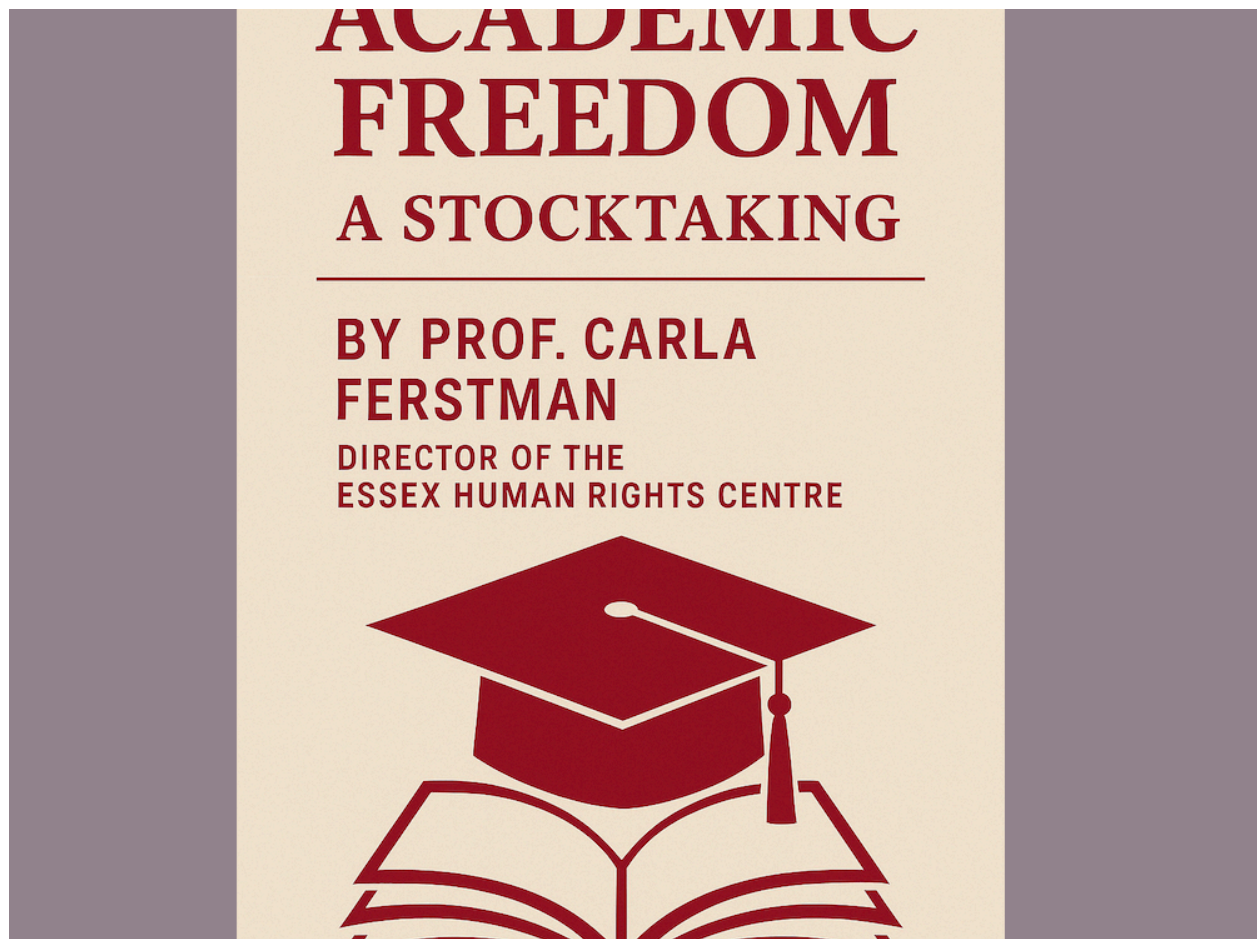




# Academic Freedom: A Stocktaking



By Prof. Carla Ferstman, Director of the Essex Human Rights Centre

## **What is academic freedom?**

Academic freedom is about the right of members of an academic community to teach, research and express themselves freely. To question and test received wisdom and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions is vital for the promotion of critical thinking, even when it gets uncomfortable. No one should be thwarted or lose their job for critical thinking.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Farida Shaheed, has underscored in her [report on academic freedom](#) that academic freedom is not only a key component of the right to education, or a part of freedom of expression, assembly

or thought, it is a fundamental human right in itself (see similarly, the [Inter-American Principles on Academic Freedom and University Autonomy](#)).

