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To cite this article: Sharda S. Nandram, Raysa Geaquinto Rocha & Gunjan Joshi (16 Apr 2026): Reimagining academic freedom as collective capability, *Studies in Higher Education*, DOI: [10.1080/03075079.2026.2657538](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2026.2657538)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2026.2657538>



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Published online: 16 Apr 2026.



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Reimagining academic freedom as collective capability

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ABSTRACT

We examine the evolving nature of academic freedom through the lived experiences of academics in higher education. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 43 academics across multiple world regions, this study advances theoretical understanding by developing a comprehensive philosophical framework that integrates epistemological, ontological, axiological, and praxiological dimensions. We propose to frame academic freedom as a collective capability that shapes and is shaped by institutional structures, power relations, and societal dynamics. It transcends traditional rights-based conceptualizations, illuminating how academic freedom operates as a complex ecosystem of epistemic inquiry, institutional structures, ethical principles, and practical strategies. It represents the capability of academic communities to pursue, create, and disseminate knowledge through epistemological freedom to challenge dominant paradigms and legitimize diverse ways of knowing; ontological autonomy to define and negotiate the boundaries between institutional enablement and institutional constraint; axiological independence to balance individual scholarly integrity with collective responsibility; and praxiological agency to implement innovative teaching and research practices within institutional frameworks. Our findings reveal how faculty negotiate institutional constraints through strategic engagement with these dimensions. The future of academic freedom appears increasingly shaped by technological advancements, political polarization, funding constraints, and evolving societal expectations, imposing adaptive institutional responses that balance these factors with scholarly independence and autonomy. Emerging themes suggest that DEI initiatives and spiritual practices have a relevant role in understanding the manifestations of academic freedom.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 April 2025

Accepted 5 April 2026

KEYWORDS

Academic freedom; collective capability; higher education; DEI; spirituality

Introduction

Academic freedom has been a foundational principle in higher education institutions (HEIs) for centuries (de Ridder-Symoens 2006; Lott 2024; Tasker and Packham 1990), yet its conceptualization and practice face unprecedented challenges and attacks (Darian-Smith 2025; Tasker and Packham 1990), especially in the contemporary neoliberal university (Yin and Mu 2023). While traditionally understood as the right to teach and conduct research without external interference (Altbach 2001; Berdahl 1990), scholarship suggests academic freedom requires reimagining

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considering mounting pressures from marketization, corporate management styles, technological advancement, and evolving societal expectations (Finkelstein et al. 2024; Jones et al. 2020; Tasker and Packham 1990).

Institutional autonomy and academic freedom are requirements for HEIs to fulfil their intellectual and social purposes (Tasker and Packham 1990). Academic freedom being 'a defining character of the health of universities' and 'an essential pre-requisite for institutional excellence' (Karran 2009, 275). Nevertheless, there are two critical issues. First, 'neither academic freedom nor institutional autonomy can ever be absolute' (Tasker and Packham 1990, 183), requiring careful navigation of competing institutional demands and societal expectations. Second, most scholars lack awareness of its true meaning and implications (Karran 2009; Moens 1991). While extensive research has critiqued neoliberal constraints on academic freedom (Finkelstein et al. 2024; Lott 2024), significant theoretical limitations persist in understanding how academics actively resist and transform these constraints. This scholarly lacuna proves particularly significant given Darian-Smith's (2025) identification of a global pattern of rising anti-democratic governance and diminishing academic freedom, which she frames as manifestations of wider policing logics reflecting global economic destabilization and political power realignments. Within this increasingly complex landscape, our investigation addresses these theoretical limitations by exploring how faculty members understand, navigate, and transform constraints on academic freedom through their daily scholarly practices.

This research advances academic freedom scholarship and makes key contributions supported by in-depth interviews with scholars across multiple world regions. Building upon foundational conceptual research on academic freedom understanding (e.g. Tasker and Packham 1990), importance (e.g. Karran 2009), and global attacks on higher education (e.g. Darian-Smith 2025). We develop a comprehensive theoretical framework that integrates epistemological, ontological, axiological, and praxiological dimensions for an innovative conceptualization of academic freedom. Our framework is grounded on Barnett's (1990) dialogical knowledge creation, Davies' (2015) epistemological inquiry, Rosewell and Ashwin's (2019) ontological positioning, Kennedy's (1997) axiological commitments, and Scott's (2006) praxiological implementations to offer a multi-faceted analytical lens that addresses the conceptual boundaries identified by Tasker and Packham (1990).

Extending the conceptual groundwork established by Tasker and Packham (1990) regarding the future of academic freedom, we reconceptualize academic freedom as a collective capability that emerges through dynamic interactions between academic communities, institutional structures, power relations, and societal forces. This perspective builds meaningfully upon Hai and Anh's (2022) insights into faculty governance participation and Lackner's (2024) distinction between formal and lived autonomy, revealing how scholarly communities develop the capacity to pursue knowledge creation through coordinated epistemological challenges to dominant paradigms, ontological negotiations of institutional boundaries, axiological balancing of individual integrity with communal responsibility, and praxiological implementation of transformative scholarly practices. Rather than viewing academic freedom as a simple protection from external interference, this collective capability framework demonstrates how academic freedom is strategically constructed with collaborative agency and networks that simultaneously shape and respond to institutional arrangements, creating systematic mechanisms through which scholarly autonomy operates as both individual achievement and communal enterprise.

We also shed light on the integration of DEI and spirituality's role in academic freedom. This complements conceptual works of Darian-Smith's (2025) on academic freedom as social responsibility and builds upon Tasker and Packham's (1990) positioning of academic freedom as essential to the social ethos of the university by empirically examining how DEI and spiritual practices expand epistemological boundaries, legitimize diverse ways of knowing, and create supportive environments for academic freedom.

Academic freedom

The epistemological foundations of academic freedom rest on the premise that pursuing truth requires unrestricted epistemic inquiry and discourse. As Altbach (2001, 206) states, this is seen in ‘the freedom of the professor to teach without external control’ and ‘the freedom of the student to learn.’ This relationship between teaching and learning embodies what Barnett (1990, 123) describes as ‘the dialogical nature of knowledge creation,’ where academic freedom is not just a right but essential for advancing understanding. As Darian-Smith (2025) notes, academic freedom goes beyond individual expression, including the collective ability to conduct research, design curriculum, and engage in institutional governance.

The evolution of academic freedom reveals a profound transformation in its theoretical conception and practical enactment. Traditionally viewed through a modernist lens, knowledge was seen as objective truth waiting to be discovered (Tierney 1993; Wight 2021). This understanding has significantly reformed as academic discourse has matured. Yet, postmodern and critical theorists challenge this, arguing that knowledge is socially constructed and tied to power relations, with ‘legitimate’ knowledge shaped by dominant cultural forces rather than existing objectively (Tierney 1993). Thus, academic freedom should protect scholars’ rights to investigate established forms of knowledge and validate previously silenced perspectives and ways of knowing to gain legitimacy within discourse (Wight 2021). This shift aligns with critical scholarship that emphasizes the role of academic freedom in challenging hegemonic knowledge and fostering epistemic justice.

The ontological value in Einstein’s (1957) conception of academic freedom as ‘having the right to seek the truth and to publish and teach what is believed to be true’ highlights an intrinsic link between academic freedom and the truth-seeking process. Constitutional courts reinforce this by framing academic freedom as a ‘defensive right’ that protects academic activities from state interference and ensures scholars have autonomous space (Stachowiak-Kudła 2021). In Habermas’s (1984) theory of communicative action, academic freedom fosters conditions resembling the ‘ideal speech situation’ – a standard where discourse is free from coercion. This environment allows the intersubjective testing of validity claims and acknowledges the evolving, open-ended nature of understanding existence (Zhao and Bindewald 2018). Thus, academic freedom emerges as a dynamic interplay of institutional enablement and constraint (Tierney and Blumberg Corwin 2007), where the ontological ‘clearing’ for truth-seeking is shaped by external factors that are acknowledged, negotiated, and transformed through critical engagement.

From an axiological perspective, academic freedom embodies paramount intellectual autonomy and scholarly integrity, balancing independence with communal accountability through virtuous practice (Gibbs 2013). Safeguarding scholarly independence is a moral imperative (Gibbs 2013; Tight 1988). This value system transcends individual rights, as Brickman (1968) noted, including the educator’s right to teach and the student’s entitlement to learn without external interference. Such formulations underscore the ethical dimensions of academic freedom as both a right and a responsibility, reflecting what Kennedy (1997) termed the ‘moral architecture’ of the academy. Darian-Smith (2025) further argues for viewing academic freedom as a social responsibility, asserting that attacks on scholars threaten democratic values and knowledge production beyond the academy.

