scale human rights violations highlights the limits of existing legal frameworks. As studies on the perception and implementation of human rights obligations demonstrate, the effectiveness of international norms remains uneven and heavily dependent on political will and institutional capacity (Heupel 2018). This gap between legal commitments and their implementation underscores the need to examine the right to peace not only as a legal concept, but also as a broader normative framework capable of guiding institutional behaviour.

Taken together, these elements support an understanding of the right to peace as an evolving and contested, yet normatively compelling, component of the international legal order. Its foundations lie in the prohibition of violence and the protection of human dignity, while its development reflects ongoing efforts to articulate more comprehensive forms of accountability and justice.

This evolution invites a rethinking of the subjects of responsibility within international law. If peace is understood as a prerequisite for the exercise of all human rights, then its realisation cannot be confined to state action

alone, but depends on a broader constellation of actors involved in shaping knowledge, norms, and social practices.

This includes institutions such as universities, whose role in producing knowledge, fostering critical inquiry, and shaping civic values places them within the wider architecture of peace governance.

3. Beyond Neutrality: Universities as Agents of Peace

If the right to peace is understood as a necessary condition for the fulfilment of all human rights, its realisation cannot be confined to state obligations alone. The evolving architecture of global governance increasingly attributes normative relevance to non-state actors, raising the question of what responsibilities institutions such as universities bear in contexts of violence and systemic injustice. In this perspective, universities emerge not merely as spaces of knowledge production, but as actors embedded within broader processes of norm formation, social transformation, and political accountability.

The traditional understanding of universities as neutral spaces of inquiry has long been central to academic self-representation. Rooted in ideals of objectivity, autonomy, and freedom from political interference, this conception has played an important role in safeguarding academic freedom and the integrity of research. However, when viewed through the lens of the emerging right to peace, the notion of neutrality becomes increasingly problematic. In contexts characterised by large-scale human rights violations, institutional silence or selective engagement cannot be regarded as apolitical, but instead reflects implicit normative choices that may contribute to the reproduction of injustice and the erosion of the conditions necessary for peace.

This critique is reinforced by both theoretical and empirical analyses of the role of universities in contexts of violence. As argued by Kagee and Manjra (2025), universities are not value-neutral spaces, but are embedded in broader structures of power and ideology, and have historically contributed to both the reproduction and contestation of social hierarchies. In this light, silence in the face of mass violence may amount to a form of complicity, particularly when fundamental human rights are at stake. From the perspective of the right to peace, such silence can also be understood as a failure to uphold the conditions that enable the realisation of human dignity.

The limits of neutrality are further illuminated by analyses of global inequalities in the recognition of suffering. Roberto De Vogli's concept of "selective empathy" highlights how institutions may respond unevenly to

human rights violations depending on geopolitical and cultural proximity. Such asymmetries in moral attention reveal that institutional responses are shaped by implicit hierarchies of value, determining which lives are recognised, defended, or ignored (De Vogli 2025). In academic contexts, this suggests that neutrality may function not as impartiality, but as a mechanism through which global inequalities are reproduced, ultimately undermining the universality of human rights and the normative foundations of peace.

At the same time, scholarship on education and peacebuilding highlights the transformative potential of universities as sites of social and political engagement. Within frameworks promoted by the United Nations, human rights education has been recognised as a key instrument for fostering critical awareness, civic participation, and a culture of peace. As Felisa Tibbitts argues, such approaches enable individuals to develop the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to engage with human rights in practice (Tibbitts 2025). Crucially, as highlighted by Orla Ní Cheallacháin (2025), human rights education also functions as a catalyst for mobilisation, equipping individuals with the cognitive, ethical, and political capacities required to respond to injustice. In this sense, education operates “on, through, and for” human rights, combining knowledge, critical reflection, and action within a single transformative process.

