

Scholars at Risk Europe: Input to the European Strategy for Universities

I. Summary

Scholars at Risk Europe welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the European Commission's open consultation on 'Higher education: a European strategy for universities'. SAR Europe submits that the strategy should unequivocally promote academic freedom as an essential precondition of a healthy higher education sector.

Specifically, SAR Europe submits seven recommendations (1) Expansion of monitoring and reporting on academic freedom; (2) Stronger policy and advocacy for academic freedom and researchers at-risk, grounded in data and analysis on both de jure and de facto conditions; (3) Safeguards for academic freedom in internationalisation activities (4) Promoting academic freedom as inextricably linked to excellence in research (5) Targeted training on academic freedom; (6) Transnational coordination to promote academic freedom; and (7) Establish an EU Fellowships for Researchers at Risk.

II. About Scholars at Risk Europe

Scholars at Risk Europe is the European office of the global Scholars at Risk network. Scholars at Risk was founded in 2000 and is an international network of over 550 higher education institutions in 42 countries working to protect threatened scholars and to promote academic freedom. SAR's European office, hosted by Maynooth University, Ireland, supports and coordinates the activities of 13 Scholars at Risk national sections and 10 partner networks across Europe to strengthen our collective voice at the European level and contribute to informed policymaking for the greater protection of scholars and increased respect for academic freedom worldwide. SAR Europe coordinates Inspireurope, an EU-funded, 10-partner initiative to support researchers at risk. SAR Europe also works to expand, coordinate, and support advocacy in Europe to promote academic freedom, including convening the European Coordinating Committee for Academic Freedom Advocacy.

III. Prioritising Academic Freedom in a European Strategy for Universities

SAR Europe welcomes the strong attention to academic freedom evident in recent activities of the EU, including in the European Democracy Action Plan, the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024, the 2021 Communication on the Global Approach to Research and Innovation, the 2020 Communication on a new European Research Area for Research and Innovation, the Bonn Declaration on Freedom of Scientific Research, the inclusion of a recital in the legislation of Horizon Europe, as well as the forthcoming guidelines on dealing with foreign interference that targets EU research organisations and higher education institutions. We also welcome the steps taken by the European Higher Education Area's Bologna Follow-up Group towards a system for monitoring higher education values in the EHEA, for which the Council of Europe has also signalled support.

However, academic freedom is under pressure in Europe and around the world. The recent [declarations](#), [resolutions](#) and [communiqués](#) on academic freedom by the European Research

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Area, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and the European Higher Education Area as well as [landmark decision](#) by the Court of Justice of the European Union represent significant progress in strengthening protections for academic freedom, while simultaneously signalling a common recognition of the need to act. A concerted implementation effort to deliver on the promise of academic freedom is warranted. The European strategy for universities provides the ideal platform on which to base this drive towards a common understanding and implementation of this fundamental value and human right. To support the European Commission in the development of a strategy that serves to protect academic freedom, SAR Europe submits seven recommendations:

IV. Recommendations

- (i) **Expansion of monitoring and reporting on academic freedom:** The European Research Area’s Bonn Declaration on Freedom of Scientific Research states its support for “the development of more effective instruments, including monitoring, for the full implementation and safeguarding the freedom of scientific research in the context of the Bologna Process”. Higher education, research and innovation stakeholders must be equipped with the knowledge they need to make appropriate decisions about the international relationships they develop and the environments in which they operate. There is an urgent need to (a) collect more data on undue restrictions on academic freedom and individual scholars around the world and a need for more detailed qualitative analysis/country reports and to (b) ensure reporting on academic freedom in official records, reports and action plans of national, regional and international higher education and human rights mechanisms. A more complete base of evidence will lead to more robust global monitoring and provide higher education, research and innovation stakeholders with data on academic freedom conditions in other countries for their consideration when evaluating their international activities. The [Academic Freedom Index \(AFI\)](#) and SAR’s [Academic Freedom Monitoring Project](#) provide a solid basis for international academic freedom monitoring mechanisms. The Academic Freedom Index should be more widely used by European, national and institutional policymakers in order to understand, react and plan ahead for changing levels of academic freedom in other countries.¹
- (ii) **Stronger policy and advocacy for academic freedom and researchers at-risk, grounded in data and analysis on both de jure and de facto conditions:** There is a need to strengthen the capacity of academics, researchers and higher education institutions around the world to inform policymaking on academic freedom at the national, regional and global levels. Such policy and advocacy work might include more systematic raising of academic freedom concerns with states, intergovernmental, regional and supranational bodies on matters relating to academic freedom, or the development of (model) policies and strategies for integrating academic freedom concerns into national and regional norms and standards.
- (iii) **Safeguards for academic freedom in internationalisation activities:** The EU should play a proactive role in safeguarding academic freedom and institutional autonomy in