The praxiological dimension appears in institutional arrangements and resource allocations essential for academic freedom. Ashby’s (1966) note on funding, curriculum, and staff selection highlights the practical needs for meaningful academic freedom. This autonomy requires strong institutional frameworks that protect scholarly independence and ensure accountability (Scott 2006). Thus, implementing academic freedom requires balancing autonomy and responsibility, mirroring Marginson’s (2014) idea of ‘situated freedom’ in academic work within institutional and societal contexts. Faculty involvement in university governance showcases this praxiological dimension across HEIs. Yet, effective faculty participation remains difficult, even with formal autonomy (Hai and Anh 2022).

Methods and Materials

Procedure

Drawing on established qualitative research methods (Denzin and Lincoln 2017), we developed an interview protocol that addresses key dimensions, including the understanding of academic freedom, institutional challenges, strategic responses, university mission, and future perspectives.

After conducting the initial analysis, the research team conducted respondent validation through a second round of data collection, using member checking procedures to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. This approach involved sharing initial interpretations with the original participants, seeking clarification on unclear responses, and validating preliminary analytical insights. Seven participants from the original sample provided additional insights (identified with '2'), more context, and refined their initial statements. For example, we asked them:

When you think about academic freedom in your institution, do you see it primarily as an individual right that you personally possess, or as something that emerges through collective action and shared practices among faculty? Can you provide a specific example that illustrates this distinction?

Participants

Our study used purposeful sampling, prioritizing depth of understanding and theoretical saturation over statistical representation, and selected 43 participants from diverse academic roles, backgrounds, and locations worldwide. This sample size adhered to the methodological guidance from Wutich, Beresford, and Bernard (2024), who demonstrated that meta-theme saturation typically occurs between 20 and 39 interviews in qualitative research. Our approach addressed disciplinary differences in exploring academic freedom across fields with varying institutional constraints, offering rich insights into how it functions across different contexts and cultures.

The sample comprised faculty at multiple career stages: professors ($n = 16$), associate professors ($n = 3$), assistant professors ($n = 13$), visiting professors, fellows, and researchers ($n = 7$), and others who preferred not to disclose their career stage. Disciplinary backgrounds encompassed business and management-related fields, including marketing, human resource management, business analytics, and business ethics ($n = 20$), alongside religion, theology, and philosophy ($n = 6$), social sciences including sociology, political science, and education ($n = 8$), and other fields such as engineering, biochemistry, and AI ethics ($n = 9$). Participants were affiliated with public institutions ($n = 27$), private institutions ($n = 13$), distributed across Europe ($n = 26$), Asia-Pacific ($n = 12$), and the Americas ($n = 5$). The sample included 24 male and 18 female participants, and one participant who preferred not to disclose. Many participants (19) also serve as deans, department chairs, program directors, and committee members.

Template analysis

The study employed template analysis (King and Brooks 2016), chosen for its flexibility and compatibility with various epistemological perspectives, as it is not tied to any specific philosophical approach (Lips-Wiersma and Hall 2007). We utilized ATLAS.ti version 24, a qualitative data analysis software (Friese 2019), to structure the coding process, support the template analysis methodology, and produce a systematic visualization of the thematic networks.

Initially, we created a template based on 15 interviews, from which we gained further insights by focusing on *in vivo* codes from the interview data (Table 1). While earlier in the initial template, we considered 'freedom to teach' and 'freedom to research' as second-level sub-themes, we chose to retain a single-level structure in the final template. Participants did refer to teaching and research as distinct aspects of academic freedom, but not in a consistently differentiated or hierarchical way. Rather than treating them as clearly separate categories, participants often discussed them

Table 1. Initial and final templates.

Initial template (first 15 Interviews)	Final template (42 interviews)
1. Understanding of Academic Freedom	1. Understanding of Academic Freedom
1.1. <i>Freedom to teach</i>	2. Manifestation of Academic Freedom
1.2. <i>Freedom to research</i>	3. Future of Academic Freedom
2. Drivers of Academic Freedom	4. Challenges of Academic Freedom
3. Barriers to Academic Freedom	4.1 <i>Institutional and administrative pressure</i>
4. Future of Academic Freedom	4.2 <i>Political Pressure</i>
5. Challenges to Academic Freedom	4.3 <i>External influences</i>
5.1. <i>Political pressure</i>	4.4 <i>Cultural and Ethical Constraints</i>
5.2. <i>Social pressure</i>	4.5 <i>Balancing Educational Reforms</i>
5.3. <i>Technological pressure</i>	4.6 <i>Technological pressure</i>
5.4. <i>Environmental pressure</i>	4.7 <i>Future constraints on academic freedom</i>
5.5. <i>Economic pressure</i>	4.7 <i>Approaches to respond to challenges</i>
6. Perspectives on Academic Freedom	5. Role of DEI
6.1. <i>Immigrant Faculty Perspective</i>	6. Role of Spirituality-related initiatives
6.2. <i>Evolution in Perspective with Experience</i>	
7. Role of DEI	
8. Role of Spirituality-related initiatives	

Source: Created by the authors.

in an interconnected manner, highlighting their mutual influence within a broader understanding of academic work. Thus, new themes, such as manifestations of academic freedom and approaches to respond to the challenges, emerged through continued engagement with the data.

Analysis of the results

Understanding of academic freedom

Respondents' understanding of academic freedom remained a single-level category in the final template (Table 2); its richness and complexity are shaped through multiple interconnected dimensions, centered on research autonomy, pedagogical freedom, and the expression of ideas without fear of reprisal. It extends beyond basic notions of unrestricted expression, emphasizing the academic right to hold and articulate beliefs (Beaud 2020).

Research autonomy stands as a fundamental pillar, reflecting the necessity for unfettered scholarly inquiry and freedom from interference (Altbach 2001). This perspective highlights how academic freedom facilitates the pursuit of knowledge without being constrained by external pressures or institutional limitations. Therefore, expression without fear of reprisal emerges as a crucial element in protecting scholarly discourse. This protection facilitates the robust exchange of ideas, which is indispensable for knowledge creation (Kennedy 1997).

Scholarly discourse protection also reflects the collective capability dimension of academic freedom. Fostering critical thinking and debate represents another vital dimension, embodying the dialogical nature of knowledge creation (Barnett 1990). The pedagogical dimension also manifests through faculty members' ability to design and deliver courses autonomously within institutional frameworks (Davies 2015). Therefore, this freedom in teaching extends from content selection to encompass methodological choices and pedagogical approaches. When observed as a collective capability, we note the group's strength in reducing individual vulnerability to institutional political pressures. Student learning autonomy emerges as an additional dimension. This perspective highlights how academic freedom extends beyond faculty rights to encompass student learning experiences (Brickman 1968).

This multifaceted understanding illustrates how academic freedom functions within a complex ecosystem, balancing institutional support with individual autonomy. The results reveal a sophisticated conceptualization that extends beyond traditional rights-based frameworks (Tight 1988) to encompass the performative elements of academic practice within institutional structures (Smith,

Table 2. Exemplary quotes on ‘understanding of academic freedom.’

Understanding of academic freedom	
	Representative quote
Research autonomy	‘Be able to express your opinion on matters that matter to the advancement of knowledge without fear of reprisal.’ (D.8)
Expression without reprisal	‘Academic freedom is the freedom of scholars, researchers, and students to explore, discuss, and pursue knowledge and ideas without fear of censorship, retaliation, repression, and administrative pressure. It allows the free exchange of ideas, critical thinking and the search for truth.’ (D.20)
Pedagogical freedom	‘The liberty to decide, within foundational parameters, how I will structure my course to provide my students the best education.’ (D.6) ‘University is to educate the next generation of citizens to be able to make more informed decisions combining critical reasoning from many different angles, and academic freedom should still be a part of that.’ (D.29)
Student learning autonomy	‘For a student, it could mean to learn what he or she will, which always may not be rationally explainable.’ (D.10)
Participatory dimension	‘Every member of our academic community, whether professor, dean or student, should have this right to participate and to discuss what affects them.’ (D.38)
Collective capability	‘Academic freedom is not sustained solely as a legal principle or personal prerogative, but is constantly constructed, defended and lived out in community, in the context of pedagogical, scientific and institutional relationships. [...] It is therefore a freedom that is not only negative (freedom from), but also positive and affirmative (freedom to) create new horizons for research and teaching.’ (D.2.2) ‘I see academic freedom at my institution as both an individual entitlement and a collective achievement, but the latter is more sustainable. Individual rights can be asserted in principle, but in practice, they are fragile unless embedded in shared governance, collegial solidarity, and collective action.’ (D.14.2) ‘I view academic freedom primarily as a collective achievement that emerges through shared practices and institutional culture, rather than just an individual right.’ (D.41) ‘Academic freedom, for me, is the right and the structural possibility to pursue, produce, and disseminate knowledge without fear of political, institutional, economic, or epistemic repression. It includes freedom in choosing research questions, methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and modes of teaching, particularly when these challenge dominant paradigms or established power relations. Importantly, academic freedom must be understood as gendered, positional, and context-dependent. It is experienced differently depending on one’s gender, career stage, citizenship, disciplinary location, and whether one works on ‘sensitive’ or non-hegemonic topics, including postcolonial, feminist, or Global South–focused research.’ (D.43)

Source: Created by the authors.