When viewed through the prism of the right to peace, this transformative understanding of education acquires further significance. By fostering critical inquiry, dialogue, and mutual recognition, universities contribute to addressing conflict through non-violent means and to sustaining the social conditions necessary for peaceful coexistence. In this sense, universities do not merely transmit knowledge about human rights, but actively participate in shaping the ethical and epistemic foundations upon which peace depends.

Empirical developments further illustrate this role. In contexts of war and crisis, universities are not peripheral institutions but central components of social resilience. As research on the Gaza Strip demonstrates, higher education plays an essential role in sustaining communities under conditions of prolonged conflict, providing not only access to knowledge but also a horizon for future reconstruction (Jebril 2024). The systematic destruction of universities therefore undermines not only the right to education, but also the broader social and epistemic conditions necessary for the realisation of peace.

Taken together, these developments suggest that universities occupy a distinctive position within contemporary peace governance. While they do not hold formal legal obligations comparable to those of states, they exercise significant normative influence and institutional capacity. Moving beyond the paradigm of neutrality, universities can therefore be conceptualised as

agents of peace, capable of contributing to the protection of human rights, the mobilisation of critical knowledge, and the construction of more just and inclusive societies.

In this light, the right to peace provides a critical framework through which the role of universities can be reassessed. Rather than evaluating academic institutions solely in terms of scientific output or institutional reputation, it becomes possible to examine their contribution to the conditions that enable or obstruct the enjoyment of fundamental rights. In this perspective, universities emerge not only as educational institutions, but as normative actors within a broader architecture of peace governance, increasingly called upon to engage with questions of justice, responsibility, and solidarity in contexts where traditional mechanisms of international law appear insufficient.

4. Universities, Responsibility, and the Conditions of Peace

The analytical framework developed in the previous sections requires a shift from describing the role of universities to critically assessing their responsibilities. If the emerging human right to peace is understood as a condition for the enjoyment of all other rights, then universities must be evaluated in light of how they contribute to, or fail to protect, the conditions under which peace can be realised. In contexts of violence, repression, and systemic injustice, neutrality does not suspend responsibility; rather, it becomes one of the ways in which responsibility is exercised.

This perspective is illuminated by the work of Judith Butler (2023), who argues that contemporary responses to violence are structured by selective frameworks of recognition that determine which lives are publicly grievable and which remain invisible. Within such frameworks, moral condemnation often operates in isolation from historical understanding, reducing complex realities to immediate reactions while obscuring broader structures of violence. For Butler (2023), ethical responsibility requires not only condemning violence, but also understanding its conditions and imagining a future in which such violence can be overcome. This shift from reaction to responsibility is central to any meaningful interpretation of the right to peace.

The case of Gaza exemplifies the consequences of failing to uphold these responsibilities. The widespread destruction of universities, described as “scholasticide”, entails not only the loss of infrastructure but the dismantling of intellectual life, academic communities, and future-oriented knowledge systems (Jebril 2024). From the perspective of the right to peace, such

destruction undermines the material and epistemic conditions necessary for the enjoyment of human rights. Yet the response of many academic institutions has been marked by hesitation and, in many cases, prolonged silence.

Recent developments within the academic community suggest that this silence is not static, but contested. As documented in recent analyses of the Italian and international scientific landscape, the initial lack of institutional response has been increasingly challenged by bottom-up initiatives, advocacy campaigns, and growing pressure from within academic communities (Belardinelli 2025a; Tola 2025). In particular, the campaign “Stop the Silence”, promoted by scholars including De Vogli, has contributed to pushing major scientific associations to take explicit positions, including the recognition of the situation in Gaza as genocide¹. This shift highlights the role of academic actors not only as observers, but as participants in processes of norm construction and contestation.

At the same time, the unevenness of institutional responses remains evident. As recent reporting shows, universities have adopted highly differentiated approaches, ranging from the suspension of collaborations to more symbolic or cautious forms of engagement, often in the absence of clear national or supranational guidance (Belardinelli 2025a; CoRDA 2026). This fragmentation reflects broader geopolitical tensions and reveals how academic institutions operate within complex systems of political, economic, and normative constraints.

