



Global Academic Freedom Index: A Comparative Study of the United States and Europe

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Abstract: Academic freedom—the free pursuit, sharing, and expression of knowledge by scholars and institutions—sits at the centre of democratic strength and intellectual growth. This paper sets out a comparison of the Global Academic Freedom Index (AFi), with a focus on the United States and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The discussion draws on V-Dem (2025) data, Scholars at Risk’s Free to Think 2025 report, Grimm and Saliba’s (2017) multidimensional model, Matei’s (2020) European institutional analysis, and the world society approach of Lerch et al. (2023). The study links empirical findings with theoretical arguments. It traces a broad pattern of pressure on academic life across many countries—at a time when democracy has grown weaker in many of those places. The United States, under the renewed presidency of Donald Trump, faces executive overreach and ideological censorship of teaching and research. Salajan and Jules (2025) describe this pattern as epistemic authoritarianism. Europe, by contrast, shows a degree of resilience that rests on policy initiatives and soft coordination under the Bologna Process. Important weaknesses remain despite these efforts. Lerch et al. (2023) argue that academic freedom grew across the world from the 1960s through the spread of liberal norms, yet they also trace a shift in the reverse since 2010 during the rise of populist and nationalist counter-currents. The paper argues that the present crisis marks the erosion of a wider institutional ecology—democracy, globalisation, and professionalism—on which academic freedom rests.

Keywords: Academic Freedom, Bologna Process, Higher Education, World Society, Authoritarianism, Democracy

1.0 Introduction

Academic freedom was once assumed as axiomatic in universities across many parts of the world, but contemporary shifts have unsettled this long-held expectation. According to the Global Academic Freedom Index (AFi), created by the V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) Institute and Scholars at Risk, academic freedom around the world has registered a 35% deterioration between 2013 and 2025 (Kinzelbach, 2020). This deterioration is not confined to authoritarian regimes; even democratic countries are experiencing heightened policy

influence, ideological monitoring, and growing divisions within universities (Salajan & Jules, 2025).

Looking back, Lerch et al. (2023) argue that academic freedom expanded in marked ways between 1960 and 2022. They trace a path that they connect mainly to the spread of liberal norms and values through cross-border institutions such as UNESCO, the OECD, and universities that operate in worldwide networks. They then argue that this progress has been interrupted since the early 2000s by populist, nationalist, and religious movements—

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and this has produced a turn in the opposite direction that they describe as a counter diffusion of illiberal education policies.

This paper compares two regions—the United States and Europe—to ask how political, cultural, and structural factors shape academic freedom.

1.1 Research Question and Objectives

This paper addresses the following central research question: How do political authority, institutional arrangements, and transnational governance structures shape the protection or erosion of academic freedom within democratic contexts? Using the Global Academic Freedom Index (AFi) as an empirical anchor, the study undertakes a comparative analysis of the United States and Europe with three specific objectives: first, to examine how executive overreach and cultural polarisation influence academic freedom in the United States; second, to assess the extent to which supranational coordination and soft governance mechanisms within the European Higher Education Area contribute to institutional resilience; and third, to situate both cases within broader global trends identified by world society theory, particularly the interaction between democracy, globalisation, and higher education.

The United States shows a mixture of executive and cultural authoritarian impulses and reveals tensions over speech, race, gender, and the politics of research. Europe, supported by supranational bodies, shows a level of resilience that rests on coordinated policy efforts and yet the region still faces pressure over funding, migration, and far-right parties. The study draws on Grimm and Salibas multidimensional model 2017, Mateis analysis of European institutions 2020, and the world society account of Lerch et al. (2023) and sets the present crisis within a wider sixty-year global shift in higher education and democratic governance.

2.0 Conceptual Framework: From Grimm and Saliba to Lerch and Matei

2.1 Grimm and Salibas Multidimensional Model

Grimm and Saliba 2017 set out three main layers of academic freedom.

- Personal safety and expression: Scholars need room to speak and work without fear of threats, dismissal, or harm.
- Institutional autonomy: Universities need space to run their own affairs, and they must stay free from direct political or corporate pressure.
- Legal and economic protection: Laws and funding rules should back academic freedom over the long term, and they must not become instruments of control.

They note in a widely quoted remark that academic freedom erodes not through coups but through committees and argue that repression often grows quietly through bureaucracy. Their model helped to shape the V-Dem Academic Freedom Index AFi, and the index uses these dimensions to compare academic freedom across countries.

