

Introduction to *Academic Freedom in the Twenty-first Century*

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Background

This supplement to the *European Review* is based on a conference on the topic ‘Academic Freedom in the Twenty-first Century’ held at the Wenner-Gren Centre in Stockholm on 15–17 May 2024 with the economic support of the Wenner-Gren Foundations. The conference was part of a series arranged by the Higher Education, Research and CULture in European Society (HERCuLES) group within Academia Europaea. Since its formal establishment in 2004, the group has organized the following symposia addressing issues in relation to higher education and research:

- 2005: *The Formative Years of Scholars* (Stockholm with the Wenner-Gren Foundations).
- 2006: *Quality Assessment in Institutions of Higher Education in Europe: Problems, Practices and Solutions* (Pavia with Compagnia di San Paolo).
- 2007: *The University in the Market* (Stockholm with the Wenner-Gren Foundations).
- 2009: *From Information to Knowledge, from Knowledge to Wisdom. Challenges Facing Higher Education in the Digital Age* (Stockholm the Wenner-Gren Foundations).
- 2009: *Diversification of Higher Education and the Academic Profession* (Turin with the Compagnia di San Paolo and Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei).
- 2011: *Trust in Universities* (Stockholm with the Wenner-Gren Foundations).

- 2013: *Migration and Mobility in Science. Impacts on Cultures and the Profession in Institutions of Higher Education in Europe* (Rome with Compagnia di San Paolo).
- 2013: *Bibliometrics. Use and Abuse in the Review of Research Performance* (Stockholm with the Wenner-Gren Foundations).
- 2014: *Humanities and Social Sciences, Globalization and China* (Beijing with the support of the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation).
- 2015: *From Books to MOOCs? Emerging Models of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* (Stockholm with the Wenner-Gren Foundations).
- 2016: *University Governance. Impeding or Facilitating Creativity* (Hannover with Volkswagen Stiftung).
- 2017: *Crossing over to the Future. Interdisciplinarity in Research and Higher Education* (Stockholm with the Wenner-Gren Foundations).
- 2019 (May): *Mind the Gap – Bridging Secondary and Higher Education* (Stockholm with the Wenner-Gren Foundations).
- 2019 (November): *Missions of Universities over Time: Global Actors, National Champions, or Local Power Houses?* (Stockholm at the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities with the support of the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation).
- 2022: *The Internationalization of Higher Education Institutions* (Uppsala with the support of the Åke Wiberg Foundation).
- 2023: *Publishing in Academia: Digital Challenges* (Stockholm with the Wenner-Gren Foundations).

In order to put the problem into perspective, the following section offers a slightly modified proposal for the 2024 conference. This is followed by a section introducing 11 of the articles presented. It should be noted that this manuscript and the other articles in this supplement were submitted before Donald Trump took office.

The Proposal for the Conference

As an organizational form, the university is a great success. The early foundations in Italy in the Middle Ages have attracted a large number of followers, particularly in the late twentieth century and in the early twenty-first century. Most countries have not one but several institutions that label themselves universities. For some time after the fall of the Berlin Wall, there were indications that higher education and research constituted the modern defence policy. Politicians raised their ambitions regarding the share of a generation to acquire an academic degree. The existing institutions grew in size, in parallel with the addition of new ones. These institutions competed for students, staff and research resources. They largely based their missions on the principle formulated in Berlin by Wilhelm von Humboldt in the early nineteenth century that education and research should be combined. In addition, university representatives emphasized Humboldt's idea of academic freedom. In 1988, celebrating the 900th anniversary of the founding of the University of Bologna,

European university rectors signing the *Magna Charta Universitatum* declared that the university is ‘an autonomous institution’ and that:

Freedom in research and training is the fundamental principle of university life, and governments and universities, each as far as in them lies, must ensure respect for this fundamental requirement.

However, in current times, both the autonomy of universities and the freedom of their faculty members have been challenged. Against this backdrop, the call for the conference pointed out the relationship between academic freedom and (1) Institutions, (2) Research, (3) Education, and (4) Dissemination.