2020). This evolution reflects broader shifts in how academic freedom manifests across epistemological, ontological, and praxiological dimensions (Davies 2015; Marginson 2014).

Manifestation of academic freedom

A new theme emerged in the final template (Table 3): ‘manifestation of academic freedom.’ Academic freedom manifests through complex interactions between individual agency and institutional structures, reflecting the contextual influences that shape scholarly practice (Marginson 2014). Our analysis reveals three distinct yet interconnected patterns through which academic freedom manifests: (i) strategic consciousness and responsibility, (ii) critical inquiry and knowledge creation, and (iii) transformative practice and advocacy.

‘Strategic consciousness and responsibility’ emerges as a pattern characterizing faculty members’ evolving understanding and deployment of academic freedom. The temporal perspective reveals increased awareness and strategic deployment of academic freedom corresponding with career progression (D6, D12, D29), aligning with frameworks of academic identity development within institutional contexts (Davies 2015). However, early-career academics encounter specific vulnerabilities (D3), which corroborate research indicating that these impacts are sensitive to career stages (Yin and Mu 2023), the consciousness of academic freedom evolves as scholars recognize both its value and responsibility.

Table 3. Exemplary quotes on ‘manifestation of academic freedom.’

Manifestation of academic freedom	
	Representative quote
Strategic consciousness	‘It has become clear to me that academic freedom is most powerful when balanced with a commitment to fostering open, respectful dialogue and creating an inclusive environment where all voices can be heard.’ (D.12)
Career development	‘Academic freedom did not play a big role in my early stages of my academic career’ [...] ‘Academic freedom is a privilege.’ (D.3) ‘[Junior scholars] might have constrain regarding academic freedom without even admitting so.’ (D.40) ‘Early in my career, I understood academic freedom primarily as freedom of expression and research autonomy. Over time, particularly through transnational academic work and engagement with poorer and richer university contexts, I have come to see academic freedom as deeply relational and structural. It depends not only on formal guarantees but also on institutional cultures, funding regimes, employment precarity, and geopolitical and economic contexts.’ (D.43)
Critical inquiry	‘while experiencing the technical issues (in class), I realized with time that I needed to adjust my course plans to fit the new limitations. Rather than see this as a setback, I took it as an opportunity to streamline my curriculum and focus on the most essential topics. I incorporated more offline resources and open educational materials to fill in the gaps, and I encouraged students to engage in independent research projects to explore areas we could not cover in class. This approach allowed me to maintain the quality of education and continue fostering critical thinking, even with fewer resources’ (D19).
Transformative practice	‘The “saying what needs to be said” includes addressing challenging topics while not saying anything that would be defamatory. I also try to keep my political views in check. My role is not to indoctrinate the student with political views but to give them better tools to test their understanding.’ (D.29)
Collective capability	‘Academic freedom is, like, needs to be collective wisdom, because otherwise it’s just egotistical individualism.’ [...] ‘You, as an individual not being the center of the universe, but rather that our relationships are what creates these universes.’ (D.34) ‘As a bachelor director, I find it important to provide the conditions that allow colleagues to pursue academic freedom, again, within limit.’ (D.31)
Collective action for at-risk scholars	‘Joint efforts of colleagues that shares same values and respect our work. For example, we launched donation campaign via [...] to receive some additional funds for scholar at risk situation.’ (D.33)
Safe academic environment	‘For example, while developing my research on Afghan migrant women in Iran, I learned how even discussing issues such as discrimination, gender-based restrictions, or state policies could place scholars at risk in certain contexts. [...] provided a safe academic environment where I could explore these topics openly, receive mentorship, and ask critical questions without fearing repercussions.’ (D.36)
Absence of collective support	‘My academic freedom (indeed, even my basic human and labor rights) when violated, has never been defended by my colleagues, all of whom remain silent out of fear of the owners. The only support I have found has come from academics at other institutions and colleagues abroad.’ (D.20.2)

Source: Created by the authors.

‘Critical inquiry and knowledge creation’ manifests through faculty members transforming institutional constraints into pedagogical and research innovations. Promoting inclusivity and diverse perspectives (D28, D33) legitimates diverse knowledge forms and teaching approaches (Finkelstein et al. 2024). It fosters academics to transform institutional constraints into enhanced teaching practices (Jones et al. 2020; Smith, 2020). Intellectual growth serves as both an outcome and a facilitator of academic freedom (D1, D19), thereby reflecting the dialogical nature of knowledge creation as identified by Barnett (1990). At the same time, faculty members consistently demonstrate how viewing obstacles as opportunities leads to enhanced teaching practices and research innovation.

‘Transformative practice and advocacy’ materializes through challenging institutional norms (D14, D21, D24) and promoting inclusive academic environments. Faculty members engage in institutional transformation through diversity initiatives, creating spaces for marginalized voices (Beaud 2020). Likewise, this is particularly evident in faculty navigating politically sensitive topics within institutional responsibilities. This careful navigation of controversial topics embodies academia’s ‘moral architecture’ (Kennedy 1997), where faculty exercise freedom within ethical frameworks while promoting inclusivity and diverse perspectives (D28).

Conversely, the ‘absence of academic freedom,’ lack of advocacy and individualistic (egoistic) actions exemplify what HEI would be without a collective capability perspective and support our call to build and promote the transformation of the right-base perspective of academic freedom to the collective capability. This absence illuminates how scholars’ collective understanding and advocacy mechanisms constitute the foundational infrastructure upon which academic freedom operates as a sustainable institutional practice rather than a fragile individual privilege.

Future of academic freedom in universities

The future landscape of academic freedom (Table 4) will require institutional responses that balance technological integration, political pressures, and scholarly independence (Lott 2024). It faces unprecedented transformation through the convergence of technological, societal, and institutional pressures. Technological advancement, particularly artificial intelligence, will fundamentally reshape academic practice. This technological trajectory aligns with theoretical projections of AI’s impact on academic labor and knowledge production (Lerch, Bromley, and Ramirez 2024). However, technological advancement also presents opportunities for the evolution of academic freedom. This digital transformation intersects with emerging DEI initiatives. Economic pressures will intensify institutional constraints.

Respondents were especially concerned about future constraints on academic freedom (Figure 1). This trend reflects broader concerns about academic independence in politically charged environments (Finkelstein et al. 2024). Their concerns included potential censorship of topics tied to dogmatic beliefs and rising expectations around work-life balance, both from personal and societal pressures. Political interference, for example, is increasingly seen as shaping academic institutions (D17).

Challenges to academic freedom

In exploring the challenges to academic freedom, respondents articulated a range of pressures (Figure 1).

Institutional and administrative pressure

In the final template, ‘environmental’ and ‘economic’ concerns were subsumed under the newly introduced theme of ‘Institutional and Administrative Pressure,’ which manifested through

Table 4. Exemplary quotes on ‘future of academic freedom.’

Future of academic freedom	
	Representative quote
Complexity of challenges	‘The future of academic freedom in universities is a complex and multifaceted issue, especially in a rapidly changing global context.’ (D.2)
AI impact	‘With AI [artificial intelligence] in the lead of so many developments, I can envision faculty leaning more on this tool to provide opinions and sadly keep their viewpoints to themselves to refrain from getting in trouble.’ (D.6)
Digital opportunities	‘The rise of digital platforms and online education provides new avenues for academic expression and exploration. These tools can democratize education, allowing for a greater diversity of thought and broader dissemination of ideas.’ (D.19)
Economic pressures	‘Universities will tend to become more circumspect about academic freedom, as economic pressures put extra strain on their budget.’ (D.5)
Institutional balance	‘Looking ahead, the future of academic freedom will depend on the ability of universities to strike a careful balance: protecting scholars from external and internal constraints while upholding rigorous standards and transparent practices. Universities that manage to cultivate such an environment – where independence, accountability, and critical reflection coexist – will be better equipped to address the profound uncertainties that characterize the twenty-first century.’ (D.33)

Source: Created by the authors.

