

Concept note

Conference on “Academic Freedom in Action”

Launch event: Democratic Mission of Higher Education

13-14 November, 2024, Strasbourg, France

Time: 9:00-18:00 on 13/11, 9:00-12:30 on 14/11

**Venue: Room 8, Palais de l’Europe, Council of Europe/
European Court of Human Rights**

Language: English/French

Introduction:

The Council of Europe has been concerned about the decline of democracy, as can be illustrated by the erosion of trust in institutions and major societal establishments, including higher education. This has led to economic, political, social, and educational inequalities, increased intolerance, discrimination, and hate speech, and serious threats to freedom of expression and association. At the Summit of Heads of State and Government in 2023 the Council of Europe called on Europe's leaders to act urgently to reverse a slide in democracy, placing this urgency at the core of its future mandate.

Higher education is crucial for reinvigorating democratic societies and realising a genuinely democratic future for all citizens. The Council of Europe has been actively involved in promoting the democratic mission of higher education, promoting an environment that fosters critical thinking, a culture of democracy, social responsibility, and active citizenship. Universities play a crucial role in addressing global issues such as climate change, sustainable development, migration, inequality, extremism, and a democratic deficit.

To address these challenges, the Council of Europe Education Strategy 2024-2030, titled "Learners First," emphasises the necessity for higher education to revitalise its democratic and civic mission. This involves preparing citizens to become active participants in democracy and contributing solutions to the democratic challenges currently faced by Council of Europe member states.

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 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.

The launch event will convene a range of actors including representatives of the public authorities, higher education institutions, the European Commission, the European Parliament STOA Panel, the UN, Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner, higher education partner organisations such as the European University Association (EUA), European Students’ Union (ESU), human rights defenders such as the Scholars At Risk (SAR), and other academia and students’ representatives.

Panel 1 – Academic Freedom in Action: Launch of Report on Erosion of Academic Freedom

“Academic Freedom in Action” marks the intensified efforts of the Council of Europe to protect and promote fundamental values of higher education, to set forward the work the premises of which were given in the Recommendation RecCM(2012)7¹. The recent period sees an important resurgence of threats and attacks on academic freedom, through traditional threats such as political interference, legal restrictions, funding and economic pressures, and intensifying academic attacks on dissenting voices, online harassment and defamation cases from social groups, commercialisation, and recently emerging security policies as new infringements on academic freedom.

The new Council of Europe Report on Threats to Academic Freedom intends to provide new insights in the erosion of academic freedom observed in recent years by examining and discussing the sources of threats and attacks.

The launch of the report will consist of a presentation of the key findings of the study, followed by a panel discussion of the report and possible future actions. The report and the panel aim to contribute to the development of effective strategies and approaches to protect and promote academic freedom.

Panel 2 – Academic Freedom in Politically Charged Times: High Level Panel Discussion

This panel will explore the challenges to academic freedom in today's politically charged climate. Speakers will discuss how media, political figures, and ideological critics impact the social sciences and humanities, framing critical scholarship as "ideological" and unscientific. The conversation will address the backlash against dissenting academic voices and the personal and professional consequences for scholars.

Topics include online harassment of academics, the financial and emotional toll of defamation cases, and the commercialisation of academia affecting academic integrity and freedom. The panel will also discuss security policies that, while protective, may inadvertently restrict research and discourse.

The role of academics as public intellectuals will be examined, focusing on how confidentiality obligations can

¹ Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)7 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the responsibility of public authorities for academic freedom and institutional autonomy

limit their contributions to public discourse. Finally, the distinction between academic freedom and freedom of expression will be clarified, highlighting the responsibility of academic research to address social phenomena, particularly those marginalised in public debate or politically sensitive.

Panel 3 – Fundamental Values of Higher Education through the prism of Human Rights: Academic Freedom, Universal Right or Relative Term

As has been stated in the Joint Declaration of a group of 74 countries on Academic Freedom (52nd Session of the UN Human Rights Council, 29 March 2023), the right to education can only be enjoyed if accompanied by academic freedom of staff and students. The declaration stresses that “academic freedom is intrinsically linked to the effective enjoyment of other rights and freedoms, such as participations in public affairs, freedom of opinion and expression and the right to education, demonstrating the indivisibility of all human rights. Without freedom to teach and research, and without freedom to disseminate and debate the results of research, the achievement of the SDGs will be compromised”.

The panel provides an opportunity to discuss the current landscape of academic freedom within the context of various international and European legal frameworks. While some treaties mention academic freedom indirectly, its explicit definition and protection is often lacking.

The panel will share insights and explore strategies to effectively address the human rights dimensions of academic freedom, and the role of legal system in protecting academic freedom. The discussion will include the presentation of the current *de jure* and *de facto* situation with regard to the protection of academic freedom in the Council of Europe member States.

Panel 4 – Academic Freedom and Democratisation of Science: Bridging the Gap through Communication

In the pursuit of protecting and promoting academic freedom, this panel will explore the intersection of democratising science and the dissemination of research. The panellists will reflect upon how enhancing public engagement and scientific literacy can bolster academic freedom by fostering a more informed and participatory society. This segment will highlight strategies to increase citizen competence in scientific matters, ensuring that the science produced democratically is both reliable and socially accountable. Through improved knowledge curation and effective science communication, the panel will explore the strategies to build public trust and create a dialogue between experts and the broader community.

Drawing on the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, the discussion will emphasise the importance of transparency and trust in science. By examining the impact of expert knowledge on public policy and societal outcomes, the panel seeks to enhance the validity and effectiveness of public engagement initiatives. The panel will aim to show the link between academic freedom and the promotion of a more inclusive and democratic approach to scientific inquiry and its role in society.

Panel 5 – Academic Freedom and the Civic Mission of Higher Education

In today's socio-political climate, the role of staff and students at higher education institutions extends beyond the confines of classrooms and laboratories; they are vital contributors to the civic life of their communities. This session will explore how higher education institutions can nurture and protect academic freedom while simultaneously strengthening their civic mission and community engagement, thus establishing mutually beneficial links between higher education institutions and society.

Academic freedom is essential for fostering an environment where students and staff at higher education institutions can pursue knowledge without fear of censorship or retaliation. This freedom, in turn, empowers higher education institutions to engage with civic issues openly and critically. By protecting academic freedom, higher

education institutions ensure that students and staff can address societal challenges, contribute to public discourse, and promote human rights and democratic values.

Through expert insights, the panel will examine the dual role of higher education institutions as hubs of knowledge and catalysts for civic engagement. It will highlight best practices for fostering a culture where academic freedom is advanced through the civic mission of higher education institutions. The discussion will underscore how academic freedom and civic mission are intertwined, with each reinforcing the other to enhance the overall impact of higher education on democratic processes in society.