

The Guild Statement on Academic Freedom

Academic freedom, the ability to pursue evidence-based enquiry free of undue external influences of any kind, is indispensable to excellent research and research-led teaching. It is ‘the fundamental principle of university life’ ([Magna Charta Universitatum](#)). Academic freedom is all the more critical at a time when scientific findings are being contested, distorted and undermined by influencers, organisations and platforms denying evidence and facts. The Guild of Research-Intensive Universities reaffirms the importance of academic freedom, of critical enquiry wherever the evidence leads, as essential for the welfare of European democracies, societies, cultures, and economies. It underlines its support for the [Bonn Declaration on Freedom of Scientific Research](#), which commits EU member states to the support of academic freedom. The Guild registers with concern that threats to academic freedom continue in many countries worldwide, including in some countries within the European Union.

We welcome the insistence in the Bonn Declaration on Freedom of Scientific Research that this freedom must encompass the right to freely define research questions. This right propels the dynamism of our subjects, ensures the cutting-edge quality of scholarly insights, and leads to the creation of new fields of enquiry as new challenges and perspectives emerge. What researchers focus on should be determined by scientific questions, subject to universal ethical boundaries that should be strongly aligned with the European values articulated in Art. 2 TEU,¹ and with a global commitment to research integrity.

As the Bonn Declaration states, ‘critical discourses are not disloyalty, but essential elements of a democratic society’. For as long as academic debate is contested within scientific boundaries, it should not be undermined by politicians simply because they disagree. We call upon all European governments, and the European Commission, to ensure that all fields of enquiry can be pursued by researchers and educators in universities. Any attempts by national governments or politicians to outlaw, discriminate or verbally abuse any academic subjects, disciplines, fields of enquiry or institutions must be criticized and sanctioned.

¹ Art. 2 TEU: ‘The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.’

We call for the institutional autonomy of universities to be strengthened in defence of academic freedom. As the object of academic debate is to push and expand the boundaries of knowledge and understanding, it is the responsibility of universities, not governments, to ensure that academic debates do not violate individual rights. Universities must be safe spaces that safeguard diversity and inclusion. They must be places of open debate, giving space to speakers of opposing views to defend and challenge each other, within constitutional boundaries and Art. 2 TEU. We call for all those engaging in academic debate to be protected from hate speech, violence, harassment and all kinds of discrimination.

We agree with the Bonn Declaration that academic freedom requires an appropriate balance between funding in fundamental research and challenge-led research, and that academic freedom requires stable institutional financing. Therefore, governments must not use disagreements on matters of policy, for instance when a political criticism of science clashes with a university's call to uphold the values and principles of science, to penalise individual institutions, and discriminate against them financially.

Finally, we welcome the Declaration's emphasis on academic freedom as a core value of the EU, anchored in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU. While national laws may therefore set a legitimate constitutional framework for the exercise of academic freedom, they may not curtail academic freedom in its essence. We reject any laws passed to restrict individual disciplines or research institutions in a discriminatory manner. We defend any researcher's right and duty to pursue academic enquiry driven by scientific methods, analytical rigour and a regard for universal rights and values, while respecting and valorising cultural differences.

We call upon Europe's politicians to refrain from polemics against disciplines, subjects or researchers. Scientists must be held to account for the quality of their research, not for their personal values or convictions. And scientists must not be derided for their failure to provide certainty, as research expands knowledge rather than certainty.

As a core principle of the EU, academic freedom must be protected vigorously and decisively by the European Commission and all EU institutions. We welcome the defence of academic freedom through the European Court of Justice as being critical, but we need to go further. We call for the creation of a European Ombudsperson for the defence and support of academic freedom, who can respond quickly, impartially and effectively to infringements on academic freedom in all its forms, based on the Bonn Declaration.

The EU must be proactive in the defence of academic freedom within the EU, to protect European researchers at risk at home and abroad and to advocate academic freedom globally. Academic freedom is a precious good to be defended, and it is essential to Europe's welfare and the democratic strength of its societies.