

## Resolution 2352 (2020)<sup>1</sup>

# 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 facing 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 wider civic, democratic and societal purposes.
2. The Parliamentary Assembly deplores the fact that some 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 the extent to which academic freedom helps research and dissemination of reliable information during a global sanitary crisis. This pandemic should in no way serve as a pretext for any further infringements of 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 the competences required to serve society responsibly and responsively.
4. The Assembly regrets that to this day, notwithstanding two decades of serious discussions on academic freedom and integrity, declarative statements have not yet translated into an internationally agreed definition or conceptual reference of academic freedom. This explains in part the low awareness among the academic community of their rights and helps to turn a blind eye to institutions and countries that fail to guarantee core values and protect students and scholars. The Assembly therefore welcomes the adoption of a common definition by the Conference of Ministers of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) held on 19 November 2020 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 these principles. 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 abuse continue unhindered and unsanctioned. It considers that there is a real need for a European convention on the protection of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, together with its instruments on information gathering, monitoring and assistance.

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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 a public responsibility. The commercial and political interests of external funders 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, as symbols of the intellectual accomplishments of States, have a major role in preserving cultural and linguistic heritage. National authorities must therefore allocate adequate State funding to 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 in countries with the lowest scores on the AFI appear to excel. Future rankings must duly take data on academic freedom 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 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) are currently undertaking with a view to developing new mechanisms to monitor the implementation of academic values in higher education institutions. The Assembly encourages them to bring all the different existing frameworks together and to combine their respective strengths and resources in order to avoid duplication of effort, maximise the added value 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 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 make clear provisions to prevent any possible threat 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 rank lowest in the AFI, to take immediate action to reverse recently adopted legislation and/or practices that limit respect for 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 their ranking and financial support mechanisms.

12. The Assembly welcomes the intention of the ministers responsible for higher education of the EHEA to reaffirm their commitment to promoting and protecting fundamental values across the entire EHEA through intensified political dialogue and co-operation and, to this end, urges them:

12.1. to place at the top of their agenda for 2021-2024 the establishment 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 implementation of policies on academic freedom and institutional autonomy;

12.2. to seriously address the threats to academic freedom and institutional autonomy and consider taking measures in respect of governments that show continued disrespect for these principles or unwillingness to take reasonable steps to improve the situation.

13. Finally, national parliaments and international parliamentary bodies also have 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 members of parliament and relevant parliamentary committees of its member States to remain vigilant as regards significant deficiencies or decreases with regard to university values, and to undertake inquiries into the causes and develop appropriate corrective policy remedies when necessary.