Academic freedom should foster all kinds of debate, but like freedom of speech, it shouldn't extend so far to permit speech that is unlawful or discriminatory; speech that demonises or denies the right to exist of other members of our bifurcated societies. As Farida Shaheed explains, "[the right to academic freedom does not protect the advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.](#)" So, there is a careful balance. Usually the boundaries are clear enough, but not always.

### **The decline of academic freedom**

Academic freedom is [in severe decline](#). We all know it; if you're on any university campus you can feel it. There is less institutional autonomy due to increased financial pressures and marketisation. Whether it is debates that are stifled, barriers that are put in the way of "controversial" speakers, research funding that is curtailed particularly for controversial or exploratory subjects, topics that are no longer being taught or discussed because they are seen as too "fringe", or protests that are so carefully managed that they become merely performative, these changes are perceptible. Faculty are also self-censuring because they are too busy and overworked to go through the hassle of dealing with bureaucracies stacked against risk-taking.

There are many reasons for the decline. University administrations have become more conservative and tolerate less difference. All members of the academic community have become less adept at navigating differences of opinion. This is because there is simply too much to do and too little time. Who even has time to debate? It also stems from the [social media echo chambers we all bring to university campuses and which tend to be reproduced there](#).

### **Academic freedom and authoritarianism**

The authoritarian turn in formerly liberal countries like the USA underscores what repressive regimes around the world have always known: academic freedom fosters pluralism and open, independent societies. [Repressive regimes have never tolerated academic freedom or ideological pluralism](#).

The [crackdown in the USA on diversity, equity and inclusion programmes, defunding those universities President Trump thinks turn "our students into communists and terrorists and sympathisers of many, many different dimensions", and issuing gag orders targeting the teaching of critical race theory and other "divisive concepts"](#) are all good examples of this. The vilification of students and academics participating in pro-Palestinian solidarity protests is another clear example. While we can be shocked and horrified by the [these practices](#), culminating most recently with the [arbitrary detention, revocation of visas, deportation and suspension of studies of certain US-based](#)

protesters, the reprisals against students and academics who express dissent about governmental policies and practices is not a uniquely American phenomenon. It is a deeply troubling global phenomenon.

According to Amnesty International, in the context of the **Russian** full-scale invasion of Ukraine Russian educators have been forced to spread anti-Ukrainian propaganda and glorify Russia's 'special operation in Ukraine' — or else lose their jobs. **Hungary's** fight against "woke" agendas in academia has led to the closure of academic departments and entire institutions. Take also, for instance, the response by **Türkiye** to the Academics for Peace campaign. The 2016 petition signed by 1,128 academics from 89 universities in Turkey, and over 355 academics and researchers from abroad, entitled "We will not be a Party to This Crime," called on Türkiye to end its repression of citizens in the Kurdish regions of Southeastern Turkey. It resulted in the academics being labelled as terrorists, with hundreds of them losing their jobs, widespread arbitrary detentions, and criminal prosecutions. While these exactions were determined by the courts to be excessive, too little has been done to restore the academics' rights. Another example is the response to the mass student protests in **Bangladesh**, where security and intelligence services reportedly killed as many as 1,400 people and arbitrarily arrested or detained more than 11,700 others, or the use of threats, intimidation, beatings and prolonged solitary confinement against Nicaraguan students and academics for publicly criticizing the Government.

### What next?

How do we, as members of university communities, foster and protect academic freedom? There are no easy answers but as a start we must be vigilant. We must teach mutual respect and respectful dialogue, and we must fight the tendency towards "quietism" and the fear of risk-taking in relation to issues, people or causes we don't understand well enough.

Crucially, we must increase dialogue on university campuses between students, staff, unions, and administrations about academic freedom, what it means and how we all have a role in promoting it. We must also continue to show solidarity with academic communities at risk around the world.

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