



## *Academic Freedom in Twenty-First Century*

**An Academia Europaea and Wenner-Gren Foundations HERCULES Symposium  
Wednesday 15 May– Friday 17 May 2024  
Wenner-Gren Center, Stockholm, Sweden**

Organizing Committee: Lars Engwall (Chair), Christine Musselin & Peter Scott

### **Background of the symposium**

As an organizational form, the university is a great success. The early foundations in Italy in the Middle Ages have gotten a large number of followers, particularly in the late twentieth century and in the early twenty-first century. Most countries have not one but several institutions that label themselves university. For some time after the fall of the Berlin Wall, there were indications that higher education and research constituted the modern defense policy. Politicians raised their ambitions regarding the share of a generation to acquire an academic exam. The existing institutions grew in size in parallel with the addition of new ones. These institutions competed for students, staff and research resources. They largely based their missions on the principle formulated in Berlin by Wilhelm von Humboldt in the early nineteenth century that education and research should be combined. In addition, university representatives emphasized Humboldt's idea of academic freedom. Celebrating in 1988 that nine hundred years had passed since foundation of the University of Bologna, European university rectors signing the *Magna Charta Universitatum* declared that the university is “an autonomous institution” and that:

Freedom in research and training is the fundamental principle of university life, and governments and universities, each as far as in them lies, must ensure respect for this fundamental requirement.

However, in present times both the autonomy of universities and the freedom of their faculty members have here and there, been challenged. Against this backdrop, it has appeared urgent for the AE HERCULES group to address the conditions for academic freedom in the twenty-first century during a symposium in 2024.

The symposium will cover the following four sub-themes: 1. The academic freedom of institutions, 2. The academic freedom of research, 3. The academic freedom of education, and 4. The academic freedom of dissemination.

The program will include two 90 minutes sessions for all four sub-themes with two speakers each followed by discussion. The symposium will start with a keynote on the topic “The Foundations of Academic Freedom”.

## **The Academic Freedom of Institutions**

One basic feature of the academic freedom of institutions is their relationship to the political power, a relationship that is indeed delicate. In many countries, the state has founded the universities and thereafter provides legitimacy as well as resources. A basic question is then how these roles of the state are compatible with academic freedom. Some argue that the state as the main financier should have the power to appoint the leadership of their universities in the same way as the major shareholders are appointing company boards. Against this, others argue that the state – in contrast to shareholders – have not invested risk capital which they can lose. As a result, according to this line of argument, the state is instead an orderer of higher education and research. Proponents of the latter position therefore argue that the role of the state is just to establish the basic rules for the universities at an arms-length distance without intervening in their operations. In this way, the state interest can even be an important protector of the academic freedom by preventing other actors to intervene in the governance of universities. Commercial interests as well as interventions from various organizations – such as religious actors, civil society organizations, and local authorities – challenging the basic values of universities indeed constitute threats to the academic freedom. In contrast, in countries where the state have taken a firm grip of their universities the academic freedom suffer significantly. An example is the statement of Russian university rectors in March 2022 of the importance “to support our country, our army, which defends our security, to support our President, who made perhaps the most difficult decision in his life, a hard-won, but necessary decision.” (Translation from Russian). Likewise, it is important to remember the moves by the Hungarian government forcing the Central European University to move from Budapest to Vienna. These are just two extreme cases of threats to academic freedom in present times. The presentations during the two sessions will focus on different aspects of the academic freedom of institutions.

## **The Academic Freedom of Research**

In relation to research, academic freedom is associated with the possibilities for researchers to choose their research topics of enquiry and methods. The ideal mentioned is often the curiosity-driven enquiry. However, there are a number of limitations to this model.

