

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE



Academic Freedom in Action

LAUNCH EVENT: DEMOCRATIC
MISSION OF HIGHER
EDUCATION

Strasbourg, France
13-14 November, 2024

Venue: Palais de l'Europe and
European Court of Human Rights

Introduction

The Council of Europe has recognised the urgent need to address the decline of democracy, evident in the erosion of trust in institutions, including higher education. This crisis has exacerbated inequalities, intolerance, and threats to freedom of expression and association. At the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in Reykjavík 2023, Europe's leaders were urged to reverse this democratic decline, making it a central focus of the Council's mandate.

Higher education plays a pivotal role in revitalising democracy by advancing critical thinking, social responsibility, and active citizenship. The Council of Europe's Education Strategy 2024-2030, "Learners First," emphasises the need for higher education to strengthen its democratic and civic mission, preparing citizens to actively engage in democracy and address today's challenges.

Ensuring a strong culture of democracy is key to defending it. Public debates, academic studies and practical experiences in the Council of Europe member states contend that academic freedom is under serious pressure in the last decade. With the launch of the new project "Academic Freedom in Action", the Council of Europe sets to work on the protection and promotion of the values of academic freedom, ensuring that higher education remains a bastion of democracy and critical thinking.

The launch event "Academic Freedom in Action" on the democratic mission of higher education will comprise of five panels, including the presentation of the findings of the Report on the Threats to Academic Freedom, a Panel Discussion on Academic Freedom and Fundamental Values of Higher Education through the prism of Human Rights organised jointly with the European Court of Human Rights, and the high-level panel on Academic Freedom in Politically Charged Times.

Participants will include representatives from public authorities, higher education institutions, international organisations, human rights defenders, and other academic and student bodies.

Programme

Wednesday, 13 November 2024

Palais de l'Europe, Room 6

09:00 Arrival of participants and welcome coffee

09:30-09:35 **Introductory remarks**
Mr Villano Qiriazzi, Head of the Education Department, Council of Europe

09:35 – 11:00

Panel 1

Academic Freedom in Action: Presentation of Report on Erosion of Academic Freedom

It is widely acknowledged that academic freedom is both a fundamental value of present-day higher education and a prerequisite for well-functioning democratic societies. Based on this general starting point, the Council of Europe Education Strategy 2024-2030 stresses the need for higher education to revitalise its democratic and civic mission. Strikingly, in most Council of Europe member states an erosion of academic freedom can be observed that, if not adequately addressed, might result in a structural deterioration of de facto academic freedom. In this panel a report produced for the Council will be presented that examines the key factors contributing to this development, that is, legal restrictions; political interference; attacks on dissenting voices within academia; online harassment, attacks and defamation cases from society; private sector interference; and restrictions resulting from European and national security policies. The panel will discuss the main features of the current state of play of academic freedom in Europe as presented in this report, and identify key areas where action is needed at the European, national, and institutional levels. This includes actions aimed at strengthening the legal protection of academic freedom, and initiatives for enhancing the awareness both within academia and in society at large of the crucial importance of academic freedom for supporting the independence and freedom of academics and students to advance knowledge, express ideas, and engage in critical academic interactions without fear of censorship or reprisal as well as for the protection and development of democratic principles, values and institutions.

Questions for discussion

1. How can the current state of play of academic freedom in Europe be characterised?
2. How can the knowledge basis with respect to the state of play of academic freedom in Europe be improved?
3. What are relevant strategies for safeguarding academic freedom in increasingly hostile environments in Europe?
4. What are realistic and fitting recommendations that can be given to public authorities on strengthening the protection of academic freedom in Europe?

Moderator: Mr Peter Maassen, Professor at the University of Oslo

The panel discussion will feature the authors of the report and the members of the Council of Europe Expert Working Group on Democratic Mission of Higher Education.

