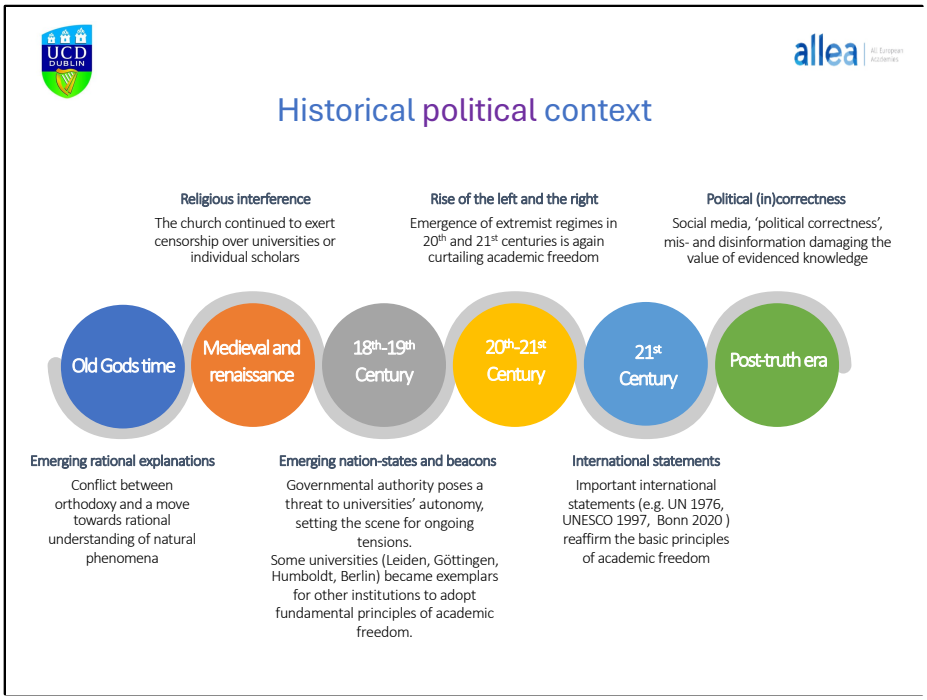
Academic freedom is increasingly under pressure; today we'll look at politics, funding, and individual responsibility — with ethics and integrity as central threads.

Academic freedom is a professional right tied to responsibility
It requires honesty, rigour, and ethical conduct
Without integrity, freedom is lost

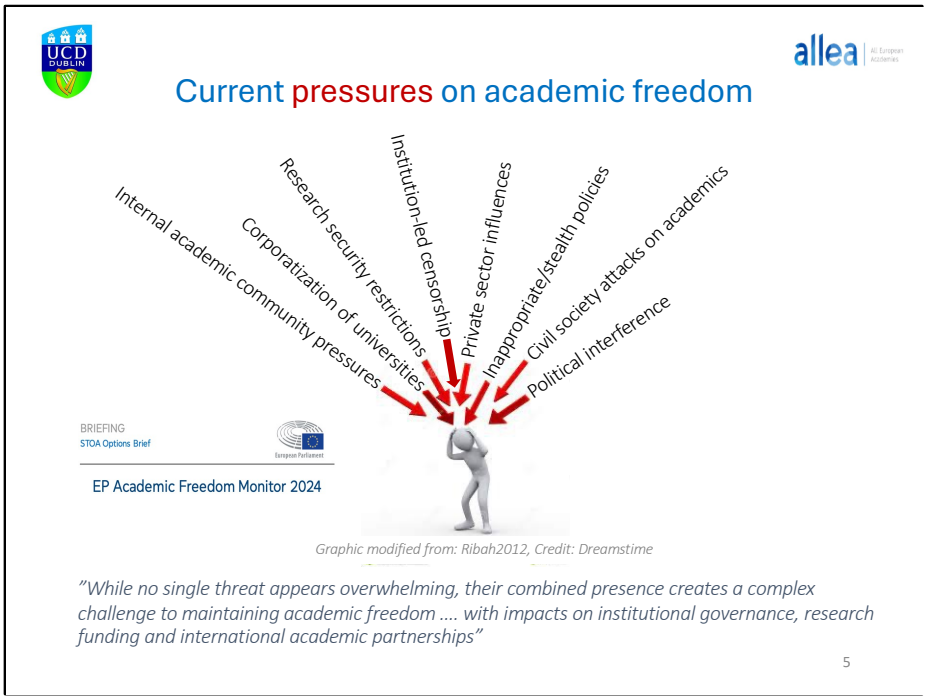
Freedom of thought and intellectual creativity require also freedom and security of individuals. Freedom of scientific research stands for openness, exchange, excellence, internationalism, diversity, equality, integrity, curiosity, responsibility and reflexivity. It is therefore a pillar of any democracy. Research and the freedom to conduct research are indispensable prerequisites for our social, cultural, political and economic resilience and progress. Scientific research benefits the people and society through the advancement of knowledge. Freedom of scientific research is a necessary condition for researchers to produce, share and transfer knowledge as a public good for the well-being of society. Our hopes and our ambitions to achieve a better future also depend on the freedom of scientific research.

