

EVENT REPORT

STRENGTHENING ACADEMIC FREEDOM & INSTITUTIONAL RESILIENCE IN THE EUROPEAN RESEARCH AREA

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Event Report: 'Strengthening Academic Freedom & Institutional Resilience in the European Research Area'

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Introduction

At a time of significant political, societal, and technological change, questions surrounding academic freedom, institutional autonomy, research security, Artificial Intelligence, and research cultures are becoming increasingly prominent within European research policy discussions, including in the context of the forthcoming ERA Act.

Science Europe Member Organisations place a very high priority on strengthening and protecting academic freedom. In a context where it is under increasing pressure, institutional resilience is essential to safeguarding this fundamental principle. In addition to Member Organisations' ongoing efforts and Science Europe's common advocacy, upcoming EU legislative developments provide an important opportunity to further strengthen the policy framework that safeguards and supports academic freedom.

On the occasion of International Academic Freedom Day, which highlights the importance of protecting the freedom to research, teach, question, and openly communicate knowledge, Science Europe organised a webinar for Member Organisations to discuss academic freedom and institutional resilience in the European Research Area. The day also served as a reminder that academic freedom depends not only on legal protections and individual rights, but also on the strength of the institutions, governance structures, and research cultures that support independent and responsible research.

Against this background, the webinar brought together speakers from the research community, academia, and international organisations to discuss current trends affecting academic freedom, the role of institutions in strengthening supportive and resilient research environments, and possible future policy directions at both national and European levels.

The outcomes of this webinar aim to help Science Europe Member Organisations shape their own policies on academic freedom, strengthen Science Europe's advocacy on behalf of its members, and contribute to the development of more coherent frameworks across the region.

During the workshop, the following questions were explored:

- What are the latest trends in academic freedom?
- How can institutions develop their capacity to support and enhance academic freedom?
- What are the next possible steps for decision makers, research organisations, and other stakeholders?

Presentations

[Angelo Vito Panaro](#), Postdoctoral Researcher at the Institute of Political Science at the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität, introduced the [Academic Freedom Index](#) (AFI). He began by highlighting the five dimensions of academic freedom considered in the AFI, which are grounded in human rights law and scholarly debate: the freedom to research and teach; freedom of academic exchange and dissemination; freedom of academic and cultural expression; institutional autonomy; and campus integrity.

The AFI, the result of contributions from 2,300 experts across 179 countries, shows that academic freedom has declined since 2010 in all regions except Sub-Saharan Africa, falling to levels similar to those of the pre-1990 period, before the last democratisation wave. Liberal democratic countries, particularly in Europe and North America, have experienced a significant decline in institutional autonomy. He demonstrated a strong correlation between institutional autonomy and the freedom to research and teach, showing that institutional autonomy plays a fundamental role in safeguarding the individual-level dimensions of academic freedom.

Dr Panaro concluded that academic freedom is under threat globally, and that the decline in the protection of institutional autonomy in liberal democracies creates a generalised risk to all aspects of academic freedom. He added that the United States of America stands out as a country experiencing rapid and pronounced deterioration, in contrast to the gradual weakening of institutional autonomy in Europe and Canada.

[Raffaella Kunz](#), Postdoctoral Researcher and Lecturer at the University of Zurich, discussed how to safeguard academic freedom beyond individual rights. She began her intervention by stating that the threats to academic freedom that are the most often discussed — attacks on universities, political interference, and funding cuts to certain disciplines — are not the only ones that should be addressed. Dr. Kunz posited that our understanding of academic freedom must be re-constructed to also address structural threats to the autonomy of science.

She described three major developments that shape what can be considered research: what is published; what is rewarded; and what is made visible. Specifically, the new threats to academic

freedom are the growing market concentration of academic publishing; dependence on private funding; and projectification and metric steering. However, the traditional understanding of academic freedom is largely limited to a negative, defensive right that protects individual researchers from state interference, with a focus on censorship, sanctions, dismissal, and political pressures. She contrasted this with the German Constitutional Court, which considers that the state has a duty to create and maintain the conditions for autonomous science.

Kunz then presented the main implications of the new threats. Academic freedom requires states to take measures to protect institutional autonomy and ensure appropriate university governance, plural and secure funding sources, and digital and infrastructural sovereignty. She concluded by examining the implications of academic freedom for Open Science policies, which should support scholar-led, non-commercial publication systems, reduce structural dependence on dominant commercial actors, protect academic content from exploitative extraction, and ensure that decisions about openness remain subject to scientific self-governance.