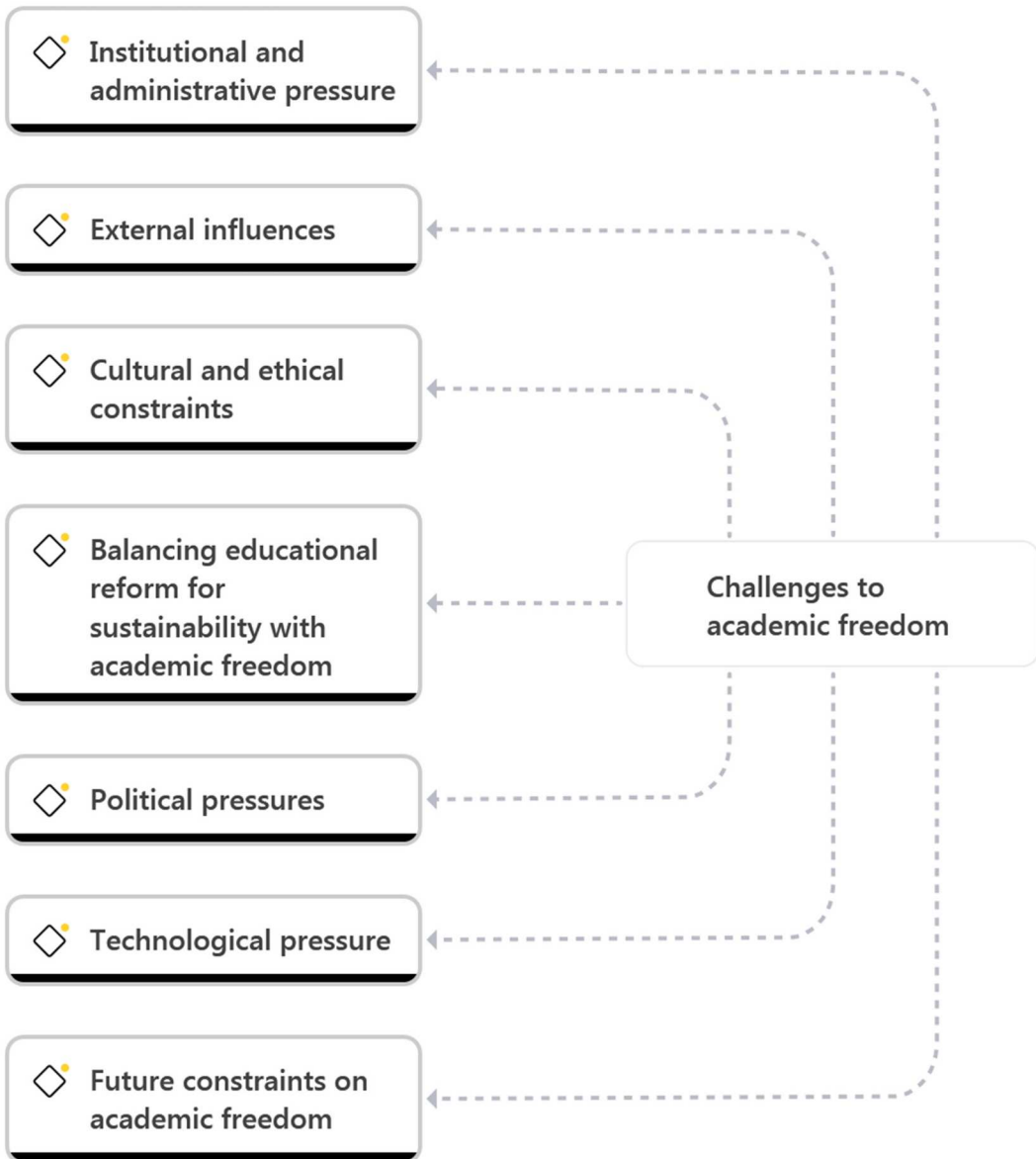


Figure 1. Challenges to academic freedom. Source: Created by the authors using ATLAS.ti software.

complex interactions between managerial practices and academic autonomy, reflecting broader challenges in the neoliberal university (Figure 1). These challenges parallel what Lott (2024) identifies as a third global wave of academic freedom decline that began around 2013, affecting autocracies and democracies. These pressures are exerted through performance metrics, audit cultures, and corporate management styles, constraining academic freedom through bureaucratic mechanisms (Jones et al. 2020; Smith, 2020). The increasing administrative burden on faculty exemplifies what research identifies as a performative university characterized by targets and managerial control (Davies 2015). Administrative constraints materialize through excessive clerical duties that detract from core academic functions, reflecting the bureaucratization of academic practice (Stachowiak-Kudła 2021). As one respondent articulated: ‘At the moment, we have an academic system that

strongly regulates all class topics, class and assessment methodology, content (why do we have to upload texts to a virtual class), marking times for tests and exercises, among other things' (D30).

Institutional pressures create significant pedagogical tensions, as evidenced by one participant's experience:

Yes, throughout my academic career, I have faced significant challenges related to academic freedom. One of the most striking involved a situation in which, when I tackled a controversial topic in a piece of research, I faced resistance from both colleagues and the administration [...] Another challenge occurred when I tried to incorporate innovative and interdisciplinary methodologies into my courses. Although academic freedom allowed for this experimentation, there were times when I realized a disconnect between my pedagogical vision and departmental expectations, especially about the traditional curriculum. (D2)

The cumulative impact of these pressures extends beyond individual faculty experiences to shape institutional cultures and academic practice. The outputs reveal how faculty members experience health impacts from overwork (D1), sometimes leading to resignation – a pattern that threatens institutional sustainability (Lindholm and Astin 2006). Leadership selection processes, particularly for senior positions such as Chancellors and Vice-Chancellors (D28), emerge as critical factors in shaping institutional approaches to academic freedom. Furthermore, autocratic management styles and inadequate leadership (D1) align with research documenting the rise of managerialism in universities and its impact on academic freedom (Yin and Mu 2023). This trend reflects broader shifts toward the audit society in higher education, where administrative oversight increasingly shapes academic practice (Beaud 2020).

These institutional pressures manifest through various mechanisms, including inequitable workload distribution (D1), resource allocation challenges (D2), and resistance to pedagogical innovation (D2, D30). The emphasis on financial metrics and institutional reputation (D8, D19) aligns with analyses of how market logics reshape academic institutions (Scott 2006). Moreover, the growing focus on metrics and financial outcomes suggests economically-driven conformity in academic practice (Finkelstein et al. 2024).

Political pressure

Political pressures operate through funding mechanisms, ideological interventions, and institutional governance structures (Stachowiak-Kudła 2021). These funding-mediated interventions exemplify how political forces reshape academic institutions through resource allocation mechanisms, creating distinct patterns of constraint and enablement across different national contexts that ultimately challenge academic freedom's collective capability dimensions.

Political pressures manifest through explicit institutional control: 'As far as [...] is concerned, there is increasing government interference in academic institutions, with authorities seeking to control research agendas, curriculum content, or the hiring of faculty based on political ideologies' (D17). In contrast, there are pressures through funding mechanisms that may indirectly constrain academic expression:

The likely huge cutbacks in higher education expected [...] could silence the voices of academics across the political and social spectrum as they begin to fear that their jobs will be eliminated if they say something that is not congenial to the prevailing political coalition. (D23)

Additionally, institutions confront neoliberal pressures that reshape academic structures: 'I have experienced increasing pressures from neoliberal social contexts, characterized by reduced resources, tuition fees, and even privatization' (D15). However, some contexts maintain stronger protections for academic expression. Some state-funded institutions appear to preserve academic freedom: 'In my school, which is a state-financed business school, I, as an ethicist, feel free to express what I mean about powerful actors [...], and have done it many times' (D21).