What academic freedom is not

- It is not a free-for-all pass to abuse the research system, colleagues, research participants and subjects, society, ecosystems, cultural heritage and the environment (ECoC)
- It is not a pass for lack of honesty and openness about, or individual accountability for, the research from idea to publication (ECoC)
- It is not a pass for unreliable research of poor design, methodology, analysis or interpretation (ECoC)

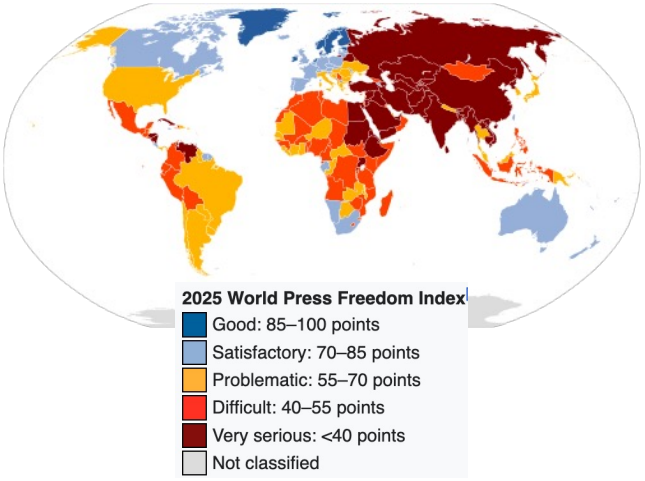


Mann DL (2025) When Facts Become Forbidden: The Past and Present History of Scientific Censorship. JACC: BTA Archives, 10(3). https://www.jacc.org/doi/10.1016/j.jacbts.2025.02.003



- https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/765776/EPRS_BRI(2025)765776_EN.pdf

Freedom of the press as a global proxy



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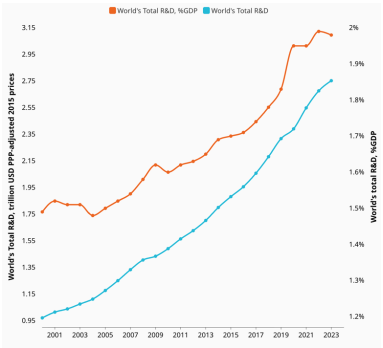
World Press Freedom Index 2025

Research funding pressures



Public and private spending on research was almost US$ 3 trillion globally in 2023

This investment now comes with heightened expectations and emphasis on:

- strategic, challenge or mission-oriented research
- tangible impacts from the research (value for money assessment)
- Public funding priorities being dictated by industry (closer to market)
- undervaluation of the importance of fundamental research and HSS research

Money shapes knowledge: Corporate ties risk biasing outcomes

Source: WIPO estimates based on GII Database and data from Eurostat, OECD, RICYT, and UNESCO UIS 7

Source: WIPO estimates based on GII Database and data from Eurostat, OECD, RICYT, and UNESCO UIS