Significantly, these debates are not only external to universities, but also take place within them. The fact that these discussions are documented and disseminated through platforms such as *Il Bo Live*², the online magazine of the University of Padua, illustrates how universities function simultaneously as institutional actors and as spaces of internal critique and public engagement. This dual role reinforces the idea that academic responsibility is not fixed, but continuously negotiated across different levels of the academic community.

Within this context, silence cannot be understood as neutrality. As the authors of the “Stop the Silence” initiative argue, the absence of a clear position in the face of large-scale violence risks amounting to a form of moral abdication, in which professional and academic responsibility is suspended rather than exercised. This resonates with the broader critique advanced by

¹ See: <https://www.change.org/p/stop-the-silence-academic-associations-must-recognise-the-genocide-in-gaza> (accessed 29/06/2026).

² *Il Bo Live* is a multimedia communication platform of the University of Padua, functioning both as an online newspaper focused on science, society, and current affairs, and as a space for public debate and dissemination. See: <https://www.unipd.it/en/ilbolive> (accessed 29/06/2026).

De Vogli and Lusiardi (2025), according to which selective empathy produces unequal responses to comparable forms of suffering, thereby undermining the universality of human rights.

At the same time, student movements across Europe and the United States have emerged as a countervailing force, acting as a form of global conscience within academia. The wave of encampments and protests in 2024–2025 reflects a demand that universities align their institutional practices with the human rights principles they claim to uphold (Camilli 2025). By invoking international law, denouncing large-scale violence, and calling for accountability, students challenge the boundaries of what can be said and done within academic institutions.

As argued by Judith Butler and George Yancy (2024), the response of many universities to these mobilisations reveals a profound institutional failure. The use of police force, disciplinary measures, and administrative sanctions to suppress student protest undermines the democratic mission of universities and erodes the conditions necessary for open debate and critical inquiry. In this sense, the repression of protest does not merely concern campus governance, but reflects a broader transformation of universities from spaces of dialogue into sites of control.

From the perspective of the right to peace, these dynamics are particularly significant. Student mobilisation represents a form of ethical and political engagement that sustains the civic conditions necessary for peace, while its repression limits the capacity of academic communities to respond to injustice. In Butler's terms, students resist the narrowing of moral frameworks that restrict both knowledge and critique, insisting instead on a broader and more inclusive understanding of injustice (Butler 2023). Their actions reveal that universities are not neutral environments, but contested spaces in which responsibility is continuously negotiated.

The case of Belarus provides a complementary perspective, illustrating both the fragility of academic freedom and the potential for institutional resistance. Following the protests of 2020, universities have been increasingly used as instruments of political control, with students and faculty subjected to repression, dismissal, and surveillance (Marabe 2025). At the same time, academic communities have developed forms of resistance, including transnational networks of solidarity, advocacy initiatives, and efforts to preserve intellectual and cultural life in exile (Marabe 2025).

These dynamics highlight that academic freedom is not a stable or guaranteed condition, but a practice that must be continuously defended. Universities operate within broader systems of power, and their capacity to sustain spaces of critical inquiry depends on both institutional choices and collective action (Marabe 2025). From the perspective of the right to

peace, the defence of academic freedom becomes integral to maintaining the institutional conditions necessary for dialogue, participation, and non-violent engagement. Where such freedom is suppressed, the foundations of peaceful coexistence are directly undermined.

Taken together, these developments demonstrate that universities are deeply implicated in the conditions under which peace is either realised or denied. Their responsibilities cannot be adequately understood through the lens of neutrality. Rather, they must be assessed in relation to their responses to violence, their engagement with dissent, and their position within broader systems of power. In this sense, the right to peace provides not only a normative reference point, but a critical framework through which to evaluate what universities do, and what they fail to do, in the face of injustice.

Across these contexts, a common pattern emerges: universities are defined not by their claims to neutrality, but by the choices they make, whether to remain silent, to repress, or to resist, and by the consequences of those choices for the realisation of peace.