[Bente Schneider-Pott](#), Scientific Officer at the Brussels Office of the Max Planck Society, also representing the G6 Network, presented the most recent [G6 statement on academic freedom](#). The statement highlights the view of the G6 Members¹ that threats to academic freedom threaten the rule of law and the values underpinning European co-operation. These threats are deeply embedded in the political, social, and financial pressures that increasingly shape the overall framework in which science operates.

To address these threats, these institutions developed a consolidated response calling for strategic actions at the European level:

- The European Institutions must make academic freedom a permanent, long-term priority. Academic freedom should be enshrined legally as a clearly defined, binding, and enforceable fundamental value across the Union.
- The EU's Framework Programmes must be significantly funded and structured to foster high-risk frontier research,

1. The French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS); The Spanish National Research Council (CSIC); the Italian National Research Council (CNR); the Max Planck Society; and the Helmholtz Association

particularly in the social sciences and the humanities, with academic freedom as an eligibility criterion.

- EU-wide tools for monitoring academic freedom should be developed, and research funding should be stress-tested against potential abuse by anti-democratic political actors.
- The EU must significantly increase its investment in digital sovereignty, including the creation of politically independent communication platforms and data infrastructures to safeguard the integrity of European knowledge.
- Transboundary academic collaboration and exchange, which requires research security measures that are proportionate and build international trust without compromising open science and collaboration, must be promoted.

She also explained that G6 members are dedicated to being proactive guardians of the scientific freedom for which they advocate. This includes commitments to exploring the establishment of a 'Safe-Haven Network' supporting initiatives that build 'virtuous circles' for scientific responsibility and integrity; and upholding their duty to communicate scientific findings clearly to society and to provide evidence-informed advice to policy makers without becoming partisan actors.

[Konstantinos Tararas](#), Programme Specialist in the Inclusion, Rights and Intercultural Dialogue Section of UNESCO, approached the topic from a scientific perspective. He explained that it is essential to anchor scientific work in a human rights framework. The [2017 UNESCO standard-setting recommendation](#) on Science and Scientific Researchers underscores the importance of linking scientific research and universally accepted values. Several core elements characterise a human rights-based science ecosystem: aligning the purpose of science with UN ideals; linking science to society; promoting Open Science as a public good; ensuring human rights in the scientific process, and upholding the freedom and autonomy of scientists.

UNESCO's work can be divided into three main strands: promoting this vision of science grounded in human rights; the freedom and safety of scientists; and the right to science. He highlighted UNESCO's reporting mechanism, through which UN Member States are invited to respond to survey questions. In 2025, one-fourth of the questions concerned scientific freedom and rights issues. Of the 162 countries that responded, 94 reported having legal provisions pertaining to

academic freedom, and 84 had operational instruments. UNESCO also provided policy support to Member States. Since 2023, UNESCO has also had a dedicated programme to support researchers' safety, including the development of an assessment tool to evaluate researchers' capacity to conduct their work freely and safely.

Mr Tararas continued by explaining that the right to science is the international framework within which a values-based approach to science is situated. Despite the adoption by the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights of [General Comment No. 25](#), Member States' reporting has been lacking. It is therefore important to strengthen the implementation and promotion of the right to science.

[Francesco Forti](#), Professor at the University of Pisa and Member of the Board of Directors of the National Institute for Nuclear Physics (INFN), presented INFN's perspective as a research performing organisation. In Italy, academic freedom is enshrined in the constitution, which stipulates that art and science are free, and so is their teaching. In addition, universities and academies have the right to grant themselves autonomous structures. However, he highlighted several de facto constraints that limit academic freedom: reliance on state funding; complex and bureaucratic governance rules; a heavily centralised legislative framework; and increasing vulnerability to political and financial pressures. Adding to that, he presented the additional challenge of brain drain, created by systemic underinvestment, characterised by uncompetitive salaries; precarious employment; a lack of independent funding sources; and pressure to achieve goal-oriented, industry-useful research outcomes.

Professor Forti presented the autonomy-by-design governance implemented by INFN, which ensures academic freedom is protected through a bottom-up approach to scientific strategy and governance, shielding basic research from short-term political pivots. This approach is divided into three steps: community-driven proposals; rigorous peer review by independent scientific commissions; and self-determination, with funding strictly following scientific merit. He continued by discussing three elements of scientific freedom in a complex world: freedom to navigate sensitive research and independently patent complex technologies; commitment to Open Access publishing; and geographic and inter-institutional mobility.