2.2 Lerch, Frank, and Schofers World Society Perspective

Lerch et al. (2023) take a global view and analyse data from 160 countries between 1960 and 2022. They argue that academic freedom grew alongside the spread of liberal democratic values. They also stress the role of global bodies such as UNESCO, the OECD and international universities. In their account, these universities act as carriers of what they call world society principles and promote liberal ideas even in less democratic settings.

After 2010, the trend began to move in a different direction. Populist and nationalist movements begin to push back and create a counter diffusion of restrictions that affects universities and scholars. Their study shows that academic freedom rests not only on legal independence but also on a wider system of democracy, global cooperation, and professional standards.

When these supports weaken, universities lose public trust and their capacity to challenge those who hold power.

The approach of Lerch et al. adds depth to Grimm and Salibas model because it sets academic freedom within a global network of shared norms. This approach suggests that no country can protect academic freedom on its own—it depends on international values and institutions.

2.3 Matei's European Institutionalisation

Matei (2020) turns to Europe and focuses on the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). He criticises the Bologna Process for treating academic freedom as a secondary value and for giving more weight to efficiency and student mobility. He calls this imbalance an edifice without ventilation and argues that performance targets outrun freedom of thought.

Between 2018 and 2020, reforms to the Bologna Process began to reduce this gap, and they brought academic freedom into European education policy in formal and explicit language. This change marked a move away from vague principles towards more concrete steps. It also signalled Europe's fresh commitment to academic rights at a time when illiberalism gained ground.

These three perspectives—Grimm and Salibas' layered model, the global analysis from Lerch and colleagues, and the European critique from Matei—together offer a broad view of academic freedom as a personal right, an institutional condition and a global norm.

3.0 The Global Academic Freedom Index (AFi): Methodology and Importance

The Global Academic Freedom Index (AFi) is a tool in wide use across many parts of the world. It measures and compares academic freedom across different countries. Researchers at the V-Dem Institute and Scholars at Risk designed the index. They used the multidimensional model from Grimm and Saliba as a

starting point for the AFi. The AFi focuses on five main areas of academic freedom.

Freedom to Research and Teach—Whether scholars can explore ideas and share what they discover without interference.

Freedom of Academic Exchange—The chance to work with colleagues across borders, to attend conferences, and to take part in open discussions.

Institutional Autonomy—How far universities can make their own decisions about governance, finances, and academic life.

Campus Integrity—Whether university spaces remain safe, with safeguards against surveillance, violence, or political pressure.

Freedom of Academic and Cultural Expression—The wider cultural climate that supports or restricts different strands of thinking and open debate.

These five indicators form a single score on a scale from 0 for no freedom to 1 for full freedom. That single figure lets readers compare academic freedom across countries and follow changes over time. The 2025 report describes steep declines in many settings—not only in authoritarian countries such as China and Russia but also in democracies such as the United States and Brazil. These results call into question the idea that democracy automatically protects academic freedom.

Matei (2020) writes that when people measure academic freedom, they can turn moral outrage into a policy argument. In other words, the AFi is not only a research tool—it also gives people a way to press for change. The index helps civil society, universities, and policymakers to spot problems, to press for reforms, and to hold governments to account. At a time when truth and democracy come under pressure, the AFi has an important role, and it helps to guard the values that support free and open knowledge.

4.0 The United States: Executive and Cultural Authoritarianism

4.1 Executive Overreach under Trump

The United States, long described as a global leader in academic freedom, has seen a marked fall under Donald Trump's renewed presidency from 2025. Salajan and Jules (2025) describe this period as a global shockwave of epistemic authoritarianism and link it to the use of executive power to reshape education based on political ideology.

By the middle of 2025, the administration had issued 161 executive orders that touched education, research, and international academic ties. The list included orders that restricted visas for foreign students, narrowed federal support for climate science, and tied public funding to ideological pledges. The scale of these measures surprised even long-term observers of United States higher education and pushed many universities into a defensive stance.

