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Securing Academic Freedom through Networks

*Katharina Boele-Woelki, Cathleen Fisher, Hans-Christian Pape, and Joseph S. Francisco**

Academic freedom is a fundamental pillar of democratic society and a foundational principle for modern science and scholarship. Close to 100 nations have deemed academic freedom a constitutional right, and the UNESCO “Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel” of 1997 declares it a universal right.^[1] Challenges to academic freedom are multiplying at an alarming rate. To cite but a few examples: In the United States, antagonism towards climate science has led to cuts in related research funding in some federal agencies, and restrictions on participation of federally employed researchers in relevant scientific conferences.^[2] In Hungary, government withdrawal of accreditation from gender studies programs and imposition of taxes on academic programs for migrants and refugees have raised concerns of the European Parliament about erosion of academic freedom.^[3] Since September 2016, more than 10000 faculty and staff members at universities in Turkey have been dismissed and students expelled under emergency decrees issued by the government.^[4] The advancement of knowledge, our deeper understanding of the world, and the informed policies that shape our societies all depend on science, scholarship, and innovation rooted in academic freedom. Safeguarding this vital principle of scientific endeavor from new threats requires an understanding of what is academic freedom.

In discussions among the international scholars attending the 2018 Alexander von Humboldt meeting on academic freedom

[*] Prof. Dr. K. Boele-Woelki

President, Bucerius Law School
Jungiusstrasse 6, 20355 Hamburg (Germany)

Dr. C. Fisher

President, American Friends of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation
1101 17th Street NW, Suite 603, Washington, DC 20036 (USA)


Prof. Dr. H.-C. Pape

President, Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung
Jean-Paul-Strasse 12, 53173 Bonn (Germany)

Prof. Dr. J. S. Francisco

University of Pennsylvania, Department of Earth and Environmental Science and Department of Chemistry
251 Hayden Hall, 240 South 33rd Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6316 (USA)

E-mail: frjoseph@sas.upenn.edu

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in Berlin, one point of consensus was clear. We speak as if there is universal understanding of what academic freedom is. But ask any university faculty member to define academic freedom, and there would be no definitive answer. The confusion stems in part from difficulty in distinguishing academic freedom and a related right, free speech. They are related, often conflated, but not identical.

Finally, restrictions, some unique to historical circumstances and therefore transitory, also pertain to the concept of academic freedom. A brief historical review makes clear, despite the absence of clear-cut definitions and periodic challenges, why academic freedom remains one of the pillars of the modern university, as well as a prerequisite for science and scholarship to thrive. This holds true across time and despite differing definitions across societies of what academic freedom should entail.

Historical Evolution of Academic Freedom

Founded in the year 1088, the University of Bologna, the oldest university in Europe, emerged as the principal center of its time for discussion, debate, and research on the law, because of its embrace of academic freedom. The critical factor in its rise was the decision of Frederick I Barbarossa in 1158 to grant privileges to scholars of Bologna and to designate the University as a place where research could develop independent of any other power. European scholars, who were often under the sponsorship of the church and subject to its authority, were granted free passage to travel to Bologna to discuss, debate, and research.

In time, other countries and their leaders followed suit, creating the conditions for scholarly debate and research freed from the constraints of the time. For example, the University of Leiden in the Netherlands (established in 1575) was founded on the principle of freedom from religious and political restraints for its members. The University of Göttingen in Germany, and, the University of Berlin, founded in 1811 by Wilhelm von Humboldt, embraced the principles of *Lehrfreiheit* (“freedom to teach”) and *Lernfreiheit* (“freedom to learn”), a model that subsequently would be embraced by universities throughout Europe and the Americas.

In 1940, representatives of the American Association of University Professors and of the Association of American Colleges agreed on Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure, reaffirming their commitment through the addition of interpretive comments in 1970.^[5]

In 1988, nine hundred years after the founding of the University of Bologna, 388 heads of universities throughout Europe came together at the University of Bologna and reaffirmed the foundational principles of academic freedom in the “Magna Charta Universitatum”.^[6]

Maintaining academic freedom in the face of new and emerging threats requires vigilance and mechanisms appropriate to an age of global science and connectivity. It also requires an understanding of the fundamental interconnectivity between academic freedom, trust in science and scholarship, and scholarly integrity. Academic freedom requires trust among scientists and between science and society; scholarly integrity in turn is fundamental for creating trust. The three elements belong together and cannot exist without the others. All three topics dwell at the nexus between science and society.

