



Resolution 2352 (2020)¹

Provisional version

Threats to academic freedom and autonomy of higher education institutions in Europe

Parliamentary Assembly

1. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy of higher education institutions are not only crucial for the quality of education and research; they are essential components of democratic societies. Yet these values are under multiple threats today, ranging from the criminalisation of researchers, scholars and students to the commodification of higher education and commercialisation of knowledge, which are increasingly damaging the quality of education and research and distancing higher education from the wider civic democratic and societal purposes.
2. The Parliamentary Assembly deplores that some of the Council of Europe member States figure at the very bottom of the recently published Academic Freedom Index (AFI) list, which confirms the urgency of setting up a proper international framework of assistance, monitoring, assessment and sanctioning mechanisms to protect academic freedom and integrity across the continent. The fundamental values of higher education apply to all member States, without exception.
3. The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated to what extent academic freedom helps research and dissemination of reliable information in global sanitary crisis. This pandemic should in no way serve as pretext for any further infringements on academic freedom and institutional autonomy of higher education institutions. The post-Covid-19 world will require more than ever democratic civic universities dedicated to producing knowledge and developing competences that serve the society responsibly and responsively.
4. The Assembly regrets that, notwithstanding two decades of serious discussions on academic freedom and integrity, to this day, declarative statements have not translated as yet into internationally agreed definition or conceptual reference on academic freedom. This explains in part the low awareness among the academic community of their rights and helps put a blind eye to institutions and countries that fail to guarantee core values and protect students and scholars. The Assembly therefore welcomes the adoption by the Conference of Ministers of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) held on 19 November 2020 of a common definition and encourages the design of appropriate benchmarks that would enable systemic monitoring and assessment.
5. The Assembly recalls the Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)7 on the responsibility of public authorities for academic freedom and institutional autonomy, which clearly stipulates that public authorities have the obligation to protect academic freedom and institutional autonomy, and that they must refrain from any action that would endanger or impinge on them. The existence of laws does not automatically guarantee their implementation. The Assembly is concerned that, in the absence of regularly monitored data and of a legally binding international agreement, the various forms of abuses go on unhindered and unsanctioned. It considers that there is a true need for a European Convention on the Protection of Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy together with its information gathering, monitoring and assistance instruments.

1. *Text adopted by the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 20 November 2020 (see [Doc. 15167](#), report of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media, rapporteur: Mr Koloman Brenner).*

See also [Recommendation 2189 \(2020\)](#).



6. The Assembly expresses concern over the increasing external funding and commodification of higher education, which undermine the idea of higher education as a public good and public responsibility. The external financiers' commercial and political interests may subvert the focus of research towards increased profits and revenue flows for the companies that sponsor such research, and set limits to the freedom to publish the research results. Universities being icons of intellectual accomplishments of States, they have a major role in preserving cultural and linguistic heritage. National authorities must therefore live up to allocating adequate State funding of higher education in order to reduce the risks arising from external financing.

7. Academic freedom and autonomy are not properly taken into account in any university rankings today, making some higher educational institutions of countries with the lowest scores of AFI appear to excel. Future rankings must duly take academic freedom data and available indexes into account. Excellence cannot be based on stifled questions, political conformism and the closing of minds.

8. Finally, the Assembly commends the various initiatives that different international bodies such as the Council of Europe, the EHEA/Bologna Process or UNESCO are currently undertaking in view of developing new monitoring mechanisms of the implementation of academic values in higher education institutions. It encourages them to bring all the different existing frameworks together and to pull their respective strengths and resources in order to avoid duplication of effort, maximise value-added of the research and enhance the chances for broad policy development and implementation. In this respect, the Assembly welcomes the 2019 Declaration of the Global Forum on Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy and the Future of Democracy and urges the academic communities, higher education leaders, public authorities, the ministries of the EHEA and other stakeholders to adhere to its recommendations.

9. In light of the above, the Assembly calls upon the governments of member and observer States:

9.1. to ensure that the protection of academic freedom and institutional autonomy is enshrined in national legislation, and that the relevant legal provisions are put into practice; to refrain from undertaking any undue action that could endanger or impinge on academic freedom and institutional autonomy, and establish the frameworks that make their practice possible;

9.2. to devise new post-Covid-19 national higher education policies and regulatory frameworks that take due account of the principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, in line with the Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)7 on the responsibility of public authorities for academic freedom and institutional autonomy;

9.3. to provide adequate public funding for higher education and research, in line with established national priorities, thus enabling institutions to maintain their independence as far as possible; to enhance transparency within the regulatory mechanisms for higher education funding and provide clear provisions for impeding any possible menace to academic freedom and autonomy through financing schemes, whether the sources are public or private.

10. In particular, the Assembly appeals to the Governments of Azerbaijan, Hungary, the Russian Federation and Turkey, which are ranking lowest within the AFI, to take immediate action to reverse the recently adopted legislation and/or practices that limit the respect of principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

11. The Assembly calls upon the relevant stakeholders, including international organisations, national authorities, academic professional associations, universities and funders, to integrate the assessment of academic freedom into their review processes, institutional partnerships as well as ranking and financial support mechanisms.

12. The Assembly welcomes the intended reaffirmation by the Ministers responsible for higher education of the EHEA of their commitment to promoting and protecting the fundamental values in the entire EHEA through intensified political dialogue and co-operation, and to this end, urges them:

12.1. to place the development of a proper framework for the enhancement of the fundamental values of the EHEA, including clear benchmarks against which the level of (and changes to) academic freedom could be measured and a strategy for advocacy and monitoring policy implementation of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, on the top of their agenda for 2021-2024;

12.2. to seriously address the threats to academic freedom and institutional autonomy and consider measures towards the governments showing continued disrespect or unwillingness to take reasonable steps to improve the situation.

13. Finally, national parliaments and international parliamentary bodies have also a role to play in identifying relative increases or decreases in respect for academic freedom among State partners and providing a framework for regular evaluation, dialogue and reform. The Assembly calls on national MPs and relevant parliamentary committees of its member States to remain vigilant as regards to significant deficiencies or decreases in respect of university values, and to undertake inquiries into the causes and develop appropriate policy remedies when necessary.