First, researchers need resources to undertake their enquiry. For those having research time in their positions with limited need of equipment this might not be a problem. Tenured mathematicians belong to this group. At the other extreme, there are researchers without research time and considerable need for access to appliances, for instance the non-tenured experimental physicist. In between there are a number of researchers with varying need of financial support. This group has in the recent decades increased because of a tendency of many governments to allocate research resources through competitive grants to individuals or research groups. A following risk is that unconventional research has great difficulties to get support. This risk is even greater as governments in their research bills earmark research resources to specific urgent societal problems.

Second, related to earmarked resources, major stakeholders in society may hamper the freedom of research by their wishes that research should generate relevant output to society. Although, this is indeed important, it may disqualify research that is not significant in the short-run but in a longer perspective. One example within the natural sciences is the finding that certain bacteria survive in volcanic water, close to the boiling point. It paved the way for the PCR method, which has become indispensable within cell biology, archeology, forensic medicine, and, most recently the covid19 tests. Adding an example from the humanities, the

research on Islam was for a long time considered as unnecessary until the revolution took place in Iran in the late 1970s.

Third, there are also moral restrictions on the freedom of research. The civil society as well as the professional community have restrictions on research problems and research methods. These constraints have increased during the past decades and have brought about demands on researchers to apply for ethical clearance as they apply for research grants. In addition, there are nowadays various administrative units handling cases of breaches of ethical standards. The mentioned constraints are particularly occurring in the medical sciences and the social sciences.

Fourth, the relationship between universities and commercial actors is a significant issue in relation to the freedom of research. Obviously, contract research means that the financing organization is steering the researcher in terms of the research problem, thereby limiting the freedom. Against this some object, that as long as the researchers can chose their methods, draw their own conclusions and publish without limitations, it is not a problem. Such cooperation can anyway be delicate.

Against the above backdrop, the presentations during the two sessions will focus on the limitations on the freedom of research in different countries and within different disciplines.

### **The Academic Freedom of Education**

In addition to research, universities have a mission to provide education. For this, Wilhelm von Humboldt formulated the two principles: freedom of study (*Lernfreiheit*) and freedom of teaching (*Lehrfreiheit*). They imply that students are free to choose what they want to study and their teachers are free to decide on how and what they teach. In both respects, there are restrictions in present day universities.

First, in terms of the freedom of the students, universities are nowadays much larger than in the early nineteenth century and are much more organized. As a result, they largely offer programs, which include studies of specific disciplines. The earlier option of combining studies of different disciplines à la carte has largely been reduced. Even the entry to universities is in many countries very selective. For many programs, it is no longer sufficient to have graduated from high school. An admission to studies requires good grades. Furthermore, particularly in the Anglo-American context tuition fees may be an obstacle, although many universities have advantageous scholarship programs. Therefore, even if there are variations between countries, the freedom to study has nowadays its limitations.

Second, also the freedom of teaching has changed since the early nineteenth century because of the growth and organizational changes of universities. Individual professors can no longer – particularly not in undergraduate programs – select topics by themselves. Instead, they are part of program structures where they have to teach parts to which they have been assigned. Those who have authored textbooks used in these programs, come closest to the ideal of freedom of teaching. However, this is a considerable step from the time when professors could read from the manuscripts they were working on.

The educational programs again touches upon the relationship to major stakeholders, since universities have a mission towards society to develop young people in a way that is desirable for that society. Therefore, these programs require a design that fits the labor market. In this context, it is not only the contents of the programs but also the methods of teaching. For the future, in a society dominated by AI and robotics, etc. there is a need of new type of

knowledge, skills and competences. In addition, political forces may object to curricula taught in universities. An example is the proposals in some states in the United States to abolish tenure in order to be able fire faculty members who include in their teaching ideas, like critical race theory, that some politicians consider as indoctrination.

In view of the above, the sessions on the freedom of education will deal with the developments for students as well as for faculty, again comparing different disciplines in different countries.

