

## Statement on academic freedom

*This document expresses the view of The Human Rights Committee of Sweden's Scientific and Literary Academies. It is intended to serve as a reference for discussions and decisions pertaining to both specific and general issues related to academic freedom.*

### 1. What is academic freedom?

Academic freedom encompasses research, education, and the dissemination of scientific knowledge. It applies to individual researchers, teachers, and students, as well as to research groups, departments, universities, and research institutes. It has both an ideal and a real dimension. Ideally, there is total academic freedom when academic activities are not restricted in any way. In reality, degrees of freedom exist within the constraints of limited material resources, research ethics considerations, and democratically made decisions. Real total freedom exists when all that *can* be done within these constraints is also permitted.

Academic freedom is protected by both international and national law and enjoys constitutional protection in several countries. The academic freedom of scientific research comprises four key components. The first is the right freely to choose which scientific questions to address. The second is the right freely to select the methods for answering these questions. The third is the right freely to seek and access information, and the fourth is the right to freely choose the channels through which research results are communicated. Academic freedom thus also includes the right to reject scientifically irrelevant loyalty demands, such as considerations of national, political, ideological, religious, or commercial interests.

In practice, these choices are constrained by competition for finite resources. This constitutes a limitation of real freedom, within material constraints, only when choices are deliberately restricted for reasons that conflict with scientific motivations. The individual researchers' freedom to choose questions and methods may be limited by the fact that they are involved in a scientific collective, within the framework of the freedom of the collective. The freedom to choose how academic knowledge is disseminated is often practically restricted to established publication channels and competition for space within them. This only infringes academic freedom if decisions on what is published are based on non-scientific grounds.

Academic freedom in higher education means that academic teachers have the right to base their teaching entirely on scientific principles, without regard for national, political, ideological, religious, or commercial interests. This also applies to scientific findings that individuals, students or others, may find offensive. An individual teacher's right to choose the topic, content,

or format of a course, may be limited by the department or the university. However, this does not preclude freedom at the department or university level.

Academic freedom in education also includes students' freedom to choose courses and degree programmes. However, these choices are restricted by competition and the availability of study places. This infringes upon students' academic freedom if admissions are not merit-based or if the range of courses is restricted by decisions that go beyond the limits of academic freedom.

## **2. Academic freedom and quality**

Academic freedom should apply to all academic research and higher education. One reason for this is that researchers and teachers are the ones best suited to understand what promotes scientific quality in research and education. It is therefore essential that research and higher education are organised as environments that provide and contribute to such freedom. As an important consequence, academic freedom should also apply to universities and research institutes as institutions. Universities and institutes should thus enjoy a high degree of institutional autonomy in relation to and independent from authorities and the surrounding society. Universities and research institutes should enjoy the freedom of taking their own decisions regarding research, teaching, and internal organisation, based on their understanding of scientific standards.

Within the framework of this autonomy, freedom can be distributed in different ways between the individual researcher, the scientific subjects and departments, and the leadership of the university or institute. This means that the freedom of individual researchers may sometimes be restricted by structures decided at a higher level. It is up to the academic community itself to make decisions on such limitations. However, it is in the spirit of academic freedom that universities and institutes delegate a high degree of freedom to individual researchers and teachers.

Autonomy from authorities is not in itself a guarantee that decisions will best serve research and education, particularly as autonomy may also be justified by other reasons, such as organisational or economic considerations. It is therefore also crucial that universities and institutes to a high degree have faculty governance. This means that colleges of researchers and teachers have significant influence over decisions affecting them, either by making such decisions themselves or by having the power to influence them in other ways, for example by electing academic leaders. Faculty governance is a prerequisite for universities and institutes to take decisions that promote their research and teaching. Student influence should also be seen as part of academic freedom in this context.

## **3. Academic freedom and democracy**

Well-informed and knowledgeable citizens are fundamental to the proper functioning of a democratic society. A key condition for achieving this is that research, new findings, and discoveries are communicated to the public. Universities play a crucial role as disseminators of

knowledge to all parts of society. To implement these ambitions, universities and higher education institutions must be independent of political and commercial interests.

