

Statement on academic freedom in the science community

Introduction

The Royal Society considers academic freedom to be central to the practice of science, and believes it is key to the Society's purpose to promote excellence in science, support international collaboration and demonstrate the importance of science to everyone. It is essential that individuals and institutions have the freedom to carry out teaching and research activities without fear of discrimination, censorship, or other restrictions that would prevent them from carrying out their scientific work.

Background: International protections

At the international level, academic freedom protections are outlined in the 1997 UNESCO Recommendation¹ which defines academic freedom as:

'The right, without prescription by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussions, freedom in carrying out research, and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express freely their opinion of the institution in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship, and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies.'

Academic freedom is not explicitly referred to in the International Bill of Rights, but much of its meaning is also covered by this, including in protections relating to freedom of opinion, expression and belief, and the right to education.

What is academic freedom?

Broadly speaking, academic freedom is the freedom of scientists to:

- Teach and debate ideas
- Carry out research and publish and communicate the results
- Express opinions about the academic system or institution in which they work
- Be free from institutional censorship
- Join and participate in professional/representative academic bodies

The principle of academic freedom relates to both individuals and institutions². It also comes with a set of responsibilities to practise science ethically, with integrity, and in accordance with professional standards and codes, governmental laws and regulations relating to research ethics.

Institutional autonomy

Institutional autonomy is a key component of academic freedom. Academic institutions should have the freedom to manage their core activities of research and teaching without fear of political or religious interference that would impact on scientific research.

Institutions also have the responsibility to ensure that they support the academic freedom of their scientists, put in place clear and transparent systems and policies, and promote related values such as equitable access to education and research.

1. This recommendation, adopted at the 1997 UNESCO conference, sets out a set of principles relating to academic freedom. This was the first major attempt at defining and consolidating academic freedom principles at the international level. It is rooted in international law, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights also requires states to 'recognize the freedom indispensable for scientific research'.

2. This is an important point which is highlighted in the 1997 Recommendation – individuals cannot have access to academic freedom without institutional autonomy. Responsibilities are a key part of academic freedom; the International Science Council has produced a statement which sets this out further. Responsibilities include the ethical practice of science, research integrity, and accountability.

What do attacks on academic freedom look like?

Academic freedom can be restricted by individuals, institutions, or by the state. It can affect individuals, groups and institutions.

At the individual and group level, academic freedom may be limited by restrictions on research, teaching or debate on a particular subject; discrimination; the refusal to publish certain material; certain hiring/promotion practices; restrictions on freedom of movement; violence, threats and/or prosecution and imprisonment because of the impact this has on a scientist's ability to carry out their scientific work.

At the institutional level, academic freedom can be limited by changes to higher education governance and/or funding; the selection of research and teaching topics (eg where these are driven by a political agenda); and violence or threats toward educational administrations because of the impact this has on an institution or scientist to carry out their scientific work.

Key references

AAAS. 2015 *Primer on Scientific Freedom and Human Rights*. See https://www.aaas.org/sites/default/files/s3fs-public/Primer_Dec_4.pdf (accessed 17 November 2020).

Cammell J. 2009 *Academic Freedom International Study*. See https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/3423/Academic-Freedom-International-Study-Colombia-chapter/pdf/academic_freedom_colombia.pdf (accessed 17 November 2020).

UN General Assembly. 1966 *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*. United Nations Treaty Series 993, 9. (<https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b36c0.html>)

International Science Council. 2015 *The principle of universality of science and academic freedom*. See https://council.science/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Academic_freedom_ICSU_CFRS_principle_document.pdf (accessed 17 November 2020).

Scholars at Risk. 2018 *Free to Think*. See <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/free-to-think-2018/> (accessed 17 November 2020).

UNESCO. 1997 *Recommendation concerning the status of higher education teaching personnel*. See http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13144&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html (accessed 17 November 2020).

University of Oslo. 2018 *Dangerous questions: Why academic freedom matters*. See <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/academic-freedom> (accessed 17 November 2020).