### **The Academic Freedom of Dissemination**

A basic part of academic life is the dissemination of ideas in scientific publications and textbooks. In the words of the British physicist Michael Faraday, academic scholars should have three words in mind: “Work! Finish! Publish!”. Obviously, the academic community has taken this request onboard. The number of academic publications has skyrocketed after the Second World War, and particularly in the past decades. This could indicate that there is a high degree of academic freedom in terms of dissemination. However, there are severe limitations through an increasing commercialization of the academic publishing.

In scientific publishing, professional organizations were the founders of the significant journals in most scientific fields. However, by the passage of time, commercial publishing houses have taken over these outlets, as they have been able to offer their organization for handling manuscripts, marketing, accounting, and etcetera. In this way, they have obtained strong power positions towards universities, charging them considerable fees for printed as well as digital subscriptions, which faculty members are eager for them to have. At the same time, faculty members work with no compensation for these publishers reviewing manuscripts. Therefore, both universities and individual scholars are in a way prisoners of the publishers of academic journals.

Similarly, the commercial interests are strong in the textbook market. In an industry that has undergone a strong concentration, a few large publishing houses control the production and dissemination of course literature. In this way, they also influence the contents of the academic education. As mentioned above, some faculty members play a particularly significant role as authors.

An additional limitation on the freedom of dissemination is the increasing quantification of research assessments. The strong focus on journal impact factors and citation counts have had the effect that career interests has come into more focus than the professional interests. For scholars in non-English speaking countries, particularly in the humanities and the social sciences, this has a particularly negative effect, as their presentations in their mother tongue are not appreciated.

Another aspect of the freedom of dissemination, which has become a burning topic in the spring 2022, is the extent to which scholars can communicate internationally. Here the issue of boycotts of certain academic communities, like those in Russia and Belarus is delicate. A basic question is whether contacts will help colleagues in countries or whether they will send them to prison.

The format for the sessions on the freedom of dissemination will be the same as for the other three with comparisons between disciplines and countries.

## **Program**

*Wednesday May 15*

1230-1300: Registration

1300-1315: Welcome and Introduction

Britt-Marie Sjöberg, Professor of Molecular Biology, Stockholm University, Sweden and CEO of the Wenner-Gren Foundations.

Lars Engwall, Professor of Business Studies, Uppsala University, Sweden and HERCules Chair

1315-1400: Keynote – The Foundations of Academic Freedom

Henry Reichman, Professor emeritus of History at California State University, USA.  
[henry.reichman@csueastbay.edu](mailto:henry.reichman@csueastbay.edu).

1400-1415: Break

1415-1545 Session 1: National threats on the autonomy of universities

Chair: Peter Scott, Professor of Education, University of London, United Kingdom and HERCules member.

John Douglass, Senior research fellow in the Center for Studies in Higher Education, at University of California, Berkeley, USA.  
[douglass@berkeley.edu](mailto:douglass@berkeley.edu).

Zhidong Hao, Professor emeritus of Sociology, University of Macau.  
[zdhao@emeritus.um.edu.mo](mailto:zdhao@emeritus.um.edu.mo).

1545-1615 Coffee Break

1615-1745 Session 2: Is a strong leadership of universities compatible with individual academic freedom?

Chair: Christine Musselin, Professor of Sociology, Science Po, Paris, France and HERCules member.

Ivo De Gennaro, Professor of Philosophy, Faculty of Economics and Management, Bozen-Bolzano, Italy.  
[Ivo.DeGennaro@unibz.it](mailto:Ivo.DeGennaro@unibz.it).

Andrew Ryder, Associate Professor at ELTE Budapest, Hungary  
[ryder.andrew@tatk.elte.hu](mailto:ryder.andrew@tatk.elte.hu).

1800 Welcome Reception and Buffet Dinner

*Thursday May 16*

0900-1030 Session 3: What should be the drivers for research agendas?

Chair: Jürgen Enders, Professor of Higher Education Management, University of Bath, United Kingdom and HERCules member.

Jean-Pierre Bourguignon, Professor of Mathematics, Honorary Professor at the Institut des Hautes Études Scientifiques, former President of the European Research Council (ERC) and HERCulES member

[jpb@ihes.fr](mailto:jpb@ihes.fr).