He concluded by stating that academic freedom can only be achieved when constitutional rights are backed by institutional autonomy; secure and attractive careers; funding opportunities for excellent research; and unwavering trust in researchers.

Key Messages from the Discussion

An open discussion with the audience followed the panellists' interventions. The exchanges touched on a large variety of topics and issues, and the conclusions are summarised below.

- Funding is a very important but complex element of academic freedom and is closely linked to institutional autonomy, particularly in European countries. Institutional autonomy does not prevent research organisations and scientists from receiving funding from public or private sources, but it must guarantee that they remain free from political and commercial influence. There must be sufficient non-mission-oriented funding available to conduct excellent research, therefore striking a balance between directed and non-directed funding.
- There is some scientific evidence that, even as more funding is available for research and innovation than at any point in history, the number of scientific breakthroughs is decreasing, underscoring the need for research funding to preserve freedom and creativity.
- An open, trust-based dialogue between the scientific community and the policy makers who allocate research budgets is a crucial component of a functioning system that preserves academic freedom and balances mission-oriented and curiosity-driven research funding. It is also hard to measure the contribution of scientific research to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and linking them too closely risks limiting the freedom of scientific research.
- Current trends and movements that relativise and doubt science can also challenge academic freedom and threaten scholars.
- Researchers should receive sufficient information and training on the security issues relevant to their research, especially given the increasing focus in Europe towards dual-use research. This is essential to preserve scientists' capacity to independently assess the risks associated with their work.
- There is a strong tension between the research security and dual-use agendas and the ideal of science, which is based on openness and collaboration. The research security narrative can be a strong negative influence on academic freedom, and care is required in how it is advanced.
- There is a tendency to underestimate the difficulty and complexity of regulating science. Simple legislative interventions might not be sufficient or appropriate to solve complex issues such as market concentration in academic publishing; however, symbolically mentioning it in an EU-level law would be. Supporting alternative publishing models is much more important than trying to break down oligopolies through legislative intervention, which might not even be possible.
- Research integrity is strongly connected to academic freedom. In a free and self-governing science ecosystem, the main actors who would assess science will be scientists, for whom integrity and ethics are prerequisites. This is essential to ensuring that research is assessed according to scientific systems to function, rather than being influenced by political actors and non-experts.
- The use of artificial intelligence in science poses challenges. A major potential problem is that LLMs scrape the internet, including scientific publications and data, making attribution much more difficult in a research ecosystem where attribution and reputation are extremely important currencies. In turn, these LLMs could harm the autonomous functioning of science.

Future Perspectives for Science Europe

The presentations and discussions during the webinar provided valuable insights and recommendations for actions to promote academic freedom. Building on previous activities, Science Europe will continue to support measures to protect the freedom of scientific research and will use the conclusions of the webinar to inform the development of future activities.

Science Europe will carry out the following actions in particular:

1. Continue to advocate for academic freedom as one of the fundamental values for research and the generation of new knowledge, including the rights of research professionals and institutional autonomy, in line with its Values Framework for the Organisation of Research. Promote these principles in relevant EU policy and legislative initiatives and global discussions.
2. Make the appropriate connections between academic freedom and institutional autonomy on the one hand, and thematic research policy priorities on the other. This will allow the integration of academic freedom considerations in key areas, such as research cultures, open science, or research security.
3. Ensure that Science Europe's advocacy and policy discussions promote the highest possible level of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, including by supporting an EU legislative, policy, and regulatory framework that safeguards and enables these principles.
4. Propose approaches to monitoring developments in academic freedom and support its Member Organisations and the wider scientific community, in collaboration with other organisations.
5. Continue to support Member Organisations in embedding and actively safeguarding academic freedom in their core missions, strategies and operating plans (including through the organisation of events).

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Science Europe is the association of major research funding and research performing organisations in Europe.

Our vision is for the European Research Area to have the optimal conditions to support robust education and research & innovation systems.

We define long-term perspectives for European research and champion best-practice approaches that enable high-quality research for knowledge advancement and the needs of society.

We are uniquely placed to lead advancements to the European Research Area and inform global developments through participation in research initiatives where science is a strong and trusted component of sustainable economic, environmental, and societal development.

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