The Importance of Networks

As Michael Polanyi argues in *The Contempt of Freedom: The Russian Experiment and Afterwards*^[7] and *The Logic of Liberty*,^[8] scientific advances that bring benefit to society arise as a consequence of open debate. Science therefore can only flourish when scientists have the academic freedom to pursue truth. How do we create and preserve space for open and free scholarly debate and exchange? The answer may lie in part in the global scientific and scholarly networks that are expanding the boundaries and forms of scientific debate and inquiry. Building on Polanyi’s argument, international scholarly networks create new real and virtual spaces for academic freedom and opportunities for new collaborations, both of which enhance the quality of research. Global scholarly networks are not directly subject to national governance or evaluation regimes. No matter the national circumstances in which researchers are working, such networks provide an avenue for the freedom of research to be pursued.^[9] Further, global academic networks encourage a diversity of views, backgrounds, and capabilities in scholarly discourse and facilitate access to resources.

Networks may also help to enforce scholarly integrity. Effective participation in the academic network of trust necessitates an implicit understanding (and acceptance) of the disciplinary Code of Conduct and standards of integrity^[10,11] for scholars and scientists. The network thus helps to reinforce rules of conduct, as defined by the respective disciplines. The network thereby substantiates the rigor of scientific inquiry. While all ideas are open to question, the network may help

ensure that ideas are questioned systematically, and that answers are defensible in reason. Through their insistence on high academic standards and integrity, networks establish the preconditions for the trust that is necessary to preserve academic freedom. Networks indeed could become the “new” way to build trust in the age of disequilibrium. Successful scientific collaborations require, at a fundamental level, trust among the participants. Here again is the critical nexus of trust and academic freedom. Networks provide assurance, based on trust,^[12] to academics in all areas of expertise, that regardless of their circumstances or geopolitical demographics, they have the freedom to challenge what we think we know and to push the boundaries of what is known.

Networks also can help to drive scientific engagement with society to extend the boundaries of trust. Academic networks cannot exist in isolation; if they are to be successful, communication both within the network and to those outside the network in general society is essential. Science must be transparent. Academic networks and the scientists within them need to engage the public in the science process and communicate effectively about the nature of science and scientific inquiry, and its intangible and

tangible benefits to human understanding and society.^[12,13] Scientists and scholars must engage in dialogue with society, remain open to justified challenges, even from non-specialists, and be prepared to debate the role that science and research should play within societies. Such dialogue can inform societal discussion on scientific merits and help to strike a sustainable balance in modern science, which is situated at the contested and often conflictual nexus between utility and truth. In this sense, scientific networks can help to build trust between scientists and with society more broadly—an essential requirement to secure academic freedom in the long run.

In short, one of the best ways to secure academic freedom may lie in fostering national and international networks of scholars and scientists. Networks can lend protection and empowerment to individual researchers whose academic freedom is infringed and help to preserve a space for free scientific exchange. In bolstering academic freedom, moreover, scholarly networks also may reinforce standards of scientific integrity and build trust both among scientists and between scientists and society. It is important to remember that academic freedom does not exist in a social vacuum, nor does academic freedom exist for its own sake. Its foundational purpose is to create an environment of openness to advance inquiry in the interest of seeking truth; to support, facilitate, and enable the best minds of our time; and to train the next generation of young researchers to fulfill their roles and mission in society by generating new knowledge that can improve and advance our communities and the world.

Global academic networks encourage a diversity of views, backgrounds, and capabilities

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Guest Editorial

K. Boele-Woelki, C. Fisher, H.-C. Pape,
J. S. Francisco* ————— ■■■■-■■■■

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time, and to train the next generation of young researchers to fulfill their roles in society ...” Read more in the Guest Editorial by Joseph S. Francisco et al.