Inherent dangers, money shapes knowledge and corporate ties risk biasing outcomes. conflicts of interest

More public funding means more requirements for accountability, which could be seen as a violation of academic freedom.
The private sector investment in public institutions can create conflicts of interest or even encourage the distortion of science

Inherent risks in the absence of robust RE/RI

The sugar industry case:

- Paid scientists in 1960's to play down the link between sugar and heart disease and promote saturated fat as the culprit instead
- Many of today's dietary recommendations may have been largely shaped by the sugar industry

Disparity in the system:

- Significant disparities in both the availability and timeliness of new cancer drugs in poorer countries
- Low availability of COVID vaccine in sub-Saharan Africa
- Pharmaceutical product development is not based on need but on market size and profitability

The distortion of science:

- 50-year campaign by Big Tobacco to disrupt and delay research
- Climate scientists who question the 'only-human-activity-caused-this' narrative risk losing funding, tenure, jobs etc.
- Restriction of funding for research on diversity, equity and inclusion and women's health

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Kearns CE, Schmidt LA, Glantz SA. Sugar Industry and Coronary Heart Disease Research: A Historical Analysis of Internal Industry Documents. *JAMA Intern Med.* 2016;176(11):1680–1685. doi:10.1001/jamainternmed.2016.5394

https://bmjgroup.com/significant-worldwide-disparities-in-availability-and-timeliness-of-new-cancer-drugs/

https://maloneinstitute.org/blog/the-distortion-of-science

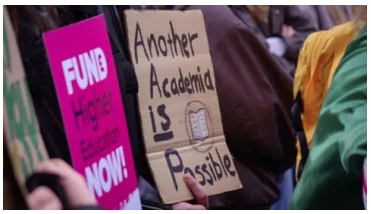
How have funders responded?

- Funders have responded by developing policy and process requirements for the research that they fund.
  - The policy objectives of research integrity and ethics formalise and institutionalise good research practice and ensure ethical treatment of subjects, the environment and society
  - Good research practice goes beyond methodological rigour and publication to setting standards of personal behaviour towards students (mentoring/supervision) and colleagues (fair recognition, equity)
  - By mandating RI/RE policies funders are ultimately protecting the trustworthiness of outputs for colleagues, policymakers and the public – in everyone's interest.

Institutional Pressures

Research institutes are under significant pressures:

- 40% of UK universities are expecting a financial deficit in 2025
- Have become increasingly reliant on non-governmental funding from industry which may not align with their values or standards
- International students are a significant funding stream, but to attract them, universities compete via world university rankings.
- Governmental funding is often contingent on reaching KPIs and demonstrating 'impact'



These kind of metrics can drive poor institutional behaviour.
Integrity is compromised when staff are under pressure to optimize for outputs not truth.

Source: WIPO estimates based on GII Database and data from Eurostat, OECD, RICYT, and UNESCO UIS