- Executive Order 14242 (The White House, 2025): Closed the Department of Education, removing federal support and oversight.
- Partial suspension and funding freeze affecting Fulbright and USAID programmes: The Fulbright Programme was not formally terminated, but federal funding for current and future grantees was paused, causing major disruptions to international academic exchanges and leading to the resignation of the Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board in protest of political interference (Fulbright Association, 2025; ICEF Monitor, 2025. ICEF Monitor, 2025)
- Cutting funds for diversity, climate, and gender studies: Redirected money to “patriotic education” and politically favoured STEM subjects.
- Federal “bias audits” of universities: Investigated alleged anti-conservative bias, creating a climate of fear and surveillance.

Delaney and Hughes (2025) from Harvard Kennedy School describe these moves as a deliberate attempt to weaken America's

knowledge systems and control academic thought under the pretence of neutrality.

Lerch et al. (2023) describe this change as part of a wider pattern that runs through many countries. States that once backed liberal values now rely on authoritarian methods they used to criticise. The United States once stood as a symbol of academic freedom. It now shows how far that freedom can sink.

4.2 Cultural Division and Internal Censorship

The problem does not stop with government action. Cultural rifts and pressures inside universities also shape what happens there. Norris (2025) writes that the crisis has two faces—one face takes the form of attacks from populist forces outside universities and the other takes the form of compliance inside universities, where administrators accept censorship and ideological control.

Many academics now avoid discussion of contested topics such as race, gender, immigration, and climate change because they fear for their jobs and reputations. Wealthy conservative donors shape course content, and state governments pass laws that ban books and lessons that officials mark as divisive or unpatriotic.

Norris (2025) warns that professors are increasingly portrayed in public debate as “enemies of the people,” a perception that erodes public trust in universities and undermines their role as independent centres of knowledge. A Harvard Kennedy School report likewise observes that universities in the United States now confront dual pressures—external political interference that constrains institutional autonomy, and internal academic cultures that discourage dissent and narrow intellectual diversity (Norris, 2025).

These developments together form a kind of authoritarian pluralism—academic freedom exists in theory, yet it remains narrow in practice because of fear, hostility, and bureaucracy. Lerch et al. (2023) set this shift within world society theory and argue that American

universities, once champions of liberal values, now echo the illiberal forces they once opposed.

4.3 Global Impact and Diplomatic Consequences

Cutting international education and research funding has had grave effects across the world. The recent federal funding freeze and proposed reductions have disrupted scholarship disbursements and created uncertainty for programmes like Fulbright, which historically support academic exchange in over 160 countries. While the Fulbright Program itself has not been terminated, suspensions and administrative interference have impacted ongoing awards and led to governance resignations, raising serious concerns about the future of U.S. academic diplomacy and cultural exchange (Fulbright Association, 2025; ICEF Monitor, 2025; Inside Higher Ed, 2025).

Salajan and Jules (2025) call this the collapse of United States educational diplomacy and treat it as a retreat from decades of global engagement. In response, the European Union has stepped into the gap. Programmes such as Horizon Europe and the Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions have welcomed displaced American scholars, rebuilt research networks, and strengthened international cooperation (European Commission, 2025).

Matei (2020) describes this pattern as Europe's normative power of example—leadership through values and institutions rather than force. While the United States pulls back from the promotion of academic freedom, Europe offers a democratic counterweight through the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Lerch et al. (2023) warn that the decline of academic freedom in the United States carries heavy symbolic weight. It shows that the liberal world's intellectual foundations have begun to weaken. The withdrawal of the United States from global educational leadership does not stand only as a domestic issue—it marks a geopolitical shift that hands moral authority in higher education to Europe and other democratic allies.

5.0 Europe: Institutional Resilience and Soft Governance

5.1 The European Model and the Bologna Legacy

Europe's approach to academic freedom has taken shape through the Bologna Process and through the creation of the European Higher Education Area in 1999. The Bologna model aimed to make degrees more comparable, to improve student mobility, and to encourage cooperation between countries. At first, academic freedom stood as a natural part of Europe's democratic values and did not appear as something that required formal legal wording.

Matei (2020) criticises this approach, calling it “an edifice without ventilation”—a system focused too much on efficiency and standard rules, while neglecting freedom of thought. By prioritising performance and quality checks without legal safeguards, the Bologna Process left universities open to political and managerial interference, especially in countries where democracy is weakening.

For the first 20 years, Bologna helped bring countries together, but didn't always protect academic freedom. As Matei (2020) and Lerch et al. (2023) point out, this created a paradox: cooperation improved openness and movement, but also made universities more dependent and exposed to illiberal trends.