The Academic Freedom of Institutions

One fundamental feature of the academic freedom of institutions is their relationship to political power, a relationship that is indeed delicate. In many countries, the state founded the universities and thereafter provides legitimacy as well as resources. A basic question is then how these roles of the state are compatible with academic freedom. Some argue that the state, as the main financier, should have the power to appoint the leadership of their universities in the same way as major shareholders appoint company boards. Against this, others argue that the states – in contrast to shareholders – did not invest risk capital that they can lose. As a result, according to this line of argument, the state instead commissions higher education and research. Proponents of the latter position therefore argue that the role of the state is just to establish the basic rules for universities at an arm’s length distance without intervening in their operations. In this way, the state interest can even be an important protector of academic freedom by preventing other actors from intervening in the governance of universities. Commercial interests as well as interventions from various organizations – such as religious actors, civil society organizations, and local authorities – challenging the basic values of universities indeed constitute threats to academic freedom. In contrast, in countries where the state has a firm grip on its universities, academic freedom suffers significantly. An example is the statement of Russian university rectors in March 2022 of how important it is ‘to support our country, our army, which defends our security, to support our President, who made perhaps the most difficult decision in his life, a hard-won, but necessary decision’ (translated from Russian). Likewise, it is important to remember the moves by the Hungarian government, forcing the Central European University to move from Budapest to Vienna. These are just two extreme cases of threats to academic freedom in current times.

The Academic Freedom of Research

In relation to research, academic freedom is associated with the autonomy of researchers in choosing their research topics and methods of enquiry. The ideal

mentioned is often the curiosity-driven enquiry. However, there are a number of limitations to this model.

First, researchers need resources to undertake their enquiry. For those with research time included in their employment contracts and with limited equipment needs, this might not be a problem. Tenured mathematicians belong to this group. At the other extreme, there are researchers without paid research time who must have access to facilities, for instance the non-tenured experimental physicist. In-between, there are a number of researchers who require varying levels of financial support. This group has increased in recent decades because of a tendency among many governments to allocate research resources through competitive grants to individuals or research groups. A consequent risk is that unconventional research finds it extremely difficult to secure support. This risk is even greater as governments, in their research bills, earmark research resources for specific urgent societal problems.

Second, and related to earmarked resources, major stakeholders in society may hamper the freedom of research by advocating that research should generate relevant output to society. Although this is indeed important, it may disqualify research that is not significant in the short run but only in a longer-term perspective. One example in the natural sciences is the finding that certain bacteria survive in volcanic water, close to the boiling point. It paved the way for the PCR (polymerase chain reaction) method, which has become indispensable in cell biology, archaeology, forensic medicine, and, most recently, COVID-19 tests. Adding an example from the humanities, research on Islam was long considered unnecessary until the revolution took place in Iran in the late 1970s.

Third, there are also moral restrictions on the freedom of research. Civil society as well as professional communities have restrictions on research problems and research methods. These constraints have increased in recent decades and have brought about requirements that researchers must secure ethical clearance as they apply for research grants. In addition, nowadays there are various administrative units that handle alleged breaches of ethical standards. These constraints are particularly prevalent in medical and social sciences.

Fourth, the relationship between universities and commercial actors is a significant issue in terms of the freedom of research. Obviously, contract research means that the financing organization can steer researchers regarding the research problem, thereby limiting their freedom. To this some may object that as long as researchers can choose their methods, draw their own conclusions and publish without limitations, this is not a problem. Such collaboration can nevertheless be delicate.

The Academic Freedom of Education

In addition to research, universities have a mission to provide education. For this, Wilhelm von Humboldt formulated the two principles: freedom to learn (*Lernfreiheit*) and freedom of teaching (*Lehrfreiheit*). They imply that students are free to choose what they want to study, and their teachers are free to decide how and what they teach. In both respects, there are restrictions in present-day universities.

First, in terms of the freedom of students, universities are nowadays much larger than in the early nineteenth century and are much more highly organized. As a result, they largely offer programmes that concentrate on the study of specific disciplines. The earlier option of combining studies of different disciplines *à la carte* has been greatly reduced. Entry to universities is also highly selective in many countries. For many programmes, it is no longer sufficient to have graduated from high school. An admission to studies requires good grades. Furthermore, particularly in the Anglo-American context, tuition fees may be an obstacle, although many universities have advantageous scholarship programmes. Therefore, even if there are variations across countries, the freedom to learn has its limitations nowadays.