Uwe Schimank, Professor of Sociological Theory, University of Bremen für Soziologische Theorie an der Universität Bremen, Germany

[uwe.schimank@uni-bremen.de](mailto:uwe.schimank@uni-bremen.de).

1030-1100 Coffee

1100-1230 Session 4: Research under political pressures

Chair. Milena Zíc Fuchs, Professor of Linguistics, University of Zagreb, Croatia and HERCulES member.

Shirin Ahlbäck-Öberg, Professor of Political Science, Uppsala University, Sweden,

[Shirin.Ahlback@statsvet.uu.se](mailto:Shirin.Ahlback@statsvet.uu.se)

Kirsten Roberts Lyer, Associate Professor of Law, Central European University, Vienna, Austria

[RobertsK@ceu.edu](mailto:RobertsK@ceu.edu).

1230-1330 Lunch

1330-1500 Session 5: Who should decide for the curricula?

Chair: Kirsten Drotner, Professor of Media Studies, University of Southern Denmark, Denmark and HERCulES member.

Margrit Seckelmann, Professor of Law, Leibniz Universität Hannover, Germany

[margrit.seckelmann@iri.uni-hannover.de](mailto:margrit.seckelmann@iri.uni-hannover.de).

Joseph C. Hermanowicz, Professor of Sociology, University of Georgia. USA

[jch1@uga.edu](mailto:jch1@uga.edu).

1500-1530 Coffee Break

1530-1700 Session 6: Education under political pressures

Chair: Marie Farge, Professor of Mathematics and Physics, CNRS, Paris, France and HERCulES member.

Michael Bérubé, Professor of English Literature, Penn State University, USA.

[mfb12@psu.edu](mailto:mfb12@psu.edu).

Nadia Al-Bagdadi, Professor of Modern Islamic history, Central European University and former president of the Network of European Institutes for Advanced Studies, Vienna, Austria

[albagdadin@ceu.edu](mailto:albagdadin@ceu.edu).

1730 Departure by bus from the Wenner-Gren Center

1800 Dinner Boat Trip

*Friday May 17*

0900-1030 Session 7: Dissemination under bibliometric pressures

Chair: Giorgi Sharvashidze, Professor of Education, Tbilisi State University, Georgia and HERCules member.

Rafael Ball, Director of ETH-Bibliothek, ETH, Zürich, Switzerland.  
[rafael.ball@library.ethz.ch](mailto:rafael.ball@library.ethz.ch).

Peter Weingart, Professor emeritus in Sociology, former Director for the Center for Interdisciplinary Research at Universität Bielefeld, Germany  
[peter.weingart@uni-bielefeld.de](mailto:peter.weingart@uni-bielefeld.de).

1030-1100 Coffee

1100-1230 Session 8: Dissemination and international collaboration

Chair: Helena Buescu, Professor of Comparative Literature, University of Lisbon, Portugal and HERCules member.

Marijk van der Wende, Professor of Higher Education, University of Utrecht, the Netherlands.  
[m.c.vanderwende@uu.nl](mailto:m.c.vanderwende@uu.nl).

Rickard Danell, Professor of Sociology, University of Umeå, Sweden.  
[rickard.danell@umu.se](mailto:rickard.danell@umu.se).

1230-1315: Concluding Panel

Chair: Lars Engwall, Professor of Business Studies, Uppsala University, Sweden and HERCules Chair

Panelists:

Alban Kellerbauer, Professor of Nuclear Physics, Joint Research Centre, Karlsruhe, Germany and HERCules member.

Marja Makarow, AE Chair and Professor of Applied Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, University of Helsinki, Finland and HERCules member.

Gemma Mondinos, Professor of Neuroscience, King's College, London, United Kingdom and HERCules member.

Jo Tollebeek, Professor of Cultural History, University of Leuven, Belgium and HERCules member.

1330-1415 Lunch