5.2 Bologna Reforms (2018–2020): From Words to Action

In response to growing concerns from Scholars at Risk and the V-Dem Institute, the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) set up a Task Force on Academic Freedom between 2018 and 2020. This was a turning point, recognising that European higher education must actively protect academic rights to remain legitimate.

The Task Force set out three main goals:

- Definition: Create a shared European understanding of academic freedom, including

autonomy, research freedom, and freedom of expression.

- Monitoring: Include academic freedom indicators in national Bologna reviews to allow comparisons and accountability.
- Protection: Link academic freedom to quality assurance and accreditation, making it part of how universities are judged.

These reforms turned the EHEA from a loose forum into a body that spoke for academic rights—with far more conviction. Matei (2020) sees this moment as a break with past practice in policy debates over intellectual liberty. The change marked a fresh European promise to defend academic freedom at a time when illiberal trends are gaining ground.

5.3 Strengths and Weaknesses of European Governance

Despite these gains, Europe has a system that still rests on gentle political methods. It depends on consent, actions taken by choice and influence from fellow states rather than strict legal duties. This leaves room for flexibility and cooperation that does not waver. It also leaves space for governments in countries such as Hungary and Poland to neglect academic freedom while they remain inside the Bologna Process.

Europe still has solid protections. Constitutional rights, independent courts, unions that speak up for staff and work carried out across national frontiers help keep academic freedom on a strong footing. Countries such as Germany (AFi 0.87), Norway (0.92) and Sweden (0.91) show how strong democratic institutions can shield universities even when populist pressure grows.

Matei (2020) warns that policy language must become a legal reality. To hold on to these gains, national legislation must give direct protection to academic freedom. Europe draws strength less from force and more from guidance grounded in principle. It rests on an example shaped by values held in common and cooperation that does not waver.

5.4 Lerch et al.'s View: The European Paradox

From outside Europe, many observers see the continent as a centre of academic freedom (Lerch et al., 2023). They point to a wide network of universities, NGOs, and international bodies that have carried liberal academic values into many other parts of the world. Yet deep contrasts remain inside Europe itself. Nordic countries keep high standards, while parts of Central and Eastern Europe begin to slip.

Lerch et al. (2023) call this tension the European paradox. Integration brings strength through standards that many systems hold in common and through joint scrutiny—it also brings risks, because extra layers of administration slow action and enforcement often stays weak. Populist movements push against democracy across Europe, and a once gentle system of rule now strains under pressure that grows heavier each year.

Even with these pressures, the EHEA draws scholars who flee repression, and this strengthens Europe's standing as a safe harbour for academic freedom. Matei (2020) and Lerch et al. (2023) both argue that Europe must move beyond good intentions. The continent needs firm laws, routine oversight and responsibility that governments must accept fully, and academic freedom must never remain something that people merely assume. It must instead receive active protection in every member state.

6.0 Comparative Analysis: Different Paths, Shared Risks

The 2025 Global Academic Freedom Index (AFi) shows sharp contrasts in the way democracies treat academic freedom. Europe looks strong in several ways. Yet big differences run through the region, and cooperation between states, along with values that many of them hold in common, still offers academic freedom a degree of protection. The United States once held a leading place. It now faces government overreach and deep cultural rifts, and these pressures weaken its universities.

The three cases differ in many ways, yet they share some of the same risks. Academic freedom does not survive by itself. It rests on solid laws, checks within democratic systems, rules that reach across borders, and room for scholars to work without interference. If these supports weaken, academic freedom grows fragile, even in democracies.

Grimm and Saliba (2017) argue that repression often builds up slowly and quietly—“not through coups, but through committees.” Lerch et al. (2023) add that recent global shifts have started to erode liberal academic values, even in places that once defended them. Matei (2020) warns that promises need firm backing from laws and institutions—otherwise freedom remains abstract and never shapes daily life.

To put the point plainly, many observers see academic freedom as crucial for democracy, yet its protection is patchy and pressure on it continues to rise. The problem does not end with authoritarian regimes—it also springs from changes inside democratic government.

7.0 Policy Recommendations—How to Protect Academic Freedom

To halt the decline of academic freedom, policies must move beyond formal statements and bring change that can be felt in academic life. From this discussion, there follow five main recommendations.

