

Panel 1:

4 November 2020

Workshop on Academic Freedom and the Internationalisation of HE

The first panel discussed various types of threats to academic freedom (AF) and university autonomy with special reference to international authoritarian influencing. This type of influencing, speakers argued, may have negative impact on fieldwork, increase vulnerability of overseas campuses and produce specific dynamics within the UK-based universities. British Universities have become more prone to such influencing due to financial pressures and the funding model that forces universities to draw primarily on students for their income. Authoritarian influencing in the UK may lead to self-censorship, which, if exercised with respect to teaching, may adversely affect curricula. Not all universities have paid sufficient attention to risks and the potential fallout from authoritarian influencing. Remaining keen to safeguard universities' reputation as well as overseas sources of income, university governance bodies may not always be willing to introduce necessary correctives.

The panel went on to present the results of research examining legislative, constitutional and practical ways of protecting academic freedom in European states. Research results show that of all EU member states, Britain was second near the bottom with regard to protecting AF. Even more worryingly, the research reported that academics in Europe do not consider they have sufficient knowledge of academic freedom, and as many as 1 in 5 of the interviewed scholars reported exercising self-censorship.

Other presentations highlighted the importance, as well as contested nature of concepts we use to speak about academic freedom. While academic freedom as an abstract value enjoys widespread support, as a principle, it is not devoid of tensions. There also remain many challenges to measuring academic freedom. More specifically, various types of soft repression and new authoritarian tactics are problematic to capture by those recording AF violations, while self-censorship is difficult to quantify. As a result, we need to constantly improve our understanding of the types of pressures academics and universities in different contexts face.

The panel concluded with the presentation of the model Code of Conduct (click [here](#) to read the Code).

The audience raised a number of important issues, such as: the changed teaching and learning environment under Covid, the persistence of precarious working conditions that affect junior academics, the absence of AF considerations in international university rankings and policymakers' scant attention to academic freedom violations.

The speakers concluded by emphasizing the need to foster better public understanding of the challenges to academic freedom. They agreed that we should seek clear ways of informing the public about academic freedom and its role in sustaining democratic governance. They also called for constructing mechanisms of transparency and accountability at universities that would allow to fend off negative impacts of internationalisation.