

ISE Contribution on Academic Freedom

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*"We cannot take academic freedom for granted,
we need to fight to preserve it in Europe and the world."¹*

Christian Ehler

STOA Chair of the European Parliament

The overall climate and environment for research and researchers has deteriorated in recent years to the point that one of the most basic principles underlying scientific inquiry, academic freedom, is being jeopardised. The most visible aspects are attacks against science, leading to threats, including physical threats against researchers, sometimes leading to researchers being placed under police protection. This has been happening in many countries, including solidly democratic countries, through different means: campaigns in social media, propagation of fake news, unwarranted challenges of the integrity of researchers, etc. There have also been limitations to the freedom of research because research goes against the views of the government, leading in some cases to researchers, research topics and research institutions being defunded. Further limitations, mostly hindering the circulation of doctoral and post-doctoral researchers, have occurred in the name of security issues or anti-immigration policies. All of these trends contribute to the limitation of academic freedom of research and researchers. The principle of freedom of research must be reaffirmed as a basic principle of academic pursuit, and a basic principle of democracies.

ISE calls on the European Union to protect, by all means, legal and institutional, the Academic freedom of researchers. It must, in connection with national governments, act on three levels.

1° Guarantee the institutional position of academic entities by ensuring their autonomy. The institutional autonomy of universities and research performing organisations is a necessary condition; these institutions must be mostly financed by public funds at an adequate level either through direct funding or competitive funding programs. Funding from other sources should be complementary, should not interfere with academic autonomy, and should not be indispensable to carry out the institution's core missions.

2° Protect the academic freedom of researchers. This has several aspects. First, within academic institutions, all affiliated categories of personnel, including junior and mid-level (R1-R2-R3) personnel, should be guaranteed representational rights where decisions are made about them and their conditions, including those in precarious positions, such as doctoral candidates and postdoctoral researchers².

¹ [#EP4AcademicFreedom | Panel for the Future of Science and Technology \(STOA\) | European Parliament \(europa.eu\)](#)

² On this, and more generally of Academic Freedom Issues, see Eurodoc's [Statement on Academic Freedom](#)

Second, the freedom to choose the research topic is a basic principle of academic research, which should be limited only on legitimate legal and ethical grounds. This right must be protected by the institution and the government.

Third, the right of researchers to present their perspectives and ideas freely, including when they are not aligned with their institution's, their government's or EU institution's views, must be guaranteed.

Fourth, researchers must be protected by their institution and their government from harassment and threats because of the topic they are investigating or the results that they obtained.

3° Keep the proper balance between risks and rewards of openness

While there may be security risks stemming from collaborating with researchers in other countries, conducting research abroad³, inviting foreign researchers at postdoctoral and senior levels for collaborations, or having foreign doctoral students, these yield huge and varied rewards. First, the talent and perspective that these collaborations improve the quality of research here. Second, on a longer term, they build strong bridges beyond our borders, in terms of cultural, economic and diplomatic links, and they illustrate the benefits of education and critical thinking to strengthen democracies.

Without being overly naive, it is important to remember that the purpose of academic research is to be open. In general, the advantages of letting ideas circulate outweigh the risks for a democratic society.

In an open society, and particularly in the context of research, a critical perspective is the rule: there is no science without the possibility to challenge existing knowledge. Researchers welcome dialogue, not only with their peers, abiding by the rules of scientific discussion, but also with Society at large. But this dialogue is possible only if the principle of academic freedom is upheld.

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³ As we have unfortunately seen with the abduction and subsequent death of the French sociologist Michel Seurat in Beirut in 1986, the abduction and murder of the Giulio Regeni (an Italian PhD candidate from Cambridge University) in Egypt in 2016, the detainment in Iran during 4 years (2019-2023) of the Franco-Iranian political scientist Fariba Adelkhah, etc.