5. Reclaiming Academic Responsibility through the Right to Peace

The analysis developed in the previous sections has shown that universities are deeply embedded in contexts of violence, repression, and mobilisation. The destruction of higher education in Gaza, the repression of student protest, and the erosion of academic freedom in contexts such as Belarus demonstrate that neutrality does not operate as an absence of responsibility, but as one of its possible configurations. Universities are therefore not external observers of global crises, but actors whose practices, silences, and institutional choices contribute to shaping the conditions under which peace is either realised or denied.

In this context, the emerging human right to peace provides a coherent normative framework through which the responsibilities of universities can be critically reassessed. As an enabling condition for the enjoyment of all human rights, the right to peace shifts attention from formal legal obligations to the broader social, political, and epistemic conditions that sustain human dignity (de Zayas 2017; Papisca 2025). Applied to universities, this perspective makes it possible to evaluate not only what institutions do, but also what they fail to do, particularly in situations where inaction or silence contributes to the normalisation of violence.

A central limitation in current institutional responses lies in what De Vogli and Lusiardi (2025) define as “selective empathy”, a concept discussed above, referring to the uneven recognition of suffering across geopolitical contexts. The persistence of selective empathy undermines the universality of human rights by producing unequal responses to comparable situations of violence. This issue can be understood in light of the principles of equality and non-discrimination, which require that similar situations be treated alike and that responses to human rights violations are not shaped by political, cultural, or strategic biases.

As De Vogli (2025, 136) highlights:

International law, by design, demands that its principles, sanctions, regulations, and even the compassion behind humanitarian interventions, be applied equally to all peoples and all nations. Applying these standards inconsistently breeds mistrust, fuels perceptions of injustice, and erodes the very legitimacy that prompted the creation of such laws in the first place.

This critique is further supported by recent United Nations analyses, which highlight how institutions traditionally perceived as neutral, including academic actors, may be embedded within broader systems that contribute, directly or indirectly, to the reproduction of violence (Albanese 2025).

Within academic environments, this dynamic translates into forms of “selective silence”, whereby institutions respond asymmetrically to comparable situations of violence.

As the previous section has shown, however, such silence is neither stable nor uncontested. Recent developments within the academic community, including advocacy initiatives and internal debates documented in university-based platforms such as Il Bo Live, reveal an ongoing process of contestation in which students, researchers, and academic networks actively challenge institutional hesitation and call for more consistent forms of engagement.

Empirical evidence reinforces this interpretation. The report produced by the Coordinamento Ricercator*, Dottorand* e Assegnist*³ (CoRDA 2026) highlights both the extent and the opacity of academic collaborations with institutions embedded in contexts of conflict. The difficulty in accessing transparent data, as well as the presence of research links connected to strategic and dual-use sectors, challenges the assumption that academic

³ CoRDA (Coordinamento Ricercator*, Dottorand* e Assegnist* dell’Università di Padova) is a collective network of early-career researchers within the University, engaged in advocacy, research, and public debate on academic working conditions, governance, and broader social and political issues affecting higher education. See: <https://cordapadova.wordpress.com/> (accessed 29/06/2026)

cooperation can be neatly separated from its political and ethical implications. In this sense, neutrality appears less as a safeguard of academic freedom than as a mechanism through which responsibility is deferred or obscured.

These dynamics acquire additional significance when considered in light of the University of Padua's own institutional framework. According to its Statute, the University is committed to promoting a culture grounded in universal values, including human rights, peace, and international solidarity (Università di Padova 2023). This internal normative framework provides a benchmark against which institutional practices can be critically assessed.

From this perspective, academic neutrality cannot be interpreted as a suspension of responsibility. If peace and human rights constitute foundational commitments, then silence or inaction in the face of large-scale violations risks conflicting with these principles.

