

ACADEMIC FREEDOM INSIGHTS SERIES

Misuse and weaponisation of academic freedom

INTRODUCTION

Several recent examples illustrate ways in which claims of academic freedom have been invoked in contested ways. Legislation has in some cases directly regulated certain aspects of state university curricula, with lawmakers explicitly invoking academic freedom to justify such interventions. Elsewhere, extremist groups have appealed to their own academic freedom in order to oppose the inclusion of educational materials that promote minority rights. There have also been instances where feminist academics have experienced negative consequences on their academic career for expressing views on transgender issues, as students have sought to silence them by invoking claims of academic freedom.

What these cases share is that, although academic freedom is cited as the underlying rationale, the practical outcome is a restriction rather than a protection of that freedom. It is therefore important to emphasise that, in these contexts, academic freedom is misinterpreted, whether unintentionally or deliberately. In the unintentional case, the misinterpretation arises from an inadequate understanding of the concept or its incorrect application. In the deliberate case, however, the phenomenon is better characterised as a misuse or outright weaponization of academic freedom.

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CONTEXT

Understanding this phenomenon requires a reconsideration of the core conceptual elements of academic freedom.

First, it is essential to recall the enabling and supportive components of academic freedom (Kováts & Rónay 2023), particularly because weaponisation frequently emerges in relation to intramural speech—that is, the internal circulation of knowledge within the academic community. Although the other essential dimensions of academic freedom—the freedoms to teach, to research, and to learn—may also be implicated, intramural expression is especially susceptible to distortion or constraint. Second, it is necessary to recognise that legitimate limitations on academic freedom do exist, as proportionate restrictions are at times required to safeguard other fundamental rights (Maassen, Kováts & Rónay 2025).

These elements clarify the nature of the misinterpretation and misuse of academic freedom, particularly when it is invoked as a defensive strategy. For instance, when an academic community establishes performance expectations, the evaluation of a researcher against these standards (with a possible negative implication on one's academic career) does not constitute an infringement of academic freedom. Similarly, when individuals act in breach of widely accepted academic norms and consequently face sanctions, invoking academic freedom to evade such consequences represents either a misinterpretation or misuse of the concept.

Misuse of academic freedom refers mostly to situations in which a natural or legal person invokes their alleged academic freedom even though they are not entitled to such freedom, because they do not engage in scientific activity¹. By contrast, the weaponisation of academic freedom denotes cases in which individuals or groups that hold real power strategically curtail the academic freedom of others to advance their own agenda, undermining the legitimacy of opposing viewpoints.

Such strategic misapplication of rights is frequently characterised as weaponisation (Amon 2025; McKinnon 2020; Ward & Rodriguez 2025).

Although the literature often treats the weaponisation and misuse of academic freedom as synonymous, we contend that weaponisation should be understood as a specific subcategory of misuse, distinguished by its intentionality and its deployment for political or ideological purposes. While misinterpretation and misuse of academic freedom undoubtedly present challenges, such misuse is generally confined to individual or isolated cases. Weaponisation, by contrast, can occur at a higher—often institutional or systemic—level, and may serve as a tool in the hands of political actors or even the state. As a result, weaponisation poses a significantly more serious threat to academic freedom. In what follows, we therefore concentrate on this more consequential form.

Academic freedom has traditionally been closely associated with freedom of expression. Consequently, in the higher education environment, the weaponisation of free speech exemplifies how these two principles relate (Ward & Rodriguez 2025). To ensure academic rigour, the standards governing academic discourse are often more exacting than those applied to ordinary speech. For example, academic claims are expected to be firmly grounded in evidence. Arguments opposing these kind of standards (restrictions) often invoke free speech (for example, when the argument has no scientific basis, despite being presented as scientific). Yet, such arguments are frequently reframed as appeals to academic freedom. Importantly, while academic freedom and free speech may coexist, they are not interchangeable. (Chemerinsky 2023; Braley-Rattai & Bezanson 2020, cited in Ward & Rodriguez 2025).

¹ In some instances, DEI principles—diversity, equity, and inclusion—originally designed to support students facing various forms of disadvantage (including those related to ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity), are invoked by activists to justify the disruption of academic lectures on the grounds that the topic or the lecturer's work is inherently contrary to DEI values (i.e., forms of no-platforming). Where the speaker is a member of the university staff, such protests have at times escalated into demands for dismissal, occasionally with effect.