These varied experiences reflect possible pathways through which political forces reshape academic institutions through funding mechanisms and regulatory frameworks (Scott 2006). The intersection of political and economic pressures creates distinct challenges across different national

contexts (Smith, 2020). While some countries face direct ideological interventions, others confront market-driven constraints that subtly reshape academic freedom through resource allocation and institutional restructuring (Ahmed 2012). The contrast between the protective state funding model and neoliberal reforms, or between direct controls and funding pressures, reveals the diverse ways political forces influence academic freedom.

External influences

In the initial template, the theme ‘Social Pressure’ was reframed more broadly as ‘External Influences’ to better capture the range of societal expectations, funding dynamics, and public campaigns that influence academic freedom. These influences manifest through funding dependencies and regulatory frameworks (Stachowiak-Kudła 2021).

Disinformation campaigns and legislative restrictions emerge as significant external constraints (D2), while wealthy stakeholders pressure research teams (D4). These dynamics align with analyses of how external actors influence academic institutions through resource allocation and policy frameworks (Jones et al. 2020). Additionally, funding emerges as a critical external influence that shapes research directions and academic autonomy. One respondent reflects on the complexities of international financing: ‘funding can be obtained from certain countries. These are areas where you have to carefully think if your academic freedom is just and ethical’ (D3). Moreover, accreditation requirements shape institutional practices and academic freedom (D25), thereby influencing institutional decisions. In contrast, ‘assessment and accreditation processes are generally quantitative rather than qualitative’ (D30).

Cultural and ethical constraints

Cultural and ethical constraints manifest through complex interchanges between institutional reputation management, research integrity, and pedagogical autonomy in increasingly multicultural academic environments. These constraints reflect fundamental tensions in higher education between academic freedom and institutional responsibilities (Scott 2006), particularly evident in how universities navigate ideological diversity and cultural differences within academic governance.

Long-term faculty members often resist change, primarily motivated by concerns about institutional reputation (D1). This conservative stance creates barriers to innovation in teaching and research methodologies, aligning with broader patterns of institutional inertia in higher education. The pressure to secure research funding while maintaining ethical integrity presents another significant constraint, particularly in industry collaborations (D3). This constraint reflects tensions between academic autonomy and market pressures that reshape institutional practices (Smith, 2020).

Integrating diverse ideological perspectives in academic spaces is a particularly contentious issue, especially regarding capitalism and economic systems. As one faculty member notes: ‘I have a view on capitalism that may not strike an agreeable chord with most [...] students (where I teach)’ (D6). This challenge intensifies in [...], where ‘the culture is more and more multicultural even if the populist, demagogical and right-wing forces are growing’ (D21).

The results reveal faculty concerns about the boundaries between activism and scholarly discourse in educational settings. One respondent highlighted tensions arising when contested political perspectives on European colonialism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are presented as established facts rather than subjects for critical examination (D23). Such pedagogical approaches, the respondent argued, potentially undermine academic inquiry and students’ critical thinking development. These tensions underscore the broader academic debate about the universities’ contributions to social change (Davies 2015).

Cultural variations in academic governance further complicate these dynamics. In [...], hierarchical structures significantly constrain professorial autonomy (D30), while [...] institutions foster more collaborative approaches to academic governance (D15). These contrasting approaches illuminate how institutional cultures shape academic freedom practices (Stachowiak-Kudła 2021).

The evolving perception of knowledge and increased sensitivity to academic debates intensify these challenges. One respondent observed:

Society is shifting in how knowledge is perceived [...] that academic research is seen as an opinion. And that some research is seen as taking a political stance. Also, due to certain conclusions based on academic research, colleagues have been threatened. This limits the academic freedom of researchers. (D3)

This observation illuminates how political polarization and social media dynamics fundamentally reshape academic discourse and institutional responses to contentious research (Finkelstein et al. 2024). These cultural and ethical values shape academic freedom within complex institutions, balancing academic freedom with social responsibility in multicultural academic environments (Tight 1988).

Balancing educational reform for sustainability with academic freedom and technological pressure

The intersection of sustainability imperatives, academic freedom, and technological advancement creates complex challenges for academic freedom (Finkelstein et al. 2024). These challenges manifest through institutional policies on environmental discourse, technological surveillance, and pedagogical autonomy (Stachowiak-Kudła 2021).

Environmental discourse in academia faces constraints amid shifting political landscapes. One respondent noted: 'Considering the opinions of reigning leaders about the environment, caution is considered a wise move when it comes to sharing opinions about environmental factors at stake' (D6). This dynamic reflects broader tensions between academic freedom and institutional reputation management in politically sensitive domains (Beaud 2020).

Faculty members express increasing concern about technological pressure regarding digital monitoring: 'Faculty are becoming more cautious as they know students can videotape their statements and pull them out of context to get them in trouble' (D6). This surveillance culture fundamentally alters pedagogical practices and academic discourse (Jones et al. 2020; Smith, 2020). The rapid integration of artificial intelligence in academic assessment (D2) and the increasing emphasis on digital and remote learning (D13) create additional complexities for maintaining academic freedom while advancing educational innovation.

Approaches to respond to the challenges

The analysis reveals sophisticated strategies faculty members deploy to navigate institutional constraints while preserving academic freedom (Figure 2). One respondent described how resource limitations were reframed as an opportunity to refine by incorporating alternative materials and student-led research to maintain educational quality and critical thinking (D19). This individual adaptation strengthens through collective action, as faculty members establish communities of practice that promote 'critical thinking' and enable 'societal development' (D13). These collective approaches reflect Kennedy's (1997) 'moral architecture' of academia.

The findings reveal that collective capabilities emerge as powerful mechanisms for tackling institutional challenges. By establishing supportive networks and communities of practice, faculty members turn individual constraints into opportunities for institutional change. As one participant describes:

Created a favorable and safe environment within my portfolio by working on the core values of trust, respect, responsibility, and innovation, which allowed staff to freely communicate and put forward their ideas without restrictions. This then allowed us to develop innovative product ideas and work through some of the persistent challenges leading to improved staff culture. (D28)

This collective approach aligns with Ahmed's (2012) analysis of institutional transformation through integrated community action. Collective advocacy mechanisms enable academic communities to transform individual vulnerabilities into institutional strengths, demonstrating how scholars'