At the same time, the emergence of student mobilisation and transnational academic initiatives demonstrates that universities are also sites of normative transformation. As shown by the wave of protests and encampments across Europe and the United States, as well as by the growing pressure exerted on academic institutions to take positions on the war in Gaza, academic communities function as spaces in which responsibility is actively negotiated. These dynamics reveal that universities are not monolithic actors, but contested environments in which institutional decisions are shaped by the interaction between governance structures, internal debates, and broader political pressures.

The case of the University of Padua illustrates both the potential and the structural tensions inherent in this process. The motion adopted by the Academic Senate in July 2025⁴ represents an attempt to align institutional positioning with international law and to move beyond a purely neutral stance. At the same time, as highlighted by CoRDA (2026), the decision to maintain existing collaborations while suspending only new agreements reflects the difficulty of translating normative commitments into consistent institutional practices. This tension is not exceptional, but indicative of broader dynamics affecting universities operating within complex systems of political and economic interdependence.

In this light, the case of the University of Padua can be interpreted as an entry point for exploring broader dynamics affecting universities in contemporary contexts of conflict and crisis.

These dynamics are further illuminated by critical reflections on the role of universities in contemporary society. As argued by Filippo Belloc (2025), the

⁴ See: <https://www.unipd.it/en/news/luniversit-padova-prende-posizione-quanto-si-sta-verificando-medio-oriente> (accessed 29/06/2026).

idea of a neutral university often conceals a deeper form of conformity, in which the avoidance of political and ethical positioning leads to the erosion of critical thought and institutional responsibility. From this perspective, neutrality risks transforming universities into technocratic institutions oriented towards performance and efficiency, rather than spaces of critical inquiry and normative engagement.

From the standpoint of the right to peace, these developments suggest that academic responsibility must be understood as both relational and processual. It does not emerge solely from formal declarations or institutional intent, but from the interaction between silence and contestation, governance and mobilisation, as well as internal and external pressures acting upon universities. In this sense, the right to peace provides not only a normative reference point, but a critical lens through which these dynamics can be assessed.

Building on these considerations, the right to peace can be operationalised as a framework for assessing academic responsibility along four interrelated dimensions, which should be understood as mutually reinforcing rather than analytically separate.

First, epistemic responsibility concerns the production and dissemination of knowledge and its ethical implications. Universities play a central role in shaping how conflict, violence, and justice are understood, framed, and debated. As argued by Belloc (2025), knowledge production is never neutral, but reflects implicit choices about what is studied, funded, and prioritised. From the perspective of the right to peace, this dimension requires universities to critically interrogate the purposes and consequences of their research, particularly when it intersects with contexts of violence or contributes, directly or indirectly, to systems that may undermine human dignity.

Second, institutional responsibility relates to governance decisions, including partnerships, funding, and policy choices. These decisions, often presented as technical or administrative, carry significant normative implications. As illustrated by the case of the University of Padua and the findings of CoRDA (2026), distinctions between “academic” and “political” collaboration are not always sustainable when institutions operate within broader systems shaped by conflict. From the perspective of the right to peace, this dimension requires assessing whether institutional practices contribute to sustaining or challenging the conditions under which violence is produced and maintained.

Third, civic responsibility refers to the role of universities in fostering public debate, protecting academic freedom, and sustaining spaces of dissent and critical engagement. Universities function as arenas in which competing interpretations of justice are articulated and contested. As demonstrated

by student mobilisation and by the repression of academic communities in contexts such as Belarus, the capacity to maintain open and pluralistic spaces is neither guaranteed nor politically neutral. Within the framework of the right to peace, safeguarding these spaces is essential for enabling non-violent forms of participation and for resisting the normalisation of injustice through silence.

Finally, solidarity involves concrete actions aimed at supporting communities affected by conflict, including displaced scholars, students, and institutions operating under conditions of violence. This dimension moves beyond discursive positioning and requires tangible forms of engagement. As highlighted by Mona Jebril (2024), the survival and reconstruction of higher education systems in contexts such as Gaza depend not only on local resilience, but also on sustained forms of transnational academic support. In this sense, solidarity represents the practical enactment of the right to peace within the academic sphere.

