



Initiative proposal

Strengthening Academic Freedom and Freedom of expression at EUR

Inhoud

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Introduction

In an era where information spreads rapidly and societal debates increasingly polarize, the necessity for robust academic freedom and unhindered freedom of expression stands paramount. These fundamental freedoms are crucial for critically evaluating societal norms and values, and they ensure that ideas and hypotheses can be tested in a free environment. It is essential that our university embraces and protects these freedoms, thus creating an environment where both students and faculty can share and develop their insights without fear. This commitment to academic freedom and expression is not just a core principle for our university, it is indispensable for our mission to 'create positive societal impact.' The free exchange of thoughts and ideas is, after all, the foundation not only for the academic community but for the democratic society as a whole. This policy proposal aims therefore to strengthen academic freedom and freedom of expression within our institution, in response to signals from various inspections and studies indicating that these fundamental rights are under pressure. We propose concrete actions to actively promote these rights and safeguard the integrity of our academic mission.

Problem Statement and Related Signals

While the freedom of academic expression is a fundamental pillar of both the academic community and the broader democratic society, the legal protection of academic freedom in the Netherlands is currently below the average of EU member states. According to the Higher Education Law, specifically Article 1.6, it is expected that academic freedom within institutions is respected. However, practice indicates otherwise, and there are several disturbing trends threatening this freedom.

1. Findings from the Education Inspectorate: Recent research by the Education Inspectorate in 2023 shows that 34% of the students surveyed could not unequivocally say yes to the question of whether they feel free to express their opinion in situations where their opinion differs from that of teachers or the majority of students. Moreover, one in seven students indicates feeling (very) limited in their ability to express their opinion on societal problems or ethical issues if it differs from the majority.
2. Decline in the Academic Freedom Index: Since 2012, the Netherlands has shown a declining trend in the Academic Freedom Index, particularly in areas such as freedom of research and education, academic exchange and dissemination of knowledge, and campus integrity. This decline indicates a growing restriction of academic freedoms in the Netherlands.
3. Direct experiences of academics: In October 2023, an open letter was published by both students and faculty of the Eindhoven University of Technology, indicating that expressing criticism within the university could be detrimental to their careers. This case is not isolated but indicative of a broader cultural shift within Dutch higher education.
4. Signals from Dutch academic leaders: The rector of Utrecht University stated in 2022 that although the exact scope of the problem is unknown, there are clear indications that justify concerns about the impact of 'cancel culture' and 'wokeness' on academic freedom within Dutch higher education institutions.
5. European context and reports: The EU report from 2023, "State of Play of Academic Freedom in the EU Member States," emphasizes that academic freedom in the Netherlands is deteriorating. The report points out the following: 'University administrators, politics and government, cancel culture, and the woke movement threaten academic freedom. As a result, there is less diversity of academic perspectives in the Netherlands and an increase in self-censorship. These threats are caused, among other things, by New Public Management-inspired developments at the system level and intra-institutional forms, structures, and practices of science governance; societal developments that lead to greater consequences for scientists in the form of threats and intimidation; traditional inequalities, and the rise of a 'cancel culture' and 'wokeness' within the

academic community; and trends in research funding, including the growing impact of external funding.'

Proposal

The proposal is fourfold and focuses primarily on information provision. Below are the concrete proposals:

1. Research on freedom of expression, academic freedom, and the impact of restrictive cultures on our campus: To further investigate the signals of increasing restrictive influences on academic freedom and freedom of expression, we propose and request the Executive Board conduct a comprehensive survey among students and staff. This research aims to map the extent of experience and the related causes of the declining freedom of expression, academic freedom, and the impact of restrictive cultures on our campus. The research may consist of a combination of anonymous surveys and possibly other research methods, to obtain a clear and comprehensive picture of the campus culture.
2. Update on the integration of academic freedom and freedom of expression in strategic documents: In earlier interactions with policymakers responsible for the long-term plan of Erasmus University Rotterdam, the need for a stronger focus on academic freedom was recognized. The policymakers indicated that the topic had received insufficient attention in both the long-term plan and the overall strategy of EUR. They promised improvements, including exploring how the university can more effectively support and defend academic freedom. We would like to receive an update on the progress of these initiatives and how they have been incorporated into policy. Additionally, we are of course willing to offer further advice or participate in co-creative processes to promote this critical university policy.
3. Update on measures from the deans regarding academic freedom: On November 15, a meeting was held where the deans of our university came together to discuss academic freedom. During this meeting, discussions were held about concrete measures that could be developed and are expected to be implemented at the beginning of 2024. We, as the university council, kindly request an update on the progress of these measures.
4. Update on discussions with the Minister of Education: Following the parliamentary questions about the article in the Telegraaf 'Academic Tirades against Conservatives' that specifically focuses on EUR, the outgoing Minister of Education, Culture, and Science, Robbert Dijkgraaf, indicated the following: 'In response to a written question from member Van der Woude (VVD), I have announced that I will enter into discussions with the Universities of the Netherlands and the Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, partly in response to findings from the Education Inspectorate about the study and work climate.' We request an update from the Executive Board on the outcomes of these discussions. Specifically, we are interested in the role and input of our university within these discussions. We would like to know what specific signals from Erasmus University Rotterdam have been discussed and what actions have been proposed to improve the study and work climate within our institution.

Other

Definition of academic freedom (UNESCO): "Academic freedom includes the freedom of individuals to teach, study, and publish without interference or pressure from the government or another entity. It enables academics to explore and discuss topics without fearing repression or censorship. It also includes the institutional autonomy of educational institutions; they must be free to determine their own educational and research programs without external interference."

Source List

- [1] <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0005682/2024-01-01>
- [2] <https://www.onderwijsinspectie.nl/documenten/rapporten/2023/05/10/rapport-de-staat-van-het-onderwijs-2023>
- [3] https://academic-freedom-index.net/research/Academic_Freedom_Index_Update_2024.pdf
- [4] <https://www.omroepbrabant.nl/nieuws/4357417/noodkreet-over-meningsvrijheid-op-tue-kritiek-kan-je-je-carriere-kosten>
- [5] [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/740231/EPRS_STU\(2023\)740231_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/740231/EPRS_STU(2023)740231_EN.pdf)
- [6] <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/1640828216/studenten-erasmus-in-actie-we-willen-dat-de-universiteit-een-neutrale-instelling-is>
- [7] <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/ronl-7aed93334850cc38025773d5042d209ac927a847/pdf>