¹ For detailed recommendations on how to deploy the Academic Freedom Index, see Katrin Kinzelbach, Ilyas Saliba, Janika Spannagel, and Robert Quinn, *Free Universities: Putting the Academic Freedom Index Into Action* (March 2021).

higher education, research and innovation internationalisation activities. International partnerships agreements should implement mechanisms that review and respond to pressures on academic freedom as necessary. Governments and universities should be advised to consult a specific country's Academic Freedom Index scores when considering future or ongoing research cooperation, not in order to exclude a potential partner but as a way of anticipating, understanding and managing the risks. A set of minimum standards for safeguarding academic freedom in international partnerships would provide useful guidance for academic engagement with international partners. For example in the UK, the Academic Freedom and Internationalisation Working Group has published a draft [Model Code of Conduct for the Protection of Academic Freedom and the Academic Community in the Context of the Internationalisation of the UK Higher Education Sector](#), which will be developed further in close consultation with UK Universities in order to develop minimum standards in this area.²

- (iv) **Promoting academic freedom as inextricably linked to excellence in higher education and research:** Excellence in higher education and research depends upon open scientific debate, and is driven by a multiplicity of ideas, people and perspectives. When the academic freedom of individual academics and researchers is repressed, not only are individual lives and careers at risk; the quality, the very future of research is also at stake. Clear recognition of academic freedom as an essential pre-condition for quality in higher education and research should be made explicit and reinforced in all EU higher education, research and innovation programmes.
- (v) **Targeted training on academic freedom** for higher education, research and innovation stakeholders, including trainings for ministries, higher education and human rights networks and institutions, civil society organisations and NGOs, university leaders, faculty, staff, students. Trainings should introduce the meaning and scope of academic freedom; its protections under existing international human rights law; related international, regional and national standards; how academic freedom intersects with its constituent freedoms of expression, opinion, thought, association, and travel; the societal implications when academic freedom is repressed; and practical strategies and policies to protect academic freedom on the ground.
- (vi) **Transnational coordination** to promote academic freedom. Although pressures on scholars and academic freedom range in scale and severity across countries and regions, certain patterns have emerged over time and challenges show similar features. Those working to shape policy at the European, national or institutional levels on academic freedom may learn from these similarities to develop more effective responses. Support for transnational coordination of academic freedom-related work allows higher education institutions, researchers, policymakers and other stakeholders in different countries to work together on a set of standards, actions and strategies that over time could produce significant positive gains across widely divergent political, social, cultural, historical and economic contexts. Such support would help mobilise a greater concern for academic freedom issues and channel this into focused transnational responses.

² The Code was developed by the Academic Freedom Internationalisation Working Group (AFIWG): <https://hrc.sas.ac.uk/networks/academic-freedom-and-internationalisation-working-group/about-afiwg>

- (vii) **EU Fellowships for Researchers at Risk:** The EU-funded [Inspireurope](#) project, coordinated by SAR Europe published a mapping report authored by the European University Association identifying a shortfall in EU-level support for individual at-risk scholars. To address this shortfall, Inspireurope recommends the establishment of a [dedicated EU fellowship scheme for researchers at risk](#). In addition to providing urgent support to individual scholars, dedicated EU support for at-risk scholars would serve to publicly highlight the central role that scholars and academic freedom play in EU higher education, research and innovation strategic priorities.³

V. Contact Information

We thank the European Commission for considering these recommendations. SAR Europe is ready to provide additional background information or context as helpful. Please contact Denise Roche, Advocacy Manager, at denise.roche@mu.ie with any questions.

VI. Related Resources

- [2020 UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Opinion and Expression: Report on Academic Freedom](#)
- [2020 Council of Europe Report Recommendation Resolution & Reply on Threats to Academic Freedom and Autonomy of Higher Education Institutions in Europe](#)
- [Rome Ministerial Communique- Annex 1, Statement on Academic Freedom, 2020](#)
- [Bonn Declaration on Freedom of Scientific Research](#)
- [Free to Think 2020](#), Report of Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project (2021 publication available 9 December 2021)
- [DRAFT Inspireurope Recommendation for an EU Fellowship Programme for Researchers at Risk](#)
- [Researchers at Risk: National-level actions in Europe](#), Report of the Inspireurope Project, 2021
- Monitoring: [Academic Freedom Index](#) & [SAR's Academic Freedom Monitoring Project](#)
- [Promoting Higher Education Values: A Guide for Discussion, Scholars at Risk, 2020](#)
- [Obstacles to Excellence: Academic Freedom & China's Quest for World-Class Universities, Scholars at Risk, 2019](#)

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³ The Inspireurope project's mapping report, and a draft detailed proposal for an EU Fellowship Scheme for Researchers at Risk are available at: <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sar-europe/inspireurope/policy>