How universities can protect & promote academic freedom

EUA principles and guidelines

Enora Bennetot Pruvot, 10 October 2025

Academic freedom today

The challenge

Academic freedom is the freedom to learn, teach, conduct research, and communicate results. It is increasingly at risk across Europe and globally.

Infringements are often subtle: excessive regulation, top-down funding, and stifling of unpopular views on campuses.

The response

Over the past five years, legislative initiatives supporting academic freedom have proliferated from the European Higher Education Area, European Commission, and European Parliament.

Universities must act to operationalize these frameworks through institutional guidelines and policies.

While Europe enjoys relative privilege, academic freedom violations here cause lasting damage to higher education systems and intellectual life.

Why academic freedom matters

Core value

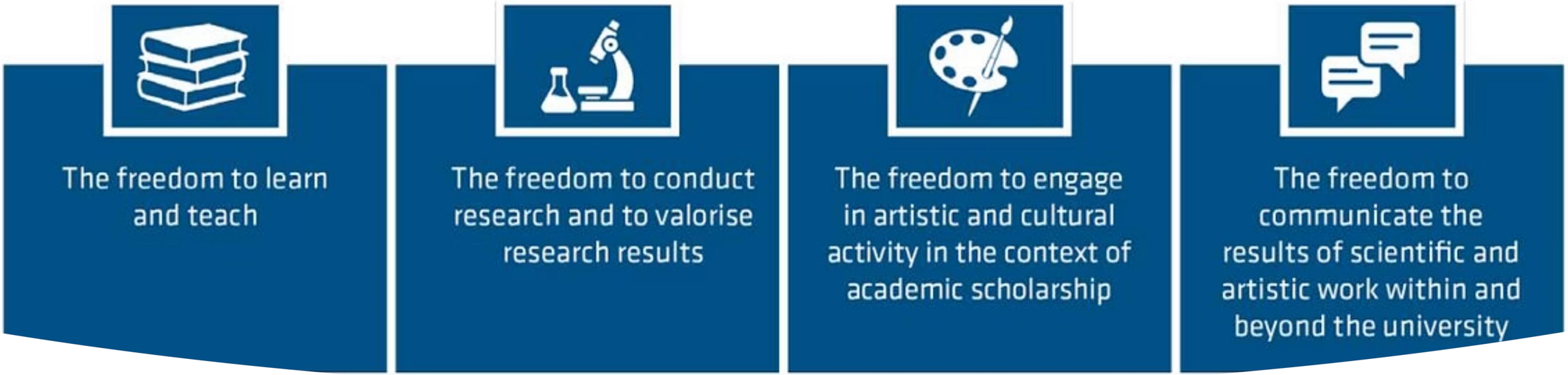
Enables all university activities and missions: education, research, innovation, and culture.

Foundation for quality

Guarantees independence of scientific process, enabling knowledge advancement and technological development.

Democratic contribution

Ensures universities remain spaces for free exchange of ideas, fostering respectful debate and supporting civic mission.



What is academic freedom?

Scholars need freedom of thought and inquiry to advance knowledge. Academic freedom consists of vital elements that empower research, teaching, and communication.

Who it is for

Applies to all academic communities engaged in research, innovation, learning, and teaching.
Also applies to students in teaching or research activities.

Institutional link

Closely linked to institutional autonomy.
Only in autonomous environments can academics work free from undue external influence.

A right and a responsibility

Academic freedom is both a **right and responsibility held by individual academics and academic communities**. It empowers higher education to further knowledge and enable societal advancement.

It must be **framed by rigorous scientific, professional, ethical, and quality standards**. This includes ethical conduct, respect for others' rights, and awareness of research impact.

> Recognition that academic freedom is both right and responsibility opens challenges for university leadership, requiring continuous reflection and open dialogue.

Critical questions for leadership

Funder influence

What is the role of public and private funders and their level of influence over university research and teaching content?

Research priorities

How to balance prioritization of research on large-scale societal goals with researchers' freedom to choose their field of study?

International partnerships

How do academic freedom considerations impact decisions regarding universities' international partnerships?

Openness vs. security

What is the right balance between openness of science and concerns over knowledge security and foreign interference?

Key actors and actions to support academic freedom

Responsibility for academic freedom protection is shared among different actors. The 2019 joint statement by EUA, ALLEA, and Science Europe called on governments and public authorities to take action regarding:

Legal frameworks

Set and guarantee legal, regulatory, and financial frameworks that safeguard academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

Non-interference

Refrain from undue interference in internal affairs of universities and engage in continuous trust-based dialogue.

Funding autonomy

Protect autonomy of funding decisions by research councils and funding bodies and diversity of research funded.

Guidelines for university leadership

1

Foster shared understanding

Develop institutional guidelines and policies to create a culture where academic freedom is valued and encouraged.

2

Enable participation

Ensure functional collegial structures and meaningful participation in decision-making, sustaining academic self-governance.

3

Create reflection processes

Establish structures for shared, transparent reflection on balancing academic freedom with other institutional goals.

4

Shield from pressure

Protect research and teaching communities from undue external pressure and intimidation.

5

Defend in dialogue

Defend academic freedom in constructive dialogue with government and external stakeholders to foster mutual trust.