Second, the freedom of teaching has also changed since the early nineteenth century because of the growth and organizational transformation of universities. Individual professors can no longer – particularly not in undergraduate programmes – select topics of their own accord. Instead, they are part of programme structures where they have to teach the parts they have been assigned. Those who have authored textbooks used in these programmes come the closest to the ideal of freedom of teaching. However, this is a considerable step from the time when professors could read from the manuscripts they were working on.

These educational programmes again touch upon the relationship to major stakeholders since universities have a mission towards society to develop young people in a socially desirable way. Therefore, these programmes require a design that fits the labour market. In this context, it is not only the contents of the programmes but also the methods of teaching. For the future, in a society dominated by AI and robotics, etc., there will be a need for new types of knowledge, skills and competences. In addition, political forces may object to curricula taught in universities. An example is the proposal in some American states to abolish tenure in order to be able to fire faculty members who include in their teaching ideas that some politicians consider as indoctrination, such as critical race theory.

The Academic Freedom of Dissemination

A basic part of academic life is the dissemination of ideas in scientific publications and textbooks. In the words of the British physicist Michael Faraday, academic scholars should have three words in mind: ‘Work! Finish! Publish!’. Obviously, the academic community has taken this request onboard. The number of academic publications has skyrocketed after the Second World War, and particularly in the past few decades. This could indicate that there is a high degree of academic freedom in terms of dissemination. However, there are severe limitations through an increasing commercialization of academic publishing.

In scientific publishing, professional organizations were the founders of the significant journals in most scientific fields. However, with time, commercial publishing houses have taken over these outlets, as they have been able to offer the services of their organization for handling manuscripts, marketing, accounting, etc. In this way, they have obtained strong positions of power vis-à-vis universities,

charging them considerable fees for printed as well as digital subscriptions, which faculty members are eager for them to have. At the same time, faculty members work for these publishers without compensation, reviewing manuscripts. Therefore, both universities and individual scholars are in a way prisoners of the publishers of academic journals.

Similarly, commercial interests are strong in the textbook market. In an industry that has undergone a strong concentration, a few large publishing houses control the production and dissemination of course literature. In this way, they also influence the contents of academic education. As mentioned above, some faculty members play a particularly significant role as authors.

An additional limitation on the freedom of dissemination is the increasing quantification of research assessments. The strong focus on journal impact factors and citation counts has had the effect that career interests have come into focus more than professional interests. For scholars in non-English speaking countries, especially in the humanities and the social sciences, this has a particularly negative effect, as their presentations in their native language are not appreciated.

Another aspect of the freedom of dissemination, which became a burning topic in the spring of 2022, is the extent to which scholars can communicate internationally. Here, the issue of boycotts of certain academic communities, such as those in Russia and Belarus, is delicate. A fundamental question is whether foreign contacts will help colleagues in these countries or whether they will send them to prison.

Contributions to this Supplement

Based on the above call, specialists were invited to present their views on academic freedom. Among the presentations, 11 articles are included in this supplement. They cluster into three groups. First, there are four articles dealing with the foundations and challenges of academic freedom. A second group, consisting of three articles, elaborates on academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Finally, in the third group, there are four articles on the relationship between academic freedom and research.

Foundations and Challenges of Academic Freedom

First, Henry Reichman discusses the foundations of academic freedom. He points out that this principle is deeply rooted in Western society although it was challenged even in the Middle Ages. It got a boost in the early nineteenth century with the foundation of the University of Berlin, for which Wilhelm von Humboldt established the principles of *Lernfreiheit* and *Lehrfreiheit*. These principles later spread to other countries, not least to the United States. They mean autonomy for academic professions to inquire and teach freely and for students to choose their studies. At the same time, these privileges stand on a different principle than free speech, namely that academic professions should serve the common good in a democratic society.

Therefore, as democratic principles are currently being challenged in many countries, among them the United States, academic freedom is also under threat. Reichman mentions as evidence events during the COVID-19 pandemic, developments in the State of Florida and manifestations in relation to the Gaza war. As a result, he concludes that academic freedom and democracy are symbiotic principles: academic freedom is dependent on democracy at the same time as democracy needs academic freedom in order to survive.