Individual responsibility

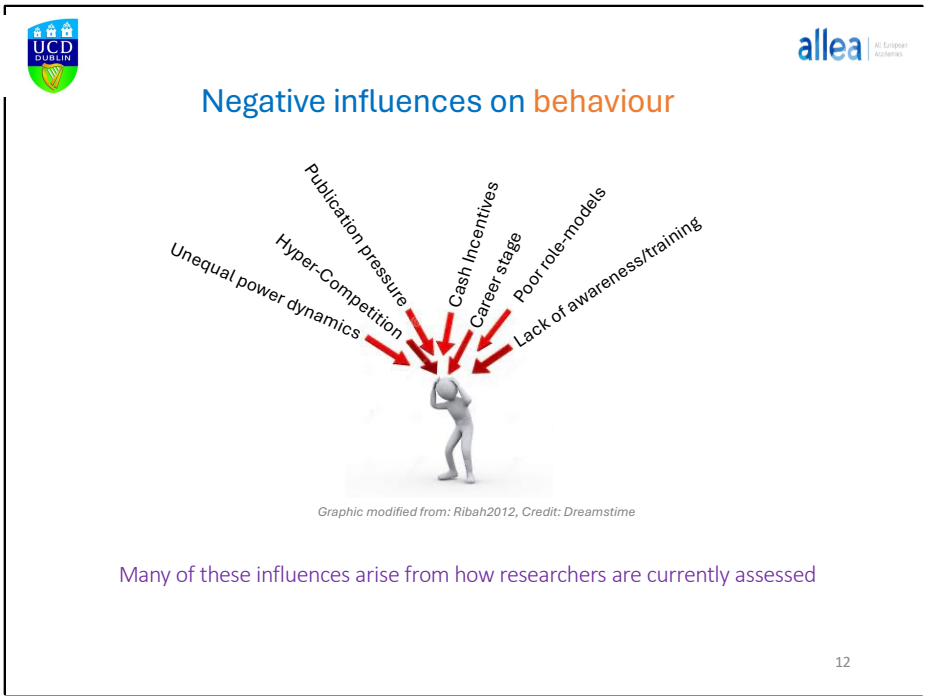
"There is hardly a step we take in the course of an ordinary day without […] relying on the judgment and virtue of anonymous experts. What have they done to deserve our trust?"

Sheila Jasanoff, Harvard University

"While scientific experts are relied upon as dependable advisers because of their specialised knowledge, impartiality, and straightforwardness, that view does not allow for the possibility of ignorance, uncertainty, error, cognitive bias, corruption, or political interest."

Sheila Jasanoff, Harvard University

Academic freedom means taking responsibility for being a researcher worthy of the trust of colleagues, collaborators, research participants and the public



Lack of awareness and/or training: Inadequate research ethics and integrity investment and training

Role models: Poor or no supervision of researchers and activities. Learning poor behaviours as the norm.

Career stage: Precarious jobs/economy, career pressures

Cash Incentives work well for intended effects: more publications and citations, but also for unintended effects: focus on quantity, not quantity, more plagiarism and duplicate publications, more 'salami-slicing', gift authorships and use of predatory OA journals, citation cartels and fake papers (paper mills) and fake peer reviews, etc. All incentives can be gamed if the stakes are high enough. (courtesy of Lex Bouter).

Hyper-competition: It is not easy to promote integrity in hyper-competitive academic environments that value high levels of ambition. In such contexts, a

kind of hyper-ambition is
likely fostered that (inadvertently or otherwise) prioritises individual success above all, including to the detriment of scientific quality. In addition, efforts to promote values like integrity falter because they rely on sufficient uniformity in motivations or tendencies. Codes and guidance promoting integrity are, however, likely to influence those for whom such values are not optional, while others simply find ways around them.
Yasemin J. Erden (2024) Hyper-ambition and the replication crisis: Why measures to promote research integrity can falter. Journal of Academic Ethics. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-024-09528-5

Unequal power dynamics: Includes poor workplace relationships (overloading, unreasonable deadlines), pressure to produce specific results and abuse seniority either in the research process or publications. Can also include sexual and racial harassment.

This is why (research) integrity matters

Research integrity relates to the behaviour of individuals or groups involved in conducting, funding, or assessing scientific research, as well as the institutions that support it. It influences the validity (truth) and trustworthiness of research findings and researchers.

- **Reliability** in ensuring the quality of research (design, methodology, analysis) and use of resources
- **Honesty** in developing, undertaking, reviewing, reporting and communicating research in transparent, fair, full and unbiased way
- **Respect** for colleagues, research participants, society, ecosystems, cultural heritage and the environment
- **Accountability** for the research from idea to publications, for its management and organisation, for training, supervision and mentoring, and for its wider societal impacts

