

More than two-thirds of UK social scientists warn their academic freedom is under threat

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Academics have said their freedom is under threat with evidence suggesting one of the reasons for this concern is the effect of internationalization including risks associated with the rising influence of

authoritarian states such as China.

Half of those who took part in a major new study said they felt their [freedom](#) to select teaching content was under threat. Half of politics and [international scholars](#) questioned said their freedom to conduct research was under threat, and 39% said they thought institutional censorship was a problem.

When asked if academic freedom was discussed in universities, 74% of teaching and research said it was.

More than two thirds (67%) of respondents indicated academic freedom was under threat in higher education.

About 73% of respondents said they did not self-censor when teaching students from autocratic states in the UK. A majority (58%) said the nationality of their students did not constrain class content with 23% saying that it does.

Three-quarters of respondents said [academics](#) should not accept funding from foreign entities or governments that do not respect human rights. A total of 59% said they did not feel pressured to collaborate with non-democratic partners in the aftermath of Brexit, while 10% said they did.

The survey was distributed to 25,000 academics in the UK at the end of 2020 and 1,500 took part. Although the response rate was low at around 6%, the number and distribution of responses suggest that they are representative.

The research was conducted by Tena Prelec from the University of Oxford and the University of Exeter, Saipira Furstenberg from the University of Portsmouth and John Heathershaw and Catarina Thomson from the University of Exeter.

Dr. Prelec said: "Concern among academics in politics and [international relations](#) could be higher because they are more exposed to sensitivities arising when teaching students from and conducting research in autocracies. Furthermore, alongside business and law, these departments have often expanded most rapidly for both domestic and [international students](#), perhaps creating an impression among staff that market demand trumps the maintenance of standards and academic freedom. This is clearest when considering the amount of private donations, which have tripled in the UK and Ireland over the past decade, while funds originating from public investment and EU research grants have decreased."

A total of 42% of academics said they considered freedom to select teaching content to be currently at risk in UK universities compared to 58% among those specializing in European studies, 61% for those researching China, and 52% among those researching Africa.

A total of 14% said they had self-censored when reporting fieldwork, and 75% said they hadn't. For those researching European countries this was 19% and 68%. For those researching Africa this was 26% and 60%, and for China 22% and 64%.

Almost two thirds (65%) of respondents said they do not know if their department provides guidelines on academic freedom.

A total of 41% of academics specializing in China said they had self-censored when teaching students from authoritarian regimes, compared to 39% for those specializing in Africa and 33% specializing in Europe. The average for all respondents was 20%.

20% of those questioned said they had self-censored when [teaching](#) students from autocratic states in the UK, and 73% said they hadn't. This rose to 33% for scholars working on Europe, 39% for those working on

Africa and 41% for those working on China.

Over 6% of respondents agreed that UK universities might introduce codes of conduct to protect academic freedom in international partnerships, while 17% were opposed.

More information: Tena Prelec et al, Is academic freedom at risk from internationalisation? Results from a 2020 survey of UK social scientists, *The International Journal of Human Rights* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/13642987.2021.2021398](https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2021.2021398)

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