Peter Maassen, Mari Elken and Jens Jungblut elaborate further on the threats to academic freedom based on the results from studies of the European Parliament's initiative, Academic Freedom Forum. According to these scholars, academic freedom is under pressure in most EU member states, and the authors identify and discuss six categories of threats. First, there are political threats in terms of the questioning and governance of research as well as constraints on the autonomy of academic institutions. Second, and related to the first, is the tendency to move towards more executive forms of leadership. Third, there are also threats coming from the academic community itself in the form of internal efforts to silence certain types of research and education. Fourth, the studies show that civil society – particularly in the age of expanding social media – tends to question academic freedom. Fifth, corporations and other organizations in the private sector have become increasingly influential in setting agendas of research and education. Sixth, and finally, there is a threat posed by the rapid development of security policies at the European and national levels restricting the dissemination and sharing of scientific knowledge. Obviously, the significance of these six threats to academic freedom varies across EU countries. Nevertheless, as the authors point out in their final remarks, in all Member States they require persistent attention.

In the third article in the first group, Joseph C. Hermanowicz focuses on the internal threats to higher education. He elaborates on two types of threats: slippage and overreach. The former implies a deficit of professional control over teaching, while the latter involves an excess of control. Hermanowicz provides extensive empirical examples of both types of threats but also presents theories as to why they occur. In terms of slippage, his first theory is one of innocence, i.e. that faculty members do not know any better. His second theory is one of normalized deviance, i.e. that standards are low and bad practice is accepted, and his third theory is one of self-interest. The latter points to the tendency in a competitive academic environment not to give priority to collegial feedback. There are two corresponding theories for overreach: one involving moralism and one regarding bureaucracy. The former is grounded in a climate of social justice and identity politics, whereas the latter is based on traditional organizational rules. The article highlights the significant difference between research and education. While academic peers continuously assess the former, this is not the case for the latter.

Internal threats to academic freedom are also in focus in the article by Ivo De Gennaro, who discusses the compatibility of strong university leadership and academic freedom. He first offers a diagnosis of the fundamental orientation and the freeness of present-day scientific enquiry and enquiry-based teaching. On this follows

a discussion of the deviations from these principles and reflections on the effects on the governance of modern academia. This in turn provides the basis for conclusions regarding university leadership. Basic to his reasoning is the observation that contemporary scientific practice is, to a great extent, influenced by the two traits of ‘technicization’ and ‘societization’. The former implies that research has increasingly turned to the formulation of concepts and hypotheses that are tested experimentally in a process involving an increasing degree of controllability. The latter, on the other hand, means that scientific problems are grounded in society. Over the past few decades, these principles have been confronted by what he labels ‘the evaluation machinery’. This, De Gennaro argues, has had the effect that scientific research is assessed by methods that he considers not to be scientific and even to be anti-scientific. Although originally initiated outside academic institutions, over time insiders have adopted this type of thinking. In this way, academic freedom is hampered, particularly for young academics. These developments have been reinforced by the emergence of centralized administrative structures governing research and the tendency of university leaders to privilege advertised academic prestige ahead of earnest academic prestige. His conclusion is therefore that strong university leadership should be free from all hierarchy.

Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy

In the first of the second group of articles, with reference to earlier studies, Zhidong Hao points to the significance of autonomy for academic institutions in terms of organization, financing, staffing and academic affairs. Based on these matters, he presents a classification of institutional autonomy consisting of four ideal types: (1) little or no autonomy, (2) low autonomy, (3) somewhat balanced autonomy, and (4) balanced autonomy. After a presentation of these categories, Hao goes on to discuss how government affects institutional autonomy and academic freedom. He mentions China, India, Nigeria, Russia and Turkey as examples of little or no autonomy, while the US States of Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and Texas are mentioned as cases of low autonomy. For the third category, somewhat balanced autonomy, Hao points to measures taken in Africa, Australia, Japan and South Korea but also to the commercialization of higher education, particularly in the United States. Balanced autonomy, finally, constitutes – according to Hao – a desirable category with checks and balances in federations between different stakeholders.

