University Governance and Academic Freedom
About the Academic Freedom and Internationalisation Working Group

The Academic Freedom and Internationalisation Working Group (AFIWG) brings together academics from UK higher education institutions, who are supported by relevant civil society representatives and the All-Party Parliamentary Human Rights Group (PHRG), to work on the protection of academic freedom and engage in advocacy for members of the academic community at risk across the world. The group began meeting in September 2019, with the aim of highlighting the importance of upholding academic freedom in the context of internationalisation of UK higher education and promoting a collective and organised response by academic communities and HE institutions in the UK.

As supporters of international academic cooperation and academic freedom, the AFIWG has been concerned about growing challenges that members of the academic community face globally in the process of learning, teaching and conducting research, including physical attacks, prosecution, dismissals, censorship and travel restrictions.

Visit the AFIWG’s website for more news, resources and activities related to the group.

Find us on Twitter: @AFI_WG
Get in touch: academicfreedomwg@gmail.com
Due to the evolution of the UK Higher Education sector in recent decades, many universities are now being run like private sector organisations rather than public institutions with a commitment to democracy, transparency and accountability. In terms of university governance, this means that senior leaders have a tendency to centralise decision-making. An exclusive approach to university governance deprives these managers of in-house subject and area studies expertise. While senior managers may have a good grasp of the holistic challenges facing universities, they should proactively invite subject experts to participate in the governance of internationalisation – including security governance – and the protection of academic freedom.

This will only be possible by de-emphasising top-down governance and by allowing much greater bottom-up staff participation.

While the issue of ethical and security risks associated with internationalisation in British academia is a thorny one, senior managers should not be afraid to have open discussions about this difficult topic with staff members. New protocols and procedures cannot be simply dictated from the top-down; they require understanding and support from the bottom-up. Although staff participation can initially slow down the pace of change, greater staff support has the advantage of much more effective implementation of new policies and protocols in the future.

Universities should not merely “consult” their non-management staff and, where possible, students, after new policies have already been mooted or new initiatives begun. Rather, they must involve them from the outset and in every stage of the process - including in key decision making and in the formulation of policy.

With the issuance of the Universities UK guidelines, the British authorities have given the higher education sector a short grace period to get their house in order. The government’s approach to the risks associated with internationalisation has thus far been less interventionist than, for example, Australia. This means that British universities now have a unique opportunity to lead on this issue and thereby protect their institutional autonomy. If they can demonstrate good governance this will stand them in good stead, both with the government and the wider public. The worst case scenario would be that perceived inaction by UK universities leads to draconian national security legislation, such as the statutory Prevent duty, which appears to have been met with quiet disregard by most academics.

A repeat of this episode would indicate the further erosion of autonomy and would most likely fail to lead to a practical response to the ethical and security risks associated with internationalisation.

PROPOSED MEASURES

The AFIWG supports colleagues in the UK who are seeking to participate in their institutions alongside senior leaders in order to generate greater transparency and accountability and thereby increase trust in any new measures and partnerships.

To these ends, universities should:

a. **Be vocal about academic freedom.** Institutions should issue frequent public statements of the importance of academic freedom and the safety of academics. In order to foster discussion and collective action in the HE Sector, challenges should be openly acknowledged.
b. **Appoint non-management representatives** to senates, boards, committees and “task and finish” groups related to internationalisation and academic freedom. This may include representatives of campus Initiative Groups and subject and area specialists with relevant expertise. Where possible, universities should facilitate the public nomination and election of representatives to standing groups responsible for the governance of the institution.

c. **Support - with funding and senior staff encouragement - staff to form Initiative Groups** focused on academic freedom and internationalisation on campus. Such groups may begin in particular departments of the university but would ideally expand to include a diverse range of constituents, students and staff, academic and non-academic, across the range of disciplinary areas, national origins, career stage, gender, race and other facets of equality, diversity and inclusivity. Such groups may raise awareness among colleagues, hold public events and (if necessary) advocacy activities and protests, and press for the inclusion of their members in senates, boards, committees and “task and finish” groups related to internationalisation and academic freedom.

d. **Encourage the formation of an international network of initiative groups** to share best practice across universities and debate the difficult issues of principle and practice arising in questions of internationalisation and academic freedom. Network members may participate in conferences and events organised by the AFIWG and similar groups and contribute commentaries to blogs and the press. Special attention should be given to the voice of academic participants from authoritarian states who may be exposed to risks due to the response of state and powerful local actors to their participation in transnational programmes.

e. **Protect those who dare to whistleblow in cases where reputation laundering or authoritarian influencing may be occurring.** Individuals who raise concerns must be protected by effective procedures for confidential and independent internal reporting.

References

1. For a more comprehensive discussion of academic freedom measures in the context of internationalisation of the UK HE sector, please see AFIWG’s [Draft Model Code of Conduct (2020)](https://www.the-afiwg.org/).

2. This policy primer was authored by **Andreas Fulda**, Senior Fellow at the Asia Research Institute, University of Nottingham and **John Heathershaw**, Associate Professor of International Relations, University of Exeter.