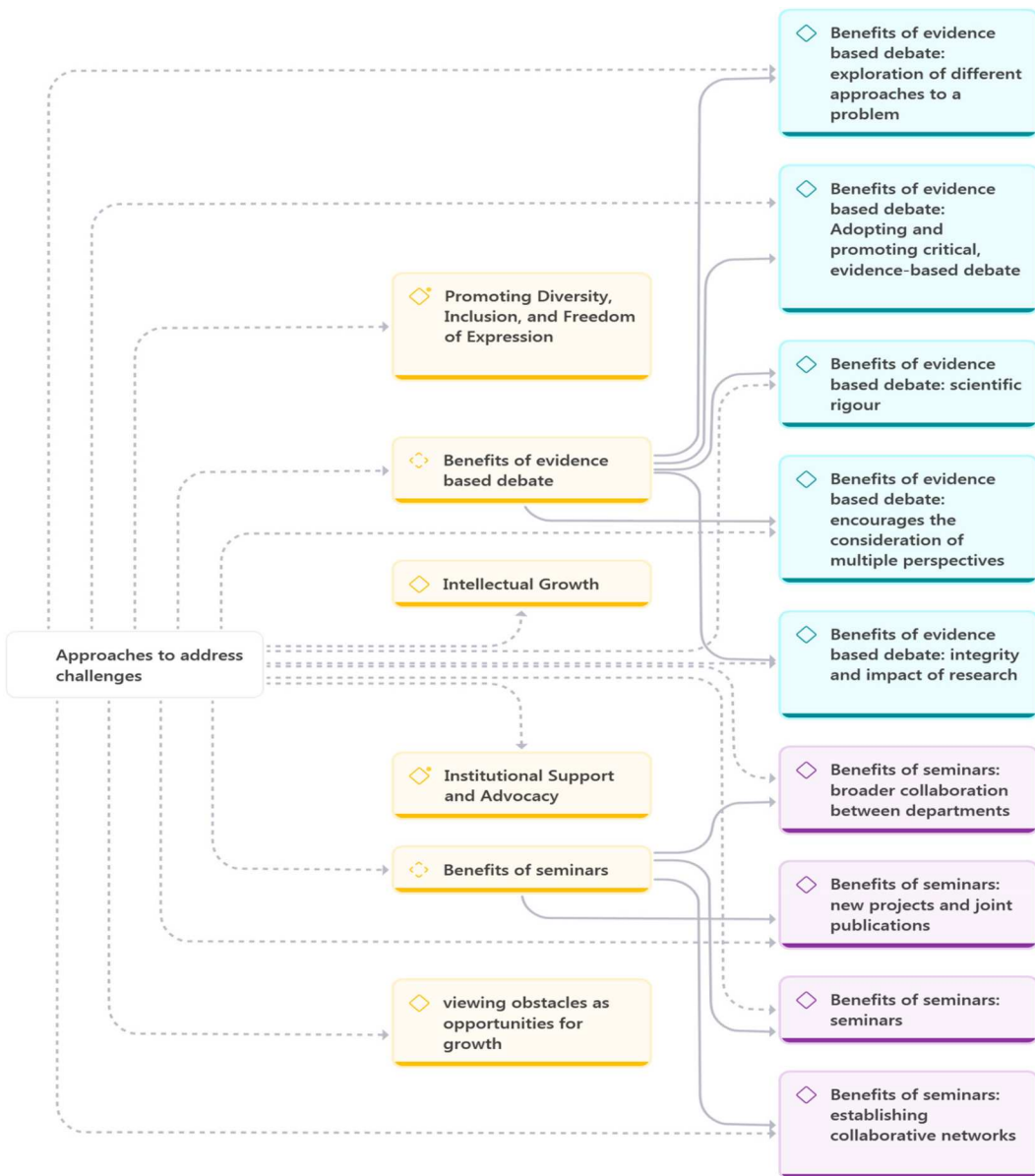


Figure 2. Approaches to address challenges to academic freedom. Source: Created by the authors using ATLAS.ti software.

shared understanding of academic freedom as collective responsibility creates sustainable protective frameworks that transcend rights-based paradigms.

Collective resilience develops through collaborative networks that enhance academic autonomy. Faculty members establish 'spaces of academic freedom through networks of contacts, through collaborations between colleagues' (D30), creating what we link to contextual freedom (Marginson 2014). These collaborative spaces enable the dialogical knowledge creation, where academic freedom functions as a collective rather than merely an individual capability. This collective understanding fundamentally shifts scholars' advocacy from defensive individualism to proactive community mobilization; wherein academic freedom becomes institutionally embedded through coordinated scholarly action rather than dependent upon isolated individual assertions.

Table 5. Exemplary quotes on 'Role of DEI in academic freedom.'

	Role of DEI initiatives
	Representative quote
Knowledge legitimization	'DEI initiatives at my institution have largely enhanced academic freedom by legitimizing forms of knowledge previously treated as peripheral. For example, the introduction of an EDI-informed curriculum review process encouraged the integration of global South scholarship into core modules. This broadened the range of legitimate references and protected faculty wishing to center decolonial perspectives.' (D.14.2)
Indigenous knowledge	'Historically marginalized Indigenous research led to curriculum enhancements which require embeddedness of Indigenous knowledge, perspectives and practices.' (D.28.2)
Epistemic pluralism	'The DEI initiatives at my institution have played a fundamental role in legitimizing forms of knowledge, research methodologies and academic perspectives that have historically been marginalized. This process has not only taken place through the symbolic inclusion of new authors, but above all through the critical revision of the criteria for epistemic legitimacy, which for a long time were guided almost exclusively by Eurocentric, positivist, and normative paradigms.' (D.2.2)
Critical perspective on DEI	'DEI projects can expose this logic, right? They can expose and critique these systems of reproducing similar structures [...] I would highly argue that DEI projects, they ... they can really help highlight this ... this contradiction, this problem. And so, in that sense. I do think they have a productive role to play. But maybe not in the way that they are usually portrayed.' (D.34)
Tensions in DEI implementation	'Academic freedom and DEI policies are not necessarily opposites but require careful management of the tensions that can arise when different values collide. [...] In some cases, the promotion of DEI may seem to limit certain forms of expression or academic approach, especially when it comes to sensitive topics such as identity, inequality or cultural history.' (D2.2). 'Political scrutiny of DEI initiatives has intensified in recent years, often framing them as antithetical to academic freedom. This politicization impacts institutional decision-making, creating a cautious climate around certain topics. For example, institutional efforts at decolonizing the curriculum rarely engage with the true epistemic erasure of Business Schools and prefer more neutral language to avoid backlash – an act of strategic compliance that protects the work but constrains open naming of its critical intent' (D14.2). 'As helpful as those initiatives are, we should monitor closely to whom privileges are granted. Universities should be particularly attentive to the danger of granting unearned privileges to particular groups at the expense of other groups.' (D.31)
Excluded perspectives	'As a Jew, I have felt that, especially in the current crisis, we have been completely ignored by DEI initiatives. I am not talking as much about my own university, but across the board.' (D.23)
Political attacks on DEI	'In my country ... [DEI initiatives] are extremely under attack. The situation here is extremely worrying. I feel that it's not as big ... in the other countries yet ... We're still very white ... how many non-white professors are there, right?' (D.35)
Structural limitations	'I feel that we can do more, but I also see that the way that our diversity officer is placed in the hierarchy, she has not so much freedom. So sometimes I am a bit frustrated that she is really walking the corporate line.' (D.32)

Source: Created by the authors.

Scholars served as institutional change agents, transforming constraints into opportunities through the careful navigation of institutional politics (D23), the strategic deployment of pedagogical innovation (D19), and the cultivation of supportive academic communities (D28). These show how individual agency and institutional structures interact with collective action and innovative teaching, resisting and transforming institutional constraints.

Role of diversity, equity and inclusion

DEI initiatives might enhance institutional environments by incorporating diverse perspectives into curricula (Ahmed 2012) and promoting academic freedom (Table 5). It results in greater cultural sensitivity, especially in international education contexts (Soffer-Vital and Finkelstein 2023).

DEI also intertwines with academic freedom regarding knowledge creation. Conversely, our findings also highlight tensions in DEI implementation, particularly around inclusive representation and academic discourse, revealing a perception that DEI focuses narrowly on minorities rather than the broader academic community (Jones et al. 2020). One respondent warned about the risks of 'minority aggression and victimization propaganda' (D9), highlighting the need for DEI initiatives to overcome an overly narrow focus on specific groups.

These findings underscore that while DEI initiatives and advocacy are crucial for academic freedom, they also challenge balancing diverse viewpoints and institutional unity (Beaud 2020). Effective integration goes beyond physical spaces to create virtual environments that promote equality (Jones et al. 2020). However, excluded and minoritized scholars still face heightened risks due to ingrained cultures of silencing (Blell, Liu, and Verma 2022). Successful DEI implementation necessitates comprehensive institutional responses that counter structural barriers while preserving academic freedom in knowledge creation (Stachowiak-Kudła 2021).

Role of spirituality-related initiatives

We argue that spiritual integration into HEIs supports academic freedom and enables a nuanced understanding of human experience and ethical engagement (Table 6). Spiritual practices enhance institutional capacity for collective well-being by fostering faculty demonstrating a heightened student-centered pedagogy and civic engagement (Lindholm and Astin 2006). This is revealed in participants' observations about how spirituality supports them in gaining 'more understanding of how we are related and what our real purpose is here, rather than complaining about issues that do not lead to collective improvement and wellbeing' (D6).

Our findings demonstrate how spirituality-related initiatives contribute to academic freedom through practices, including meditation and yoga (D13), reflexive silence and interfaith listening and dialogue circles (D2.2), establishing resilience mechanisms that address emotional well-being within academic communities, for example, 'meditation helps me to deal with institutional pressures to pursue my own research interests' (D8.2). Rather than merely constituting individual responses to neoliberal pressures, spiritual practices emerge as systemic resources for collective empowerment and institutional transformation.

The mechanism through which spirituality enhances academic freedom operates through three interconnected pathways. First, contemplative practices support emotional regulation necessary to withstand institutional pressures (D8.2 exemplifies this through meditation). Second, spiritual community-building creates alternative power structures that support academic risk-taking, as evidenced in D2.2's description of interfaith dialogue spaces enabling controversial discourse. Third, spiritual frameworks provide meaning-making resources (exemplified by D5) that sustain faculty engagement with socially challenging research topics beyond immediate institutional rewards.

In addressing DEI regarding religious celebrations and displays of spirituality, we point out that this positions spirituality as a foundational element for addressing academic freedom and building sustainable scholarly communities, bridging individual well-being with institutional capacity for knowledge creation through what Tisdell (2006) terms the intersection of spirituality and secular higher education.

