

The Principle of Universality of Science and Academic Freedom

Introduction

ICSU promotes the free and responsible practice of science, which is fundamental to scientific advancement for the benefit of society, by advocating the Principle of Universality of Science. This Principle includes academic freedom, emphasises equity and non-discrimination in the international practice of science, and explicitly recognises incumbent responsibilities. The purpose of this note is to address aspects of academic freedom.

Academic freedom, as defined by UNESCO in 1997, is “the right, without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussions, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies.”¹

Academic freedom is a core principle for all scientific disciplines. It supports a universal right to engage in scholarly practices such as conducting research, reading, analysing and exchanging scientific ideas, theories and methodologies without interference or suppression. Without academic freedom, the advancement of science and social benefits derived from science will be impaired.

Academic freedom is essential, both to individuals and to institutions, and goes hand-in-hand with individual and social responsibilities. In this context, it is important to recognise the many levels at which academic freedom can be impaired.

Individual freedoms

At the individual level, academic freedom is vital to teachers, researchers and students, who each require unhindered access to scientific ideas, theories and methodologies. Additionally, individual scientists should not be restricted in their scholarly practice and related communications by their academic institutions or by the state.

Academic freedom means that scholars must be able to teach, conduct research and learn without fear or threat to their lives. Scientists who are threatened because of their scientific activities should be protected by both the state and the scientific community.

Academic freedom also requires mobility, freedom to interact with colleagues and travel to any destination related to research and academic work.

Academic freedom of individuals further includes freedom of expression that must not be violated by censorship or any other form of repression.

Institutional freedoms

At the institutional level, academic freedom allows academic institutions, such as universities, colleges and research centres, freely to support research and teaching. Regardless of whether these institutions are publicly funded, they must not be restricted or controlled in their academic activities by political interference, religion, ideology, economic considerations or other constraints. Academic institutions should ensure that their charter effectively protects them against political and economic forces.

¹ [Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel](#), 11 November 1997

Individual responsibilities

At the individual level, the independence granted to scientists obligates them to behaviour that is ethical, honest, open-minded and objective. Such integrity in the conduct and communication of research is a critical component to ensuring the individual right to academic freedom. While scientists should be free in their research and teaching activities, it is their responsibility to take into account the legal and regulatory framework in which they work.

In addition, academic freedom includes scientific debate, which can be controversial but is also inherent to the scientific process and essential to the advancement of science. Communication of such controversies to the public is an important part of ensuring academic freedom and transparency. Freedom of speech for scholars also implies a responsibility to separate scientific opinion from personal conviction in their communications.

Institutional responsibilities

Institutions should support their scholars both to exercise academic freedom and to assume the related responsibilities. This support may be through guidelines, information and educational activities.