Mr Gergely Kovats, Professor at the Corvinus University in Budapest, Hungary
Mr Zoltan Ronay, Professor at the Eotvos Lorand University in Budapest, Hungary

Ms Kirsten Roberts Lyer, Professor at the Central European University

Ms Denise Roche, Advocacy Manager, Scholars At Risk Europe

Ms Rose Anne Cuschieri, Chief Executive Officer at Further and Higher Education Authority, Malta

11:00-11:30 Coffee break

11:30-13:00


Panel 2

Academic Freedom in Politically Charged Times

This session will explore the numerous domestic and international pressures on academic freedom in Europe today. These pressures reflect an increasingly anti-intellectual climate, marked by intensified attacks on scholarship from political officials, media actors, and others. Such pressures can be personally and professionally devastating to scholars, and – given scholars’ responsibility to engage with society by sharing the content of their work – they can do severe, lasting damage to the public discourse more broadly. Panellists will examine these harms, and the greater consequences for a society deprived of scholarly knowledge. Panellists will then address the mounting tensions Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) face as global actors adhering to a set of core values, while navigating concerns about their role in political and social discourse. Finally, this session will explore the roles of governments, institutions, scholars, and the public in protecting and promoting academic freedom, in order to maintain informed public discourse in the interest of social, political, cultural, and economic progress.

Questions for discussion

1. Scholars have a duty to share what they have discovered with the wider society, but polarisation and direct attacks are undermining this. Can you explain how? And what can be done to support scholars?
2. Today’s higher education institutions are international actors in their own right. At the same time, they are vulnerable to shifting domestic policies and new political agendas. For example, there is now a strong political focus on knowledge security and combating foreign interference, and policies intended to be protective, may inadvertently restrict cross border research and discourse. What is the role of HEIs in political and social discourse and how can the tensions be best managed?

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3. In her recent report the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Ms. Farida Shaheed, concluded that academic freedom “has yet to be accepted within governing spheres and the wider public as being as crucial as a free press or an independent judiciary”. Given academic freedom’s essential role in society, and to democracy in particular, how can national and regional government bodies – like the Council of Europe - ensure its benefits are more widely understood and ultimately protected?

Moderator: Ms Marie-Anne Persoons, Chair of the Council of Europe Steering Committee on Education and International Policy Advisor at the Flemish Department of Education and Training, Belgium

Ms Denise Roche, Advocacy Manager, Scholars At Risk Europe

Mr Svein Stølen, Rector of the University of Oslo, Norway

Ms Iris Kimizoglu, President of the European Students' Union (ESU)

13h00-13:05 Conference group photo

13h05-14:15 Lunch break



Wednesday, 13 November 2024

European Court of Human Rights – Seminar Room

14:15 Arrival of the participants at the European Court of Human Rights

14:30-14:35 **Introductory remarks**

Mr Matjaž Gruden, Director, Directorate for Democracy, Council of Europe

14:35-16:30

Panel 3

Academic Freedom, Universal Right or Relative Term Fundamental Values of Higher Education through the prism of Human Rights

Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights declares the right to education, requiring and ensuring that everyone has free access to knowledge. In this, as is the case with most fundamental rights, mature international law is a common minimum legal framework set by the international community that usually serves as a framework for national legislation that must remain within it. However, mature international law does not clarify the conditions for realising the right to education or how it relates to academic freedom. Furthermore, with respect to academic freedom, such a framework is not available in the absence of international rules explicitly protecting academic freedom (not including the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union) and of a generally accepted concept of academic freedom in public policy terms. This is why courts often turn to other fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression, opinion, labour law, or the right to teach and learn. Meanwhile, the jurisprudence of courts often has an influence on legislation or the implementation of legislation.

Therefore, it is important to explore academic freedom within the context of international and European legal frameworks, assessing the current landscape and the legal protections available with particular attention to the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights. In this session, panellists will discuss possible strategies to address the human rights dimensions of academic freedom and the role of legal systems and courts in protecting this fundamental right. Within this framework, panellists will pay special attention to the legal relationship between the right to education and academic freedom and the relevance of this relationship for the Court of Human Rights. The discussion will include presenting the legal conditions, possible interpretations of academic freedom, and the challenges jurisprudence faces in terms of academic freedom.

Questions for discussion

1. What is the relationship between the right to education and academic freedom, and how can the first be realized more effectively by strengthening the latter?
2. What can the European Court of Human Rights do more to protect academic freedom more effectively?
3. What interpretations can be accepted to articulate the relevance of academic freedom and the development of its legal protection further?

