

Resolution

Strengthening academic freedom in Europe

Adopted by the ETUCE Special Conference, the Regional Special Conference of Education International, meeting in Athens on 27-28 November 2018

Further to and consistent with the Resolutions adopted by the 7th EI Congress in Ottawa in 2015, the Resolutions adopted at the ETUCE Conference in Belgrade in 2016, this ETUCE Special Conference

Noting that:

1. Serious violations of academic freedom and institutional autonomy are on the rise throughout the European Higher Education Area (EHEA);
2. Authoritarian governments are using repressive measures such as the arrest and dismissal of higher education staff and politically-driven closures of individual universities to silence criticism;
3. Anti-democratic forces are increasingly questioning the role of universities as cosmopolitan spaces in which everyone is free to think, criticise and put forward new ideas or unpopular opinions;
4. A basic disrespect for scientific knowledge, research evidence and academic expertise – for example, when politicians or the media cherry-pick or incorrectly report research results – is growing and remains a threat to well-informed public debate;
5. Academic freedom is also being undermined by the commodification of education, in particular as a result of cuts in public funding, a greater use of private sources of income for teaching and research, economic pressures to reduce the length of study time and a narrow focus by governments and employers on the labour market outcomes of higher education. These policies are having a negative impact on the content and development of the curricula as well as the diversity of subjects and research perspectives in higher education, particularly those fields which promote self-reflection and critique of contemporary society;
6. Freedom to teach and freedom to research are being undermined by the growing use of heavy-handed quality assessment procedures and performance metrics that have been set up to distribute funding and to recruit and evaluate individual teachers and researchers;
7. Collegial governance and job security – the main supportive elements of academic freedom - are also under attack. Key developments include the reduction of academic staff on higher education governing bodies and the growth of fixed-term and precarious contracts;
8. The 2018 EHEA Paris Ministerial conference states that fundamental values, including academic freedom and integrity, institutional autonomy, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, and public responsibility for and of higher education, form the backbone of the EHEA.¹

¹ Paris Communiqué: <http://www.ehea2018.paris/Data/ElFinder/s2/Communiqué/EHEAParis2018-Communiqué-final.pdf>

Reaffirms that:

9. A key purpose of higher education and research should be to serve the public interest through extending knowledge and fostering critical thinking in expression in staff, students and society;
10. Academic freedom is essential in achieving these goals and to the development of democratic life;
11. Institutional autonomy, collegial governance and job security are vital elements in protecting academic freedom;
12. Institutional autonomy, however, should not be used by higher education institutions as a pretext to limit the rights of higher education staff;
13. Academic freedom should apply to all types of higher education staff engaged in teaching and research.

Therefore, calls on ETUCE and its member organisations:

14. To lobby, campaign and negotiate for better constitutional and legislative protection of academic freedom at the European, national and institutional level;
15. To lobby, campaign and negotiate for meaningful staff and student participation on higher education governing bodies and for decent, secure contracts of employment;
16. To hold governments accountable for the implementation and respect of principles and international standards as defined by the 1997 UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel², the 2017 UNESCO Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers³ and the Council of Europe 2006 recommendation (1762) on Academic freedom and university autonomy⁴;
17. To ensure that higher education leaders and university rectors are accountable for upholding academic freedom, including on issues relating to collegial governance and security of employment;
18. To publicise the 1997 UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel and the 2017 UNESCO Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers and to consider using the allegations process overseen by the Committee of Experts on the Application of the Recommendation concerning Teachers (CEART)⁵;
19. To lobby for the promotion and protection of academic freedom to be prioritised in run up to the 2020 EHEA Ministerial Conference;
20. To publicise the ETUCE report ('Academics united for quality higher education'⁶) on the future of the Bologna Process, including its wider policy recommendations on improving working conditions and gender equality;
21. To collaborate with the European Students' Union (ESU), national students' unions and other relevant bodies on the protection of collegiality in the governance of higher education institutions;
22. To work on narrowing the funding gap in European higher education institutions through sustained levels of core public funding, rather than through performance-based funding models.

² http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13144&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

³ http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=49455&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

⁴ <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=17469&lang=en>

⁵ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/education-building-blocks/teacher-education/ceart/>

⁶ <https://www.csee-etu.org/images/attachments/AcademicsUnitedforQualityHE-EN.pdf>