In certain cases, protesters have explicitly appealed to their own alleged academic freedom—for example, claiming a supposed right not to be exposed to ideas they perceive as offensive—thereby directly infringing the lecturer's academic freedom to teach (Brubaker 2018; Ignatieff 2018; Scott 2018; Stanger 2018).

FACTS & KEY CHALLENGES

Surveying scholarly research and public reporting reveals that documented instances of the weaponisation of academic freedom originate predominantly from the United States. Nonetheless, the lessons are pertinent on the European side of the Atlantic as well, particularly when comparing these developments with contemporary illiberal movements in Europe. In what follows, two illustrative examples are presented that demonstrate the weaponisation of academic freedom.



01 — EXTREME OPINIONS IN ACADEMIA

Universities cannot remain entirely insulated from contemporary political developments. Academic communities often must reflect upon political events. Yet, in today's highly polarised and politicised climate, even extreme political positions seek a foothold within higher education institutions. Universities, therefore, face the dilemma of whether to exclude such views or to accommodate them under the banner of diversity. Either decision may generate conflict, often involving opposing extremist groups (Stanger 2018; Brubaker 2018; Amon 2025).

Groups whose views are rejected frequently claim that their academic freedom has been violated, even when the ideas in question are extreme or outright prohibited and thus fall outside the protection of academic freedom. This dynamic is evident, for example, when support for women, LGBTQ, or ethnic and religious minority communities is portrayed as oppression of white Christian men instead of protecting minorities, ensuring equal rights, or promoting equal opportunities. In such cases, anti-LGBTQ narratives are portrayed as resistance to this alleged "oppression," and any institutional response to protect minorities is seen as an attack on academic freedom (Hackett & Rivera 2020; Franz 2020, in Ward & Rodriguez 2025).

02 — THE PROMOTION OF NON-SCIENTIFIC THEORIES IN ACADEMIA

Academic freedom is intrinsically linked to scientific inquiry. Unlike freedom of speech, which offers broad general protection, academic freedom is specific to higher education and research. The scientific community retains the authority to determine what constitutes legitimate science. Consequently, it is not uncommon for academics to challenge theories lacking credible evidence but enjoying political favour, invoking scientific standards to oppose their incorporation into curricula or research.

In some political movements—and particularly in populist ones—deliberate efforts are made to legitimise non-scientific doctrines under the banner of defending academic freedom. Proponents argue that the exclusion of unverified or scientifically discredited claims from the academic canon constitutes a violation of academic freedom. Upon gaining political power, such movements have at times employed legislative means to compel the scientific community to adopt or teach these doctrines, thereby infringing academic freedom in a substantive and genuine sense (Branch 2020). Illustrative examples include state-supported anti-vaccination narratives, assertions of unproven vaccine harms (such as alleged links to autism), the denial of evolutionary theory, and the promotion of intelligent design.

CONCLUSION

Universities and research institutions must be reaffirmed as spaces for evidence-based and argument-driven discourse.

All claims may be scrutinised when scientific evidence is weak or absent, and all participants are entitled to engage critically. Yet, academic expression must always respect human dignity. Fundamental rights—including personal dignity and related protections—or ethical considerations (such as restrictions on cloning for reproductive purposes) or the prohibition on researchers entering laboratories during a pandemic for public health reasons (Kovács & Spannagel 2024) can legitimately constrain academic freedom. It is therefore essential to strike an appropriate balance between competing rights: academic freedom, free speech, and the broader corpus of fundamental rights. Clarification of the content and scope of these principles—academic freedom, free speech, diversity, equity, and inclusion—is indispensable.

To this end, the Council of Europe should consider launching a campaign that highlights both the existence and the risks of weaponizing academic freedom—a phenomenon already visible in the United States and increasingly relevant for Europe. Such a campaign should include the production of materials that promote a shared understanding of academic freedom and offer strategies to identify and prevent its misuse. Member states should actively support this initiative by raising awareness among national academic institutions and organising training activities in line with the Council of Europe's guidance. Additional measures include early-warning monitoring, strengthening autonomy indicators, and training administrators to recognise distorted claims of academic freedom.

REFERENCE DOCUMENT



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↘ www.coe.int/education

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