- 1) **Treat Academic Freedom as a Legal Right.** Governments should protect academic freedom in law as a specific legal guarantee and not treat it simply as one strand within general free speech. That protection should include university independence, freedom for research, and campuses where people feel safe.
- 2) **Set Up Independent Monitoring Bodies.** Panels of scholars, legal experts, and civic groups should watch for breaches, publish what they discover, and press institutions to answer for what they do.
- 3) **Protect a Broad Range of Funding Sources.** Universities must be free to receive local

and international research funding without political control. If grants are blocked, the range of ideas within universities narrows.

- 4) **Keep Academic Appointments Free from Politics.** University leaders and faculty should be chosen through fair and open processes that reward good work, hold political influence in check, and keep academic credibility intact.
- 5) **Build Academic Freedom into Accreditation.** The Bologna reforms show that when academic freedom stands at the centre of the standards that define university quality, universities come under pressure to respect it, and the public asks more of their conduct in return.

These steps need real political will, broad public backing, and steady cooperation across national borders. Academic freedom is not a gift from the state—it forms part of the core of democracy, and it keeps critical thought and public responsibility alive.

8.0 Future Research—Understanding the Knowledge Field

This study points towards several paths for future work.

- *Regional Studies.* Comparisons across regions such as Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South East Asia may show distinct patterns and different forms of pressure.
- *Long Term Analysis.* Research that looks beyond 2025 can show whether reforms last and how authoritarian trends change.
- *Digital Surveillance.* Research on online monitoring, censorship algorithms, and platform rules, and their effect on academic speech, has great importance in the digital world that now shapes academic work.
- *Intersectional Risks.* Work that traces how gender, caste, race, and migration status shape the practice of academic freedom can reveal who faces the sharpest risks and why.
- *Global Academic Networks.* Close study of international scholars, diaspora communities, and global institutions, and of how they defend academic freedom, can uncover new ways to resist and to support.

Future research must keep large systems and personal experiences in view at the same time. Academic freedom is not just a number—it forms the ground on which democratic knowledge grows and where open inquiry can still take place.

9.0 Conclusion—Protecting Academic Freedom in a Time of Knowledge Crisis

This study, which compares the United States and Europe, shows that earlier generations treated academic freedom as a natural part of democracy, yet it now faces a grave threat. The Global Academic Freedom Index (AFi) shows that democracies with long histories of elected government can still slide into habits of tight control over knowledge, and these habits weaken academic independence through bureaucracy and through ideology. The United States has lost much of its intellectual autonomy. Europe stands somewhere in between, with some areas of strength and some areas of weakness. Together, these cases suggest that academic freedom rests not only on political systems but also on strong institutions, cooperation across borders, and active civic support.

The ideas of Grimm and Saliba (2017), Lerch, and Matei (2020) all point towards one central lesson. Academic freedom is complex. It grows out of particular histories, and it links into global networks. It does not survive on its own. It depends on a healthy democratic setting, strong professional standards, and active international collaboration. When populist and nationalist forces strike at these foundations, the defence of academic freedom calls for more than moral concern—it calls for laws that set out rights in plain terms, for policies that rest on good judgement, and for steady public involvement.

In a world that lives with uncertainty and with a constant sense of crisis around truth, universities must reclaim their role as places for open thought, argument, and a wide spread of ideas. The AFi offers a practical tool for tracking and defending academic freedom, yet its usefulness

in practice depends on the response of universities, scholars, and the wider public world. The future of academic freedom will not rest only on politics. It will depend on our shared resolve as a public community to protect knowledge and to guard the democratic values that grow from it.

Despite these differences, both cases face many of the same risks. Academic freedom does not endure on its own—it depends on strong legal protections, democratic checks, international norms, and professional independence. When these supports weaken, academic freedom grows fragile, even in democracies.

Grimm and Saliba 2017 write that repression often grows slowly and quietly—not through coups but through committees. Lerch et al. (2023) argue that current shifts across the world now weaken liberal academic values, even in places that once defended them. Matei 2020 warns that promises must rest on firm laws and strong institutions—otherwise, freedom stays abstract, and people cannot depend on it in daily work.

Put simply, many writers treat academic freedom as central to democracy, yet its protection remains uneven and faces threats that grow over time. The problem does not stay within authoritarian regimes—it also forms part of the changing patterns of democratic government.

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