

The Right to Academic Freedom and the Advancement of the SDGs and Human Rights

Leveraging sustainable development and human rights, including the right to science, for the people and planet

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Academic freedom is foundational for sustainable development, and the achievement of peace and human rights, including the right to science and creativity. Free, quality and inclusive education institutions are pillars of democratic societies, producing cutting-edge knowledge, including on societal challenges; generating scientific and social advancements; modelling democratic cooperation and participation; and facilitating the research, debate, artistic achievement, and intellectual inquiry that move societies forward.

The most recent report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Farida Shaheed, presented to the Human Rights Council in June 2024, stresses that academic freedom is at the heart of scientific progress, which is essential in countering both local and global crises. Science, technology and innovation are called on to play a pivotal role in promoting the enjoyment of human rights across the globe and in fulfilling the promises carried out through the SDGs and the Pact for the Future. However, these interconnected elements cannot produce long-lasting positive results as expected, unless conducted within a human rights framework that includes academic freedom, at all levels of education. In addition, the contribution of science must be understood considering scientific diversity, encompassing not only natural sciences but also social sciences.

The report of the Special Rapporteur provides a detailed, cutting-edge analysis of the human right to academic freedom within the framework of the right to education, defining it to include the freedom to access, disseminate and produce information; to think freely; and to develop, express, apply and engage with a diversity of knowledge within or related to one's expertise. The report asserts that educators can only foster critical thinking and provide diverse perspectives if they themselves enjoy academic freedom, while upholding the principles of pluralism, respect for others, and the pursuit of knowledge. Furthermore, the report asserts that the exercise of the right to academic freedom carries with it special duties to seek truth and impart information according to ethical and professional standards, and to respond to contemporary problems and needs of all members of society. The report, in addition, calls for the endorsement of the Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom, drafted by a working group of United Nations experts, scholars and civil society actors, based on and reflecting the status of international law and practice. The adoption and effective implementation of these principles would support academic freedom worldwide. In the Americas, for example, the recent launch of the Inter-American Principles on Academic Freedom and University Autonomy represents a landmark step toward the improvement of protection and safeguard mechanisms in the region.

Academic freedom is fundamental for the advancement of a multitude of other human rights. It is intrinsically connected to the freedom of scientific research, a core

component of the right to science, relating to all scientific fields, including both natural and social sciences. Intellectual autonomy is indispensable for scientific progress that benefits the whole of society by spurring quality science and innovation, addressing complex and often controversial societal issues, such as deeply rooted exclusion patterns, and anticipating the adverse effects of scientific and technological advancements.

Academic freedom is also a key for the realization of long-term, global societal goals laid out in the SDGs and the Pact for the Future, including but also going beyond SDG 4 on inclusive, equitable and quality education, which seeks to build peaceful, sustainable, and just societies that uphold human rights. Furthermore, academic and scientific freedom nurture trust in science and consolidate a culture of science-based decision-making. These rights also address the responsible use of digital technologies, science, and innovation to benefit people and the planet, improve gender equality, and enhance the enjoyment of other human rights.

UNESCO's Recommendations – which serve as ‘soft law’ normative instruments – further bolster this effort by emphasizing the importance of academic freedom, professional responsibility, and institutional autonomy in education and research. For instance, the revised [Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development](#) and the [Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education](#) stress protecting these freedoms to address global challenges.

Similarly, the Recommendation concerning the [Status of Teachers](#) and the [Recommendation concerning the status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel](#) highlight the need for academic freedom at all levels of education, ensuring that educators can operate without undue interference. In science and technology, the updated [Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers](#) asserts that academic freedom is key to scientific progress, while the [Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence](#) stresses the importance of safeguarding freedom of expression and academic freedom as AI technologies evolve. Together, these frameworks promote education and innovation that benefit all and safeguard human rights.

Thus, academic freedom *must be* protected and nurtured. Yet, despite its firm grounding in existing human rights law as a practical matter academic freedom remains tragically under-recognized as foundational to a functioning democracy – just as foundational as an independent judiciary, a free press, or a thriving civil society. The concept is still at the margins of public debate and is often neglected by official data. Academics, research and teaching staff as well as students, face State, non-State and social repression because of their research, teaching, or engagement with the larger society; university autonomy is eroded by political actors seeking to remake institutions in their own images; and financial pressures are used to constrict areas of study portrayed as controversial.

Thus, while the legal and human rights doctrine surrounding academic freedom and scientific freedom has unquestionably advanced, *de facto* erosions of the right have increased (alongside the growth in global authoritarianism). The 2023 Academic Freedom Index highlights the practical problem in stark terms: “23 countries are in episodes of decline in academic freedom, but academic freedom is increasing in only ten countries. 3.6 billion people now live in countries where academic freedom is completely restricted.”

This side event will allow participants to explore ways to bring the practical reality in line with recent legal and doctrinal advancements, such as the SR’s report and the Inter-American Principles. Because healthy, thriving, free educational spaces are a necessary condition for the full realization of the promise of the SDGs and the Pact for the Future.