In the following article, Shirin Ahlbäck Öberg offers a closer look at institutional autonomy as well as academic freedom for individuals in a particular country: Sweden. She points out that although it has been common that various government bills directed towards Swedish institutions of higher education include freedom in their titles, there are considerable constraints. According to Ahlbäck Öberg, this is due to a lack of understanding of the special character of academic institutions. In terms of institutional autonomy, there is thus no formal regulation. Rather, Swedish institutions of higher education are part of the wider Swedish public administration system as state authorities. This is not the result of one formal decision but is rather

an evolution that has occurred over time. For collegiality, the Autonomy Reform in 2011 was a significant change since it removed the requirements for collegial decision-making bodies. In many Swedish institutions of higher education, this led to a centralization of power and decision-making. In terms of individual academic freedom, Swedish law has protected the freedom of research since 2010. However, at the same time, research resources are increasingly being allocated through grant applications responding to more and more targeted calls. More recently, the freedom of research, particularly in the social sciences, has been challenged by the tightening of ethical rules. In terms of education, there is no legislation protecting its freedom. As a result, after abandoning the earlier, detailed governance of higher education, politicians have in recent years tended to intervene to a higher extent. Overall, Ahlbäck Öberg concludes that in Sweden there is a need for further guardrails of academic freedom.

The limitations of institutional autonomy that Ahlbäck Öberg identifies for Sweden are slight in comparison with those in Hungary, highlighted by Balázs Majtényi and Andrew Ryder in their article. They start out by summarizing a development towards a deep state in Hungary, which has implied the removal of democratic checks and balances, particularly through attacks on independent institutions. Among the latter, universities have been a prime target. As a result, allies of Prime Minister Victor Orbán now control most Hungarian universities through foundations. Among them, Corvinus University constitutes a particularly worrying case, relying on income from the Hungarian Oil Company and the pharmaceutical chain, Richter. As a result, the university has adopted an audit-culture system monitored by bonus-rewarded line managers. In addition, the conditions of faculty members have deteriorated. Nevertheless, there are counter-movements; the two authors report on developments in the Social Sciences Faculty of Eötvös Loránd University (a social science institution with a long history) and the University of Film, Theatre, and Arts. In both cases, faculty and students protested in different ways against the transition to the foundation model. In the first case, the institution has been able to maintain its autonomy, while the second is now foundation-controlled. The Hungarian article indeed demonstrates the danger in introducing authoritarianism and commodification in academia. In particular, it provides significant and worrying evidence to be contemplated by those who plead for a transition towards a foundation model.

Academic Freedom and Research

In the third group of articles, dealing with academic freedom in relation to research, Jean-Pierre Bourguignon addresses the fundamental question of how research agendas are set. He starts out by pointing to the great diversity of research and complexity of the research ecosystem. In this system, he identifies six steps in the fundamental decision processes regarding the setting of research agendas: (1) fixing research objectives, (2) determining the resources needed, (3) identifying the personnel needed, (4) determining the timeframe, (5) launching the project, and

(6) implementing and exploiting of the research results. In this process, he continues, there is a fundamental difference between bottom-up and top-down decision-making. In the first case, the scientists are at the helm. They propose projects; their peers evaluate the proposals and make the final decision. After a political battle, the European Research Council has chosen this model. In the second case, research priorities are determined by politicians and financing bodies, thereby asking for solutions to particular problems. A prime example of this is the Framework Programmes within the European Union. In the current environment, with a number of constraints, there are tendencies towards more top-down governance. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that the rapid development of the COVID-19 vaccine was a result of long-time bottom-up research. At the same time, there have recently also been calls for limiting research in areas such as cloning, generative AI and geo-engineering. Against this backdrop, Bourguignon argues that scientists need to have better contacts with politicians as well as among themselves, across different disciplines. Finally, he also warns of increasing threats from misinformation diffused through various media channels.