In an era marked by rapid technological change and increasingly advanced data-driven research—often leading to profound societal transformations—it is particularly important that citizens have access to knowledge. This is also essential for identifying and countering disinformation that spreads through digital systems and networks. Free universities and free research can provide citizens with the information and the knowledge needed to make informed decisions, both as voters in elections and as enlightened citizens.

Academic freedom contributes to making independent knowledge available to the public. Journalistic work also contributes to this, which is why academic freedom and freedom of the press have a shared purpose. Similarly, a well-functioning school system contributes to a basic level of knowledge among the population. For academia to fulfil its role in supporting democracy, it is essential that scientific knowledge is created freely and rigorously and that it can be freely communicated to society at large. Likewise, it is important that higher education and the scientific process enjoy legitimacy in society. This legitimacy, in turn, depends on both high quality of research outcomes and on the perception that scientific activities are conducted freely. Academic freedom, therefore, plays both a technical-economic role in society and a political role in promoting democracy.

Conversely, it is in the interest of democracy to ensure a high degree of real academic freedom, precisely because it serves democracy. A democratically elected government has a duty to promote academic freedom and to refrain from actions that threaten or reduce it, or create uncertainty about its preservation. It is therefore of great importance that politicians in a democracy have a sound understanding of what academic freedom entails. Significant support for curiosity-driven research is an indication of academic freedom, provided that its range is not unduly restricted by scientifically unmotivated measures, or that it is not based on a skewed allocation of resources that unduly disfavours some scientific fields.

Academic freedoms and rights are related to, but are not identical with, civil freedoms and rights. A teacher or researcher cannot exercise all their civil rights in their professional role. A teacher, for example, may not use their teaching to promote political or non-scientific views, as this would constitute an abuse of academic freedom. Preventing this does not limit academic freedom. At the same time, teachers and researchers have the right to express their views as citizens outside academia without jeopardising their academic position, as long as their statements remain within the bounds of the law. Individuals in positions of trust within academia have an additional responsibility to conduct themselves publicly in a way that does not damage trust in science and higher education.

#### **4. The legitimate limits of academic freedom**

Denying researchers or research groups resources for research is not a limitation of real academic freedom if such decisions are made solely on scientific grounds within given material constraints. A society that funds research and education for the public good has a legitimate

interest in maintaining some degree of oversight over these activities. This must be balanced against the demand for academic freedom, which means that academic freedom cannot be absolute. Academic work is therefore subject to justified limitations, both negative and positive.

Negative limitations concern what researchers or teachers are not allowed to do. Some of these restrictions apply to the scientific process itself, such as prohibitions based on research ethics. Other restrictions are substantive, preventing research whose results could have negative consequences for society and its citizens. These limitations may be justified on ethical or strategic grounds. It is crucial that there is consensus on such considerations, achieved through a lively and ongoing dialogue between researchers and society. The boundary between such restrictions and those motivated by ideology can be difficult to draw. There is a risk that politically decided restrictions infringe on academic freedom. Ultimately, these boundaries must be determined through an open discussion and in the spirit of academic freedom, where the views of researchers and teachers carry a significant weight.

Positive limitations concern what the state requires researchers and teachers to do. This is a consequence of the steering of research and higher education that stems from its being funded by public resources. Some research and higher education initiatives receive funding while others do not. This does not constitute a limitation of academic freedom if the selection of supported projects is based on scientific grounds. Decisions on research funding may also be justified by perceived societal needs. While societal needs involve value judgements, they also include factual questions that must be answered scientifically. Furthermore, the identification of research capable of addressing relevant issues and societal challenges must itself be scientifically grounded. It is therefore in the spirit of academic freedom that the scientific community has a major influence over decisions about the funding of research and higher education. It is always a restriction of academic freedom if research or higher education is *obstructed* in ways that contradict scientific considerations, especially when financial resources are available.

### **5. Threats to academic freedom**

Threats to academic freedom can come from multiple sources, including government authorities, professional politicians outside the government (in parliament as well as regional and local assemblies), commercial interests, and extremist groups or individuals.

Political interference in education or research can take the form of strong political control over these areas. It can manifest itself as unwarranted involvement in the right and ability of academic teachers and departments to independently determine educational content, or as excessive interference with researchers' choice of topics, research questions, or methods. Government attempts to prohibit or mandate specific theories, doctrines, or research directions are examples of such threats.