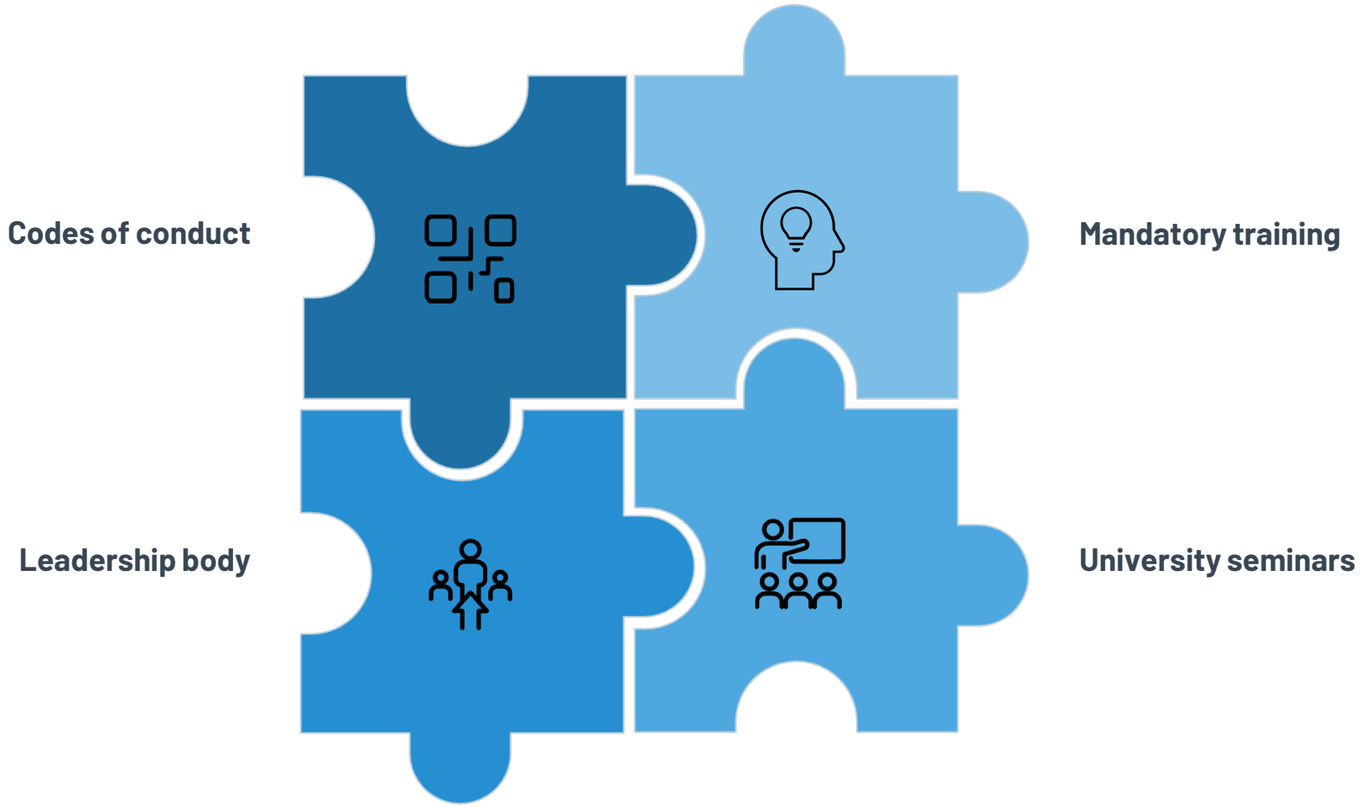
6

Secure diverse funding

Work towards diverse funding to avoid overdependence on single sources and balance varied financial priorities.

Creating a culture: measures and tools

- Develop codes of conduct and reference in employment contracts
- Establish dedicated body or leadership focus point for academic freedom issues
- Organize regular seminars involving entire university community
- Provide mandatory training sessions on academic freedom and integrity
- Incorporate academic freedom in curricula and teacher training



Guidelines for academics and communities

Individual responsibility

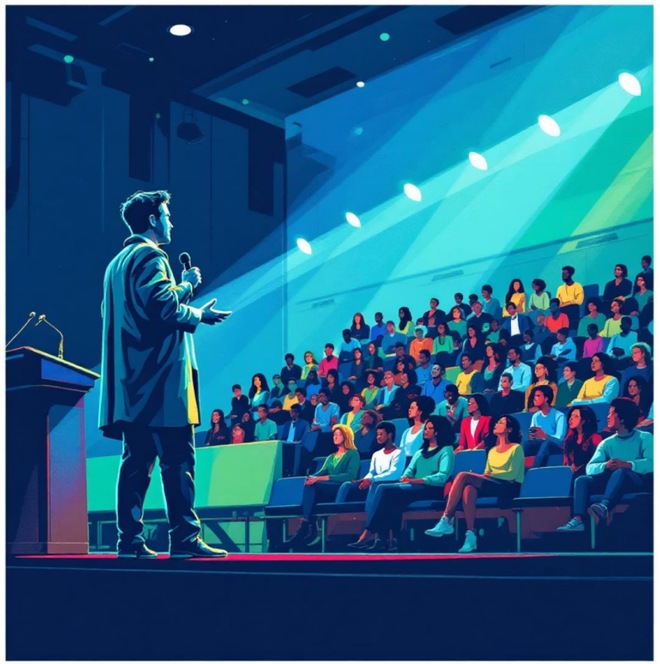
Each member is responsible for ensuring academic freedom. Adhere to fundamental values like integrity, quality, and responsibility.

Raise awareness

Actively encourage open and rigorous debate in scientific endeavor and academic scholarship, including on complex topics.

Make the public case

Explain why academic freedom is necessary for universities to fulfill their public mandate and responsibilities toward society.



Key references: Selected legal texts and reference works on academic freedom include the 1940 AAUP Statement, Magna Charta Universitatum (1988, 2020), UNESCO Recommendation (1997), and the Academic Freedom Index (FAU & V-Dem Institute, 2020).