The question about the setting of research agendas is also the topic of the contribution by Uwe Schimank. He starts out by discussing the basic opportunities for individual researchers to make choices regarding questions, theoretical approaches and methods, thereby pointing to the constraints set by their dependence on their earlier research. On top of that, he identifies seven types of extra-scientific constraints. First, he mentions regulations restricting or banning certain types of research. Second, discourse control constitutes a more informal constraint in the form of socially banning research on certain topics, theories and methods. Yet another constraint, according to Schimank, is time, as certain research projects may require more time than is actually available to researchers, who are increasingly burdened with many other duties. This third constraint is closely related to the fourth mentioned by Schimank: financing, which is always scarce and increasingly geared towards certain specific research goals. However, even with time and resources, researchers may be constrained by two other significant features of academia: publication opportunities and career opportunities, i.e. to what extent can the research results be published in prestigious journals and how can the research serve as a basis for jobs and promotion? However, on top of everything is reputation – the appreciation by the scientific community – as a constraining factor. Of the seven constraints, Schimank finds four – regulation, discourse controls, time and publication opportunities – to be weaker than the other three – finances, career opportunities and reputation – particularly as they interact. Although Schimank bases his analysis on the situation for German professors, his conclusions have a wider validity.

Another German scholar, Peter Weingart, focuses in his article on one of Schimank's constraints, publishing opportunities. His point of departure is the question of whether measures of performance have affected academic freedom. In dealing with this issue, he discusses a number of significant changes that have occurred in the research system. The first change involves the strong growth of the

assessment system and its effects on the governance of institutions of higher education. In addition, he elaborates on the substantial changes that have occurred in the journal market, which has undergone a strong concentration of ownership from a wide array of professional associations to just a few commercial publishers that earn considerable profits. Another important change in terms of publishing has been its digitization, followed by the development of sophisticated databases that showcase performance indicators for journals as well as individuals. In relation to these metrics, Weingart concludes that they have not curtailed academic freedom. Instead, he argues that the development should be considered as a fundamental change in the way scholars communicate their work.

Metrics are also the point of departure for Rickard Danell, who addresses the question of the relationship between academic freedom and global scientific production. In so doing, he uses bibliometric indicators for the 2000–2022 period, the V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index and the Academic Freedom Index. His analysis shows first that the dominance of Europe and the United States in terms of share of publications is being challenged by the BRICS countries. He then demonstrates how the growth of scientific publications in these countries is occurring under conditions not only of limited academic freedom and limited liberal democracy in 2022, but also of a decline in these variables since 2000. Against this backdrop, Danell analyses international co-authorships. Looking at Western Liberal democracies on the one hand, and BRICS countries on the other, he finds that there is a clear upward trend for co-authorships among the former, while the pattern is less clear among the latter. However, a closer analysis of scholars from China, India and Russia demonstrates that their collaboration with colleagues in Western democracies is declining, while it is increasing with BRICS scholars. Nevertheless, US researchers remain domain-dominant partners for all three countries. Overall, the article points to a movement towards a more multipolar world and an increasing scientific production in countries where academic freedom is challenged.

Concluding Remarks

Academic freedom has a long tradition but has been challenged time after time. As shown above, the threats have been internal as well as external. For the former, lack of professionalism and increasing managerialism have been significant reasons, while the latter have been associated with political and market forces. The articles published in this supplement demonstrate that, in the twenty-first century, there is a clear tendency to limit academic freedom both for individual scholars and for institutions regarding their autonomy. This appears to go hand in hand with an increase in autocratic political forces in the world, contrary to Francis Fukuyama's conclusion in the early 1990s regarding the final victory of liberal democracy (Fukuyama 1992). As liberal democracies are challenged, so is academic freedom. Therefore, it is important to remember Henry Reichman's conclusion in the first article that academic freedom and democracy are symbiotic principles. In view of

this, it is indeed worrying that Richard Danell demonstrates in the final article that the growth in scientific production occurs particularly in countries with limited, and even declining, democracy. In relation to these circumstances, however, we should remember that systems of knowledge production and dissemination have been able to survive and develop in earlier times of repression. In the words of the Carnegie Commission 1980:

Universities in the past have been remarkable for their historic continuity, and we may expect this same characteristic in the future. They have experienced wars, revolutions, depressions, and industrial transformations, and have come out less changed than almost any other segment of their societies. (Carnegie Council 1980)

For this conclusion to also be true in the future, it is extremely important that we manage to recruit a new generation of academic scholars and that we continue, together with them, to fight for academic freedom.

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