It is important to note that this framework should be understood as a preliminary analytical tool rather than a definitive model of academic accountability. Its purpose is to offer an initial conceptual structure through which the responsibilities of universities can be examined in light of the right to peace, while leaving open the need for further empirical testing, comparative analysis, and theoretical refinement.

Taken together, these dimensions provide a structured answer to the research question guiding this article. Universities cannot be understood as neutral actors, but must be critically reassessed as normative agents whose epistemic, institutional, and civic practices contribute to shaping the conditions under which the human right to peace is either realised or undermined.

6. Conclusion: Universities as Normative Actors of Peace

This article has examined how the human right to peace can serve as a normative framework for critically reassessing the responsibilities of universities in contexts of war, violent repression, and student mobilisation. Moving beyond traditional understandings of academic neutrality, it has argued that universities are not external observers of global crises, but actors embedded within the social, political, and epistemic structures that shape both violence and its contestation.

By conceptualising peace as an enabling condition for the full realisation of all human rights, the analysis has shown that the responsibilities of universities extend beyond formal compliance or symbolic declarations.

Universities must instead be evaluated in relation to their contribution to the conditions that sustain or undermine human dignity. In this perspective, silence, inaction, and selective engagement cannot be understood as neutral positions, but as practices with concrete normative implications.

The article has further demonstrated that the uneven responses of universities to global crises reflect deeper structural dynamics, captured by what De Vogli (2025) defines as selective empathy. The unequal recognition of suffering across geopolitical contexts exposes a fundamental inconsistency in the application of human rights principles, highlighting the need for forms of engagement that are both more universal and more accountable.

At the same time, the analysis has shown that universities are not only sites of constraint, but also spaces of contestation and transformation. Student mobilisation, transnational academic initiatives, and institutional responses such as those observed in the case of the University of Padua demonstrate that academic communities actively participate in shaping normative debates on justice, accountability, and peace. These dynamics reveal that academic responsibility is not located solely at the institutional level, but emerges through the interaction between governance structures and collective action.

Building on these insights, the article has proposed a framework for assessing academic responsibility grounded in epistemic, institutional, civic, and solidaristic dimensions. This framework provides a structured response to the research question, showing that universities must be understood as normative actors whose practices, silences, and institutional choices contribute to shaping the conditions under which the human right to peace is either realised or undermined.

Understanding universities as actors of peace ultimately requires a shift from a reactive to a generative perspective. As recalled in the foundational vision of the UNESCO, peace must be built in the minds of men and women. Universities, as sites of knowledge production, critical inquiry, and civic formation, are uniquely positioned to contribute to this process. Their responsibility lies not only in responding to violations, but in shaping the intellectual, institutional, and ethical conditions that make peace conceivable, legitimate, and sustainable.

At the same time, this article represents an initial step towards the development of a more systematic framework of academic accountability in relation to the human right to peace. The analytical dimensions proposed here are not exhaustive, but are intended to open a field of inquiry that requires further empirical investigation, comparative research, and interdisciplinary engagement.

In this light, the long-standing tradition of the University of Padua, encapsulated in its motto *universa universis patavina libertas*⁵, acquires renewed significance. If freedom is to be truly universal, it cannot remain indifferent to the conditions under which it is denied. The human right to peace, understood as both a normative principle and an analytical framework, calls on universities to align their practices with their values, and to assume responsibility as actors in the construction of a more just and peaceful global order.

In this perspective, the right to peace may be understood not only as a juridical claim, but also as a broader normative horizon capable of orienting institutional practices in contexts where traditional mechanisms of international governance appear increasingly limited.

7. References

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⁵ "Universa universis patavina libertas" is the historical motto of the University of Padua, commonly translated as "Paduan freedom is universal and for all". It reflects the University's long-standing commitment to academic freedom, intellectual openness, and the protection of independent thought. See: <https://800anniunipd.it/en/tradizioni/> (accessed 29/06/2026).

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