The withdrawal of funding for education or research should be considered a restriction on academic freedom if the decision to withdraw cannot be reasonably justified by a lack of resources and cannot be scientifically justified either. Similarly, far-reaching initiatives leading

to earmarked funding from government agencies or grant-giving organisations may restrict academic freedom by diverting resources away from other education or research. Such restrictions are characterised by a lack of justification and poor communication with the scientific community. Furthermore, a high proportion of curiosity-driven research is valuable for maintaining the breadth of overall scientific competence, as well as for ensuring long-term scientific development, which best serves the public good.

Academic freedom can also be threatened by the governance model of universities or research institutes. A governance structure that serves as a tool for the government, or for other ideological, religious, or economic interests, constitutes a latent threat to the academic freedom of affected researchers and teachers. Decisions on structural changes to governance that reduce researchers' and teachers' influence over the organisation and decision-making processes inherently restrict academic freedom. This applies to decisions that undermine institutional autonomy as well as those that diminish the degree of faculty governance.

Another threat to academic freedom arises from the demand that research and teaching must always provide immediate benefits, particularly if such benefits are narrowly defined in relation to commercial or political interests and restricted to addressing current societal challenges or technological opportunities. Likewise, uncertainty regarding funding may pose a threat to academic freedom, as it can compel universities, institutes, or individual researchers to avoid certain topics or fields for reasons other than scientific value.

Yet another threat to academic freedom comes from extremist and anti-scientific groups or individuals, both domestic and foreign, who target individual researchers and teachers. Academics are increasingly subjected to harassment and personal persecution, either through social media or in direct confrontation from extremists opposed to their research or teaching. Such threats may also involve physical threats, directed at academics themselves or their family members. In such cases, researchers and teachers must be offered support and protection, both from their own institutions or research units and, where relevant, from the criminal justice system. The risk of not being provided with adequate support and protection constitutes an indirect threat in itself.

Finally, threats to academic freedom may also emerge from within academia itself. Ideologically motivated intolerance from colleagues or students may lead to actions against peers, lecturers, or guest speakers—so-called *cancel culture*. Similarly, ideologically motivated intolerance may stem from the leadership of a university or institute. These are real threats, but it is important not to exaggerate their prevalence. An equally significant or even greater threat arises when the mere existence, or suspicion of the existence, of internal academic intolerance leads to disciplinary measures imposed by the government, officially justified as safeguarding academic freedom but in practice restricting it—for example, by limiting freedom of expression within academia. Internal academic intolerance should primarily be addressed within academia itself.

# THE HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE OF SWEDEN'S SCIENTIFIC AND LITERARY ACADEMIES

*The Human Rights Committee of Sweden's Scientific and Literary Academies  
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## 6. Appendix: Important documents on academic freedom

- Wilhelm von Humboldt, 1809/10: 'Denkschrift über die äußere und innere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin' (<https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/bitstream/handle/18452/5305/229.pdf>).
- AAUP's 1915 *Declaration of Principles*, American Association of University Professors.
- United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948, Article 19.
- *The European Convention*, 1950, Article 9, point 1.
- United Nations' *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 1966, Article 19.
- United Nations' *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, 1966, Articles 13 and 15.
- UNESCO *Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel*, 1997.
- *Magna Charta Universitatum*, Bologna 1998.
- Europeiska Unionens stadga om de grundläggande rättigheterna, 2010C 83/02, Artiklarna 13 och 14.
- *Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression*, 2014.
- Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, David Kaye (Report to the United Nations General Assembly, 2020).
- *Free to Think*, Report from Scholars at Risk, 2023.
- *Självständiga lärosäten*, Autonomiutredningen SOU 2008:104, Daniel Tarschys
- *The Principle of Universality of Science and Academic Freedom*, International Council for Science (ICSU), 2014.
- *Academic Freedom Index*, 2017 (<https://academic-freedom-index.net>).
- *Magna Charta Universitatum*, 2020.
- EHEA (European Higher Education Area and Bologna process) Rome Ministerial Communiqué, Annex I, *Statement on academic freedom*, 2020 (<https://ehea2020rome.it/pages/documents>).
- *Challenges to academic freedom as a fundamental right*, LERU (League of European Research Universities) advice paper, 2023 (<https://www.leru.org/publications/challenges-to-academic-freedom-as-a-fundamental-right>).