Moderator: Mr Matjaž Gruden, Director, Directorate for Democracy, Council of Europe

Mr Davor Derenčinović, Judge of the European Court of Human Rights

Ms Lorraine Schembri Orland, Judge of the European Court of Human Rights

Mr Peter Maassen, Professor at the University of Oslo, Norway

Mr Zoltan Ronay, Professor at the Eotvos Lorand University in Budapest, Hungary

Mr Gergely Kovats, Professor at the Corvinus University in Budapest, Hungary

Ms Vasiliki Kosta, Professor, Leiden University, Netherlands

16h30-17:30 Reception

Thursday, 14 November 2024

Palais de l'Europe, Room 6

08:45-09:00 Arrival of participants and welcome coffee

09:00-09:05 **Introductory remarks**


Mr Villano Qiriazzi, Head of the Education Department, Council of Europe

09:-10:30

Panel 4

Academic Freedom and Democratisation of Science: Bridging the Gap through Communication

The democratisation of science refers to efforts aimed at increasing public influence over, participation in, and understanding of science and scientific processes. It encompasses various aspects, including making scientific knowledge more accessible, promoting scientific literacy, and engaging diverse communities in scientific endeavours. A public engagement agenda is adopted and institutionalized in many countries around the world and offers a potential remedy to diminishing trust in science. Trust in science by policymakers and ordinary citizens is crucial for its effective use.



Furthermore, researchers as the producers of science must also rely on trust, e.g. in their collaboration with other researchers and the dissemination of their research outcomes. Yet, within academia, in public policy-making processes, and among citizens, trust in science is very often difficult to achieve, which potentially affects the state of play of and support for academic freedom negatively. This panel will examine how enhancing public engagement and scientific literacy, and strengthening science communication can advance a more and better-informed society and enhance the protection of and support for academic freedom by. Drawing on lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, the panel will focus on transparency in science, public trust, and the role of higher education in promoting a democratic approach to scientific inquiry.

Questions for discussion

1. How can public engagement become a more integrated part of the larger institutional frameworks set up for science?
2. How can knowledge curation be transformed in order to make science communication more effective?
3. How can citizens science competence be increased?
4. How can the public governance of science become more democratic?
5. How can the public trust in science be enhanced, and related, the willingness of citizens to accept scientific knowledge as a foundation for addressing societal problems at all relevant levels?

Moderator: **Mr Peter Maassen**, Professor at the University of Oslo, Norway

Mr Martin Galvin, Professor at the University College Cork, Ireland

Ms Barbara Wasson, Professor in the Department of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen, Norway

Ms Paola Mattei, Professor at the University of Milano, Italy

10:30-11:00 Coffee break




11:00-12:30

Panel 5

Academic Freedom and the Civic Mission of Higher Education Institutions

This session explores why academic freedom is important for society and democracy. It treats academic freedom not only as a right but a responsibility: higher education institutions (HEIs) and academics are entrusted with public funding not only to enable them to operate without external interference but to do so in ways that serve the public good.



In this session we focus on the role of HEIs in their local community. This is often referred to as the 'civic mission' – a term that is referenced in policy but often lacks precise definition or practical application. It encompasses a spectrum of activities from education and research to different forms of outreach. The ways these activities are carried out is also crucial to public recognition of the value of HEIs. Rather than a transactional approach, basing education or research *on* the community, it is important to work *with* the community in ways that are of mutual benefit and often transformative of both parties. A well-implemented civic mission can reinforce public support for academic freedom, while a lack of community understanding or support can threaten it.

This panel will explore how establishing a robust civic mission of HEIs can enhance academic freedom and contribute to societal progress and the advancement of democracy.

1. How does your institution's civic mission foster activities that create mutual benefits for both the community and the university?
2. In what ways do these activities rely on or help strengthen academic freedom at your institution? What challenges do you face in balancing academic freedom with institutional goals?
3. How do these civic mission activities contribute to enhancing local democracy?

Introduction to the Panel/Moderators: **Ms Susan Wright**, Professor at the Aarhus University, Denmark and **Mr Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt**, Executive Director, Institute for the Development of Education, Croatia

Mr Svein Stølen, Rector of the University of Oslo, Norway

Mr Martin Galvin, Professor at the University College Cork, Ireland

Ms Rita Dias, President, Erasmus Student Network

Mr Gavin Pelan, Education and Youth Policy Coordinator, Erasmus Student Network



12:30-12:45

Closing remarks

Mr Villano Qiriazi, Head of the Education Department, Council of Europe

Mr Peter Maassen, Professor at the University of Oslo, Norway