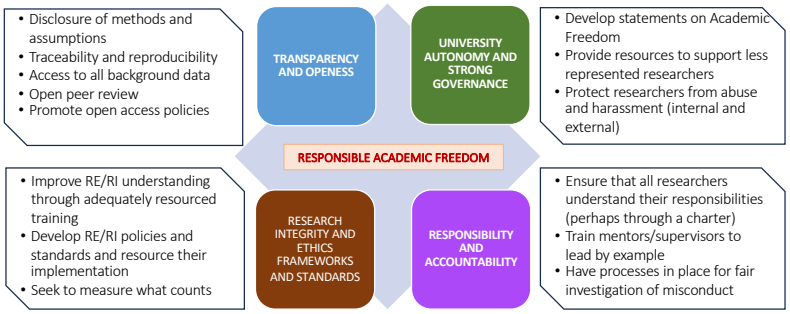
Definition adapted from Prof Lex Bouter, Professor of Research Integrity at Medical University of Amsterdam (VMU)

Integrity means more than accuracy – it's about openness, fairness and responsibility
Without integrity even correct results use credibility

Some consequences of erosion of academic freedom

Trust	Shrinkage	Research gaps	Pipeline	Collaboration
Decline in public trust if they fear bias, dishonesty and conflict of interest in the outputs that impact their lives	Narrower knowledge outputs if research is confined to 'safe topics'	Loss of critical research in 'banned' areas with impacts on the health of those seen as less deserving (women, trans, migrants, poor)	Stifled creativity and innovation that feeds from the wellspring of blue-sky research	Fewer/more prescribed collaborations and knowledge exchange in the face of research security fears

Things we can do to sustain responsible academic freedom

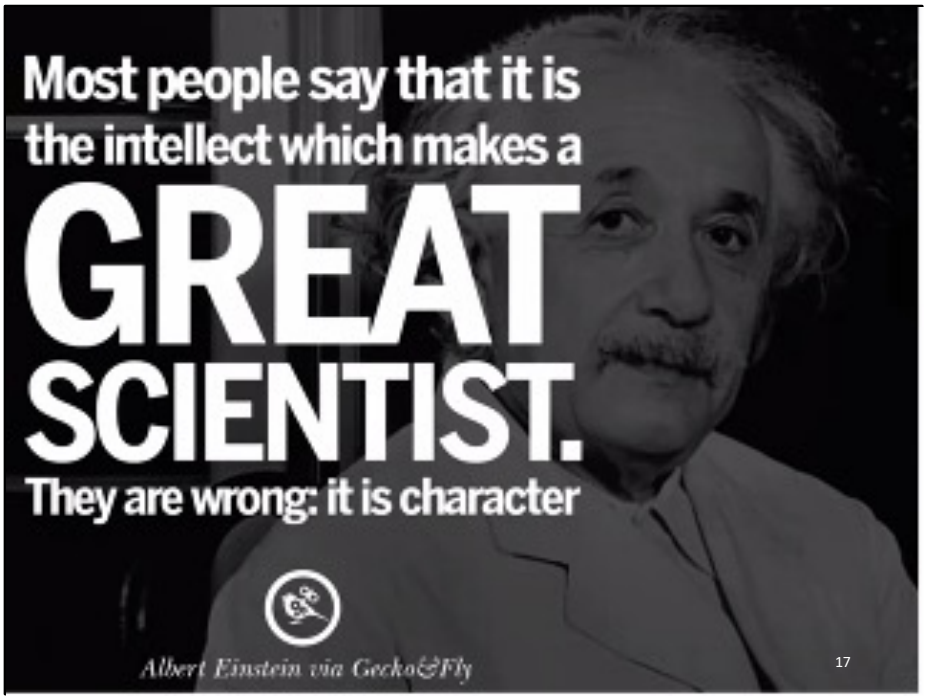


Safeguards defend freedom and integrity when under attach

Some final thoughts

- Truth, transparency and trust are vital assets in the research system
- Ensuring Integrity in the data we generate and use, and how we use it, is our strongest defence against distortion
- The onus for researchers, institutions and government is to strengthen frameworks, foster ethical leadership and champion openness
- Academic freedom needs to be viewed in the context of societal benefit which has increased demands for accountability between the university and the state

Preserving academic freedom is not optional – it is the foundation of democracy and progress


Most people say that it is
the intellect which makes a
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They are wrong: it is character
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