Discussion

The findings illuminate how academic freedom is understood and manifests through four distinct but interconnected philosophical dimensions: epistemological foundations, ontological frameworks, axiological principles, and praxiological applications. This comprehensive framework emphasized the need to balance individual academic autonomy with collective responsibility, particularly in addressing contemporary challenges related to technological advancements, political pressures, and cultural dynamics. Integrating DEI and spirituality perspectives into this framework enriches our understanding of academic freedom and suggests new pathways for institutional adaptation and scholarly resilience in an increasingly complex academic environment.

The epistemological foundation of academic freedom has shifted from pursuing objective truth through unfettered inquiry (Altbach 2001) to recognizing the dialogical nature of knowledge creation (Barnett 1990). This shift reflects the view that knowledge is socially constructed and linked to power relations (Tierney 1993), as research on institutional transformation incorporates

Table 6. Exemplary quotes on ‘the role of spirituality-related initiatives.’

Role of spirituality-related initiatives	
	Representative quote
Plural spirituality	<p>‘Although [spiritual practices] are not always formally recognized as such. [...] [And they] are not about religion per se, but about an open, plural and humanizing spirituality that values listening, caring for others, deep reflection and a sense of purpose in academic life. [...] In general, these manifestations are discreet, transversal, and culturally diverse, reflecting the pluralism of beliefs and worldviews present in the academic community. For example, symbolic messages, moments of silence, thanks to transcendental forces or words of blessing (elements that do not belong to a specific religious tradition, but which carry a spiritual sense of connection, gratitude and collective purpose) are common [...] At our institution, meditation groups and interfaith dialogue meetings function as communities where researchers and students feel safe to express divergent opinions and reflect on controversial topics without fear of censorship or retaliation’ (D2.2).</p> <p>‘Meditation helps me to deal with institutional pressures to pursue my own research interests.’ (D.8.2)</p> <p>‘Half an hour meditation, half an hour walking silently together outside, things like that to really give space ... bring it to the buildings that the people who are there, it’s in their space, they don’t have to go somewhere else.’ (D.32)</p> <p>‘In my view, spirituality can be associated with meditation, deep thinking and even philosophy, seeing things in a broader and more holistic context with an eye for the common public good (rather than political power and corporate interests).’ (D.39)</p> <p>‘Yoga classes every evening are a spot for meeting senior faculty and institute leadership outside their offices and with a more humane outlook. [...] When scholars feel pressured to suppress parts of their identity – whether spiritual, political, or cultural – it diminishes their intellectual freedom.’ (D.40)</p> <p>‘I am a Christian, and when I face injustice or restrictions on freedom, I remember the strength within me and my mission – to bring light and goodness. This deeply supports me in conflicts with darkness and evil.’ (D.42)</p>
Meaning-making	<p>‘At the inter-personal level, when we practice these [spiritual] values (in the workplace, for example), we are able to create an environment of acceptance, understanding, equity, inclusion, dignity and tolerance for all, regardless of their background or orientation [...] We develop virtues such as forgiveness, generosity, and service. Above all, a spiritual perspective helps garner an attitude of gratitude for being given the opportunity to play a part in the grand drama called life during our brief sojourn on this planet. We begin to intuit a big picture and sense of sublime purpose and meaning behind the never-ending economic grind. This is called ‘big-picture thinking.’ All great leaders have this gift’ (D.5).</p> <p>Institutional constraints exist but navigating these through collective capacity is possible through spirituality initiatives such as building a sense of community and meaningful interventions’ (D28.2).</p>
Under-evaluated potential	<p>‘I think it [spirituality] could be important factor that previously mostly ignored. It could positively effect on the development of academic freedom, shaping it from another angle. I think we still undervalue its potential for rethinking academic freedom definition and its input in development.’ (D.33)</p> <p>‘Spirituality and religion in general can be helpful resources for helping to foster academic freedom since they provide resistance – or resources for being resistant to – public pressures. By the same token, they can also hamper academic freedom.’ (D.31)</p>
DEI-spirituality complementarity	<p>‘DEI initiatives coupled with spiritual practices undoubtedly will strengthen the academic freedom as a collective capability in higher education institutions. This will be realized through enhanced resilience and equity measures. [...] Spiritual practices complement through empathy, nurturing, reflection and commitment. Such complementarity will allow for broader participation, diverse viewpoints, and challenges to groupthink.’ (D.28.2)</p> <p>‘Looking ahead, I envision DEI initiatives and spiritual practices working together to strengthen academic freedom by fostering inclusive environments where diverse voices are valued.’ (D.41)</p>

Source: Created by the authors.

marginalized voices (Ahmed 2012). We argue that DEI initiatives enhance academic freedom’s epistemological foundation by expanding knowledge legitimation processes through inclusion-exclusion dynamics inherent in all social institutions. Our study reveals how DEI operates as an epistemic technology that increases communicative complexity within academic discourse by legitimizing previously marginalized methodologies while preserving scholarly rigor through professional peer review standards. This integration addresses allegations that DEI suppresses

dissenting voices by demonstrating how academic freedom differs fundamentally from general free speech, operating within professional institutional settings that require adherence to ethical standards determined by academic peers rather than popular opinion (Darian-Smith 2025). Following Wight's (2021) analysis of critical dogmatism, we note that DEI initiatives enhance academic freedom by applying a great diversity of perspectives to bring 'objectivity' to our understandings (Nietzsche 1996), thereby expanding rather than constraining epistemic possibilities. The academic context's inherent exposure to multiple viewpoints enables what Zhao and Bindewald (2018) conceptualize as Habermasian tolerance, in which DEI frameworks facilitate scholarly coexistence of structurally recognizing epistemic diversity without enforcing ideological positions. This approach could resolve apparent tensions between DEI promotion and academic freedom protection by demonstrating how institutional DEI mechanisms enhance communicative capacity while maintaining scholarly autonomy through differentiated knowledge validation processes that privilege professional expertise over political opinion. Findings show this evolution through participants' experiences with diverse teaching and research methods, especially in integrating spiritual perspectives and DEI initiatives. This evolution occurs within increasing global efforts to control knowledge production, as identified by Darian-Smith (2025), making participants' strategies for navigating constraints particularly important. Expanding the boundaries of academic freedom reveals how institutional structures shape and are shaped by changing understandings of knowledge creation, a dynamic central to modern academic practice (Davies 2015).

The ontological dimension of academic freedom is a dynamic interplay between institutional enablement and constraint, transcending traditional ideas of protected academic space. This builds upon the concept of the 'moral architecture' of academia (Kennedy 1997), incorporating frameworks for institutional transformation through diversity (Smith, 2020) and analysis of situated academic freedom (Marginson 2014). Lackner's (2024) research on development agreements between states and HEIs provides insights into this ontological tension, especially how formal autonomy may not lead to meaningful change in daily academic practice. The study's findings illustrate how faculty navigate institutional pressures by innovatively responding to constraints, balancing academic rigor and inclusivity. They also highlight how DEI and spirituality initiatives contribute to the protective function of academic autonomy (Stachowiak-Kudła 2021), demonstrating the interconnectedness of academic work. These dynamics between institutional structures and individual agency further reveal the complex value systems guiding academic practice. However, this disconnection between formal structures and lived experience often stems from faculty members' limited comprehension of academic freedom's multifaceted nature, which constrains their capacity to advocate effectively for meaningful institutional change. Such conceptual uncertainty creates implementation gaps where academics struggle to translate theoretical understanding of academic freedom into concrete actions that challenge institutional constraints.

From an axiological standpoint, academic freedom embodies the values of intellectual autonomy and scholarly integrity, balanced with communal accountability (Scott 2006). This reflects moral imperatives (Tight 1988) and the analysis of engaged scholarship in contemporary academia (Gibbs 2013), which is relevant to our findings on institutional pressures (Figure 1). Our results align with Darian-Smith's (2025) view that academic freedom must be understood regarding collective social responsibility, not just individual rights. Participants' approaches to sensitive topics and spiritual perspectives emphasize academic freedom in polarized contexts (Beaud 2020). Recent studies on institutional diversity show how these practices shape academic discourse (Ahmed 2012). Integrating spiritual values with DEI principles strengthens this framework. Participants expressed a desire for the freedom to teach and research ethically while engaging diverse viewpoints, reflected in their strategies to address challenges (Figure 2).

