

Students are worried about the erosion of academic freedom in Europe – 25 out of 27 EU Member States have declined in the Academic Freedom Index

The European Students' Union is deeply concerned by the findings of the European Parliament's newly published [Academic Freedom Monitor 2025](#).

Findings of the Monitor

The findings confirm what students across Europe increasingly experience: **Academic freedom is not collapsing overnight, but is steadily eroding**. This is not a sudden development, but the result of a long-term accelerating trend. In the past year alone, 15 out of 27 EU Member States have registered a decline in the Academic Freedom Index. Over a five-year period, this figure rises to 24 out of 27, and over the past decade, 25 out of 27 countries have experienced a decline – with 8 out of these 25 encountering a severe downturn.

The report makes clear that while systemic violations remain limited, a growing accumulation of political, economic and geopolitical pressures is weakening the foundations of free and independent higher education across the European Union. These developments reflect a broader global trend of democratic backsliding, where attacks on academia increasingly serve as early warning signs of deeper institutional erosion.

The European Students' Union strongly believes that academic freedom is not a niche concern of higher education institutions alone – but **a core pillar of democratic societies**. It ensures that knowledge can be produced independently, that power can be scrutinized and that public debate remains grounded in evidence. Academia is not merely a beneficiary of democracy, but part of its essential infrastructure.

The Monitor highlights a clear and concerning **pattern**: academic freedom in Europe is being challenged from multiple directions at once. Between the main findings of the report, a list of factors that currently threaten academic freedom have been identified, as follows:

- Political interference and growing polarisation
- Pressure from institutional governance and management
- Pressures within the academic community itself
- Anti-intellectualism and societal pressure
- The commercialization of higher education
- Security Policies and Foreign interference

The European Students' Union expresses serious concerns regarding the findings of the report and all the growing trends it showcases. These developments created a sustained and systemic pressure that is steadily – and, often, **silently**, eroding academic freedom across Europe, **together with the fundamental rights and liberties of all actors involved in higher education.**

The Monitor highlights a clear pattern: academic freedom in Europe is being challenged from multiple directions at once. On the list of the threats identified by the report, ESU finds the following the most alarming:

Political interference and growing polarisation are shaping academic environments in ways that threaten the core mission of higher education. These conditions constrain critical inquiry, foster self-censorship among students and staff and undermine institutional autonomy. When academia becomes subject to partisan pressures, its role as a space for independent thought and debate is compromised.

The report also draws explicit attention to the **growing commercialization of higher education**, where private sector influence can shape research agendas and priorities. This trend risks fostering a “customer mentality,” where education is treated primarily as a market product rather than a public good. ESU has long warned against such commodification, emphasizing that the value of education and its benefits to society extend far beyond immediate economic outcomes.

Finally, **foreign interference** is standing out as a significant – yet incongruous – challenge, unduly restricting academic collaboration and international research. This trend can take many forms, one of the most dangerous being the creation of a vicious cycle: reinforcing polarisation, which in turn makes societies more susceptible to further interference. Such dynamics fracture communities, undermine trust in education and research, and, in the long-term, not only compromise academic freedom, but also weaken the very foundations of democratic societies.

Academic freedom rests on three inseparable pillars: the freedom to learn, to teach and to conduct research independently and without interference. These dimensions are mutually reinforcing and must be protected together. Yet, current policy and research discourses continue to focus predominantly on teaching and research, while the freedom to learn – including students' rights and the role of student activism – remains underexplored and insufficiently recognised. **This gap is also reflected in the Monitor**, where the student dimension of academic freedom is **not fully addressed**.

ESU calls for stronger safeguards of academic freedom

For students, these trends are not abstract. **Students are not passive recipients of academic freedom – they are active members of the academic community and rights-holders**. For them, academic freedom means the freedom to learn, to question and to engage in research and knowledge creation without restriction. When these freedoms are limited, education itself is weakened. Excluding students from academic freedom is not only outdated, it undermines the very purpose of higher education¹.

Students also play a critical and often **under-recognised role as frontline defenders of academic freedom**. Across Europe, students are actively resisting political interference, defending institutional autonomy and standing up for democratic values on campus. This role must not be overlooked. Any serious effort to protect academic freedom must recognize, support and empower students as essential actors in its defense.

¹ Also see ESU's [Student Rights Charter](#) and ESU's [Fundamental Values and Solidarity Policy Paper](#)

On this point, ESU highlights a **critical gap** in the current policy discourse: the lack of attention to **students at risk**. While initiatives supporting scholars at risk are increasingly recognized, the Monitor fails to address that students – particularly student activists – are often among the most vulnerable members of the academic community. Across Europe, students face growing persecution not only for academic work, but for their engagement in democratic life. Existing national initiatives demonstrate both the urgency of the issue and the lack of coordinated European response.

The Academic Freedom Monitor report concludes with a set of policy recommendations; however, ESU finds these insufficient and proposes a strengthened and expanded set of measures, as follows:

1. Exploring further the scope and nature of academic freedom as an EU fundamental right, *ensuring it fully encapsulate the freedom to learn*²;
2. Strengthening existing European legal frameworks for promoting and protecting academic freedom, *creating legally binding protections for students, staff, scholars and higher education institutions*;
3. Enhancing awareness of definitions and interpretations of academic freedom *and promoting the ones that define it holistically – as a both a value and a right that belongs to all those involved in academia, including students*;
4. Developing the European Parliament Academic Freedom Monitor *by, inter alia, establishing it as a regular report to be presented and debated in the European Parliament plenary*;
5. Better integration of academic freedom into EU higher education (*both learning and teaching*), research, development and innovation, *while also supporting civic engagement*³;
6. Conducting meta-analysis of academic freedom data *and making it publicly available and accessible to the large public, improving overall data collection and transparency, with a specific focus on students*;
7. Enhancing the knowledge base and deepening understanding;
8. *Protecting higher education institutions from political interference and polarization*;

² See [ESU's feedback on the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights](#)

³ See ESU's [Statement on Active Citizenship Education](#)

9. *Addressing risks stemming from commercialisation, commodification and private sector influence;*
10. *Recognizing and protecting students at risk, by, inter alia, expanding current frameworks to address the growing vulnerabilities of students across Europe;*
11. *Recognizing students as full rights-holders of academic freedom and as key stakeholders in its protection;*

ESU demands that both the European Union as a whole and its Member States **take note of these policy recommendations** and **act decisively to strengthen legal protections for academic freedom**, while also taking **concrete** steps to **restore** what has been lost over the past decade.

European higher education must remain a space where the freedom to learn, teach and research is not only protected, but actively fostered. Higher education institutions are spaces where democracy is practised, where ideas are challenged and where future generations are taught.

Finally, ESU expresses its **availability** and **willingness** to work with European institutions and stakeholders to ensure that academic freedom – in all its dimensions – is effectively safeguarded across Europe.

Av. de Tervueren 155
1150 Brussels

tel.: +32 2 893 25 45
fax.: +32 2 893 25 45

secretariat@esu-online.org
www.esu-online.org