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Statement on Academic Freedom

This text, developed by the BFUG in consultation with a range of experts and stakeholder organisations, aims to outline a shared understanding of academic freedom for the EHEA, and to provide a first basis for the future development of indicators.

Academic freedom is an indispensable aspect of quality learning, teaching and research in higher education as well as of democracy. It is a necessary condition for higher education institutions to produce and transmit knowledge as a public good for the benefit of society. It guarantees academics and students the freedom of thought and inquiry to advance knowledge through research and to exchange openly, as well as the freedom to communicate the results of research within and outside of the framework of academic institutions and programmes.

Academic freedom is a distinct, fundamental democratic right in part grounded in the right to education, and shares elements with freedom of thought, opinion and expression. Academic freedom must be framed by rigorous scientific and professional standards, respect for the rights of others, ethical conduct and the awareness of the impact of research on humans and their environment. It is crucial in order to advance the standards of academic disciplines and fields of enquiry. As such, academic freedom protects not only individual scholarship and expression but also the free functioning of academic institutions in democratic societies. Institutional autonomy is constitutive for academic freedom.

Academic freedom designates the freedom of the academic community - including academic staff and students - in respect of research, teaching and learning and, more broadly, the dissemination of research and teaching outcomes both within and outside the higher education sector. In essence the concept ensures that the academic community may engage in research, teaching, learning and communication in society without fear of reprisal.

Academic freedom is also an essential element of democracy. Societies cannot be genuinely democratic without honouring academic freedom and institutional autonomy. At the same time, the fundamental values of the EHEA cannot be fully realised except in democratic societies. Academic freedom is similar to freedom of expression and is both informed by the standards of academic disciplines and provides the condition for challenging these standards based on the results of research.

The concept, although seemingly simple, is in reality highly complex, and intricately related to other fundamental values such as institutional autonomy and public responsibility for and of higher education. Academic freedom is a universal value rooted in the pursuit of knowledge and truth. Its core tenets cannot be understood and interpreted differently in different national contexts or types of higher education institution. But academic freedom is not an absolute value, and its exercise is shaped by the institutions in which we work and the societies in which we live. Thus the range of conduct and boundaries of enquiry and expression which academic freedom protects are often a source of debate.

Academic freedom can be understood to comprise the freedom to learn, to teach and to research, with each of these freedoms entailing the freedom to think, to question, and to share ideas, both inside and outside the higher education sector. Giving meaning and life to these freedoms in the reality of the academic environment automatically opens up a number of issues. The freedom to teach can only be realised concretely in combination with public and social responsibility and institutional autonomy. Public authorities have the responsibility to ensure that relevant higher education programmes are offered to citizens, while autonomous higher education institutions assume a

large responsibility for research underpinning programmes, and for how programmes are taught. Academic staff also exercise a strong responsibility in setting the curriculum and programme components, and developing the teaching methods employed.

Higher education governance also has an impact on the freedoms to learn, teach and research, and should be organised consciously in ways that respect academic freedom. Different governance models co-exist in Europe with academic staff and students differently represented in governing and decision-making bodies. Participation in governing bodies may favour the teaching and research missions of the institution and may reflect the goal of broader societal engagement. Whatever the particular model, academic staff and students should participate meaningfully in decision-making processes and have the right to express their views on their institution's policies and priorities without fear of reprisals.

Values are inter-connected, and the freedom to teach also raises the question of who is to be taught and is thus intimately linked to the freedom to learn. In turn these values relate to equitable access, with a range of issues on criteria and conditions for access to higher education needing to be addressed through societal dialogue and administrative procedures.

Similarly questions also need to be asked about who is doing the teaching and research, and the kind of decision-making process in place for academic staff recruitment and retention. It is essential to ensure that academic staff benefit from sufficiently secure employment conditions to be able to exercise academic freedom. Academic staff should never suffer threats, dismissal, or other sanctions in relation to the content of their research, teaching or stated professional views.

The freedom to research includes the right, consistent with professional standards of the respective discipline, to determine: what shall (or shall not) be researched; how it shall be researched; who shall research, with whom and for what purpose research shall be pursued; the methods by which, and avenues through which, research findings shall be disseminated.

These questions cannot be addressed in a vacuum. Determining which research programmes or disciplines are offered at any given institution is a complex question involving public authorities and institutions in difficult, strategic choices. Research requires financing – which may come from both public and private sources – and in many cases also requires careful consideration of ethical issues.

Although academic freedom is intrinsic to quality higher education, it is not a value that can be automatically assumed. Rather the interaction of the different elements and conditions that ensure that academic freedom is operationalised need to be constructed, regularly assessed, protected and promoted.