The praxiological manifestation of academic freedom needs specific institutional arrangements and resources for meaningful scholarly work (Berdahl 1990). This practical aspect includes the global evolution of academic freedom practices (Lerch, Bromley, and Ramirez 2024), evident in participants' innovative pedagogical methods and inclusive research strategies. The challenges our

participants face in governance parallel Hai and Anh's (2022) findings of low faculty participation in university governance, especially in financial and organizational areas. Results highlight strategies to address institutional limitations, particularly in executing DEI initiatives and spiritual practices. Remarkably, the cultivation of academic communities through spirituality-related practices might facilitate a transformative shift from individualistic rights-based understanding toward collective capability frameworks that enhance institutional resilience. This evolution transcends traditional protective mechanisms by fostering collaborative academic agency that simultaneously preserves individual scholarly autonomy while strengthening communal capacity for knowledge creation and institutional transformation. Recent frameworks explain the protective role of academic freedom in diverse contexts (Stachowiak-Kudła 2021). Faculty experiences show the courage to teach within constraints while fulfilling broader social purposes, reflecting participants' responses to institutional pressures. These implementations reveal tensions between institutional demands and scholarly integrity, particularly in confronting future challenges to academic freedom.

Integrating spiritual awareness into academic freedom can be a powerful mechanism for transcending its individualistic approach, enabling intersubjective dialogue utmost for knowledge creation, especially under institutional pressure, fostering resilience and engagement in academic communities, and influencing institutional cultures. This builds on the interactive essence of knowledge creation (Barnett 1990). Likewise, this theoretical integration challenges transaction-cost approaches to academic governance by fostering community-oriented worldviews that move beyond zero-sum competition for scarce institutional resources toward collaborative knowledge creation through shared meaning-making systems. The findings show that spirituality initiatives and practices create supportive environments promoting scholarly rigor and personal well-being. This integration offers pathways for transnational solidarity essential against global higher education attacks (Darian-Smith 2025). Participants' experiences with meditation, mindfulness, yoga, and spiritual reflection align with contemporary frameworks for understanding academic freedom (Lerch, Bromley, and Ramirez 2024) and suggest new ways to navigate institutional pressures. Therefore, the contemplative dimension develops collective sense-making capacity, enabling scholarly communities to function as interconnected knowledge networks rather than atomized competitors, and creating supportive institutional environments that sustain controversial research through community solidarity mechanisms.

Our analysis points toward a more comprehensive and inclusive conceptualization of academic freedom as a transformative force that acknowledges its traditional roots and emerging dimensions in contemporary higher education. Our findings' distinction between formal and lived autonomy resonates with Lackner's (2024) observation that agreements between states and HEIs often have a limited impact on institutional operations despite enhancing legitimacy. Therefore, academic freedom appears as a multidimensional construct operating across the proposed four interconnected philosophical domains. We posit, therefore, that *academic freedom represents the dynamic capacity of academic communities to pursue, create, and disseminate knowledge through epistemological freedom to challenge dominant paradigms, ensure epistemic justice and legitimize diverse ways of knowing; ontological autonomy to define and negotiate the boundaries between institutional enablement and constraint; axiological independence to balance individual scholarly integrity with collective responsibility; and praxiological agency to implement innovative teaching and research practices within institutional frameworks*. Therefore, academic freedom manifests as an individual right & responsibility and a collective capability influenced by institutional structures and societal dynamics.

Implications

Our study offers valuable theoretical and practical contributions. First, our research advances academic freedom understanding through a conceptual framework synthesizing its epistemological, ontological, axiological, and praxiological dimensions. This theoretical contribution addresses the critical gap Barnett (1990) identified in understanding how academic freedom manifests across

multiple philosophical domains. While previous scholars examined academic freedom primarily through rights-based conceptualizations (Altbach 2001), our framework illuminates how epistemological inquiry (Davies 2015), ontological positioning (Rosewell and Ashwin 2019), axiological commitments (Kennedy 1997), and praxiological implementations (Scott 2006) coalesce to shape academic freedom.

The framework reveals academic freedom as a sophisticated and complex ecosystem where knowledge-creation processes interact with institutional structures through the performative elements of scholarly practice (Ahmed 2012). This perspective transcends conventional theoretical boundaries by examining how academic freedom principles guide scholarly decisions (Gibbs 2013) while practical strategies enable faculty to transform institutional constraints (Jones et al. 2020). The theoretical advancement illuminates how academics actively shape institutional environments through transformative academic practice (Smith, 2020), positioning academic freedom not merely as a protective right but as a generative force for scholarly and institutional metamorphosis.

Our study illuminates the theoretical intersection between DEI initiatives and spirituality-related practices as complementary forces for enhancing academic freedom as a collective capability. This integration extends Smith's (2020) diversity framework and Tisdell's (2006) study on diversity-spirituality in higher education by demonstrating how these seemingly distinct domains operate synergistically to create institutional environments conducive to epistemic pluralism. The findings reveal how spiritual practices provide meaning-making resources that sustain DEI efforts beyond policy compliance, while DEI frameworks offer structural legitimacy for diverse spiritual expressions within secular academic contexts. This opens significant avenues for future research examining how contemplative practices influence institutional diversity outcomes, how marginalized scholarly communities utilize spiritual resources for academic resilience, and how spiritual community formation intersects with Collins (2019) intersectionality framework to support multiple identity negotiations within academic freedom contexts.

Conclusion

Our study advances the understanding of academic freedom by developing a philosophical framework that integrates epistemological, ontological, axiological, and praxiological dimensions. It offers a comprehensive conceptualization of academic freedom in contemporary higher education. Accordingly, our key contribution is to establish academic freedom as a collective capability rather than merely an individual right.

Regarding the limitations, it is constrained by focusing solely on faculty perspectives, excluding views of other stakeholders influencing academic freedom, its understanding, and manifestations. This narrow scope misses important institutional dynamics shaping academic freedom in practice. To broaden our understanding, we interviewed leading student bodies in the EU and UK regarding their perceptions of academic freedom (Figure 3). These interviews illuminate how students view academic freedom, providing insights that challenge our faculty-centered analysis and underscore the need to explore the motivations and effects of these perspectives.

While our investigation deliberately sought diverse perspectives across multiple regions, cultures, and scholarly positions to capture varied manifestations of academic freedom, this approach prioritized breadth over regime-specific depth. We acknowledge that our findings, while illuminating how academics navigate constraints within predominantly democratic contexts, may not adequately address how academic freedom operates under authoritarian, illiberal, or hybrid regimes where state control over universities differs fundamentally in scope and intensity. The theoretical framework we advance likely reflects assumptions about institutional autonomy and scholarly agency that may not hold across all political systems. Future research should examine how our proposed collective capability conceptualization operates within contexts where external political interference directly constrains epistemological inquiry, limits ontological

European Student Union [President]

“In the very basic way, I would understand it in the Humboldt conceptualization that you have these different strands of the freedom to science, freedom to learn, freedom to teach, and then as a subcategory, the freedom to unionize – both for academic staff, but also students. [...]

We also apply a continental European perspective on academic freedom very much from the Humboldtian perspective. But then, if you look at how Anglo-Saxons frame the world, it is way more about the freedom of speech.

I would say that freedom of speech is not the same as academic freedom. So, for me, there is a clear distinction that the continental European perspective goes way broader, and it's more a human rights perspective.

That would maybe be the one last thing I would add to this: I do not agree with the Anglo-Saxon view of academic freedom.”

Student Academics For Academic Freedom [Convenor]

“In terms of what academic freedom is, we see it as scholarly openness and holding yourself to true scholarly values, which have previously been held; we think they have been degraded but previously held before. So, the ability to publish and, as academics and students, say what you want to say without having to have too much fear.”

Figure 3. Further insights on academic freedom.

negotiation of institutional boundaries, restricts axiological independence through imposed value systems that subordinate scholarly integrity to political orthodoxy, and curtails praxiological implementation of transformative practices. Such investigations would strengthen the framework's theoretical robustness and address contextual generalizability across diverse political regimes.

Additional studies could explore three promising directions from our findings. First, comparative analyses across regional, national, and institutional contexts could illuminate how different approaches to academic freedom influence scholarly and institutional transformation. Second, our conceptual framework highlights the transformative potential of DEI initiatives and spiritual practices in HEIs, revealing how they can support or hinder academic freedom. Further research is needed to understand their interconnection. Longitudinal studies could investigate how spiritual practices evolve to reshape institutional power dynamics and knowledge legitimation. Third, future research could examine how emerging technologies and AI are reshaping academic freedom practices, particularly regarding surveillance, data privacy, and pedagogical autonomy. Fourth, our sample has substantial representation from business and management-related fields. Future research could further examine how our collective capability framework operates across a broader range of disciplines.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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