

## Introduction

Zoltán Rónay & Ewelina K Niemczyk

### A Worldwide Pandemic and Academic Freedom: Challenges of the Changing Landscape

#### Abstract

In the last decades, increased number of scholars warned that academic freedom is at risk, not only due to the authoritarian tendencies of some governments but also due to globalization and an increased pressure on academic performance. Based on the most current literature, this paper brings attention to the impact of Covid-19 on academic freedom. The findings show that the pandemic placed the conversation about academic freedom into a new dimension, introducing new challenges for which academics and higher education institutions were not fully prepared. Zooming on the observed developments in teaching and researching during the pandemic, it became evident that (a) the shift to online platforms made the privacy of classroom conversations disappear and (b) the dissemination of knowledge gained through scientific work contradicting governments' narrative was restricted. Overall, this work offered an opportunity to highlight the importance of academic freedom and to recognize the urgency to monitor academic freedom globally as it becomes increasingly vulnerable.

Keywords: academic freedom, Covid-19, higher education, pandemic and education, research and instruction, zoombombing

#### Introduction

As evident within scholarly literature, academic freedom (AF) is a fundamental component of universities, pursuit of knowledge and innovation, research collaboration, and quality teaching. The notion of AF is in strong connection with institutional autonomy, which is part of universities' identity since the beginning. The institutional autonomy and AF were the protections put in place against the endeavors of the church and later of the state to influence and restrict institutional and individual functioning. In fact, the phenomenon of State interventions still exists nowadays and is documented in several publications of the last decade (Ren & Li, 2013; Rónay & Niemczyk, 2020). The fragility of AF was always present, however, in 2020 the whole world, including the sector of higher education faced new dangers and demands posed by COVID-19. Universities and academics were forced to respond to the challenges of the pandemic in a thoughtful and timely manner. The new circumstances of crisis placed the conversation about AF into a new dimension.

The connection between COVID-19 and AF is two-sided; AF is crucial to managing the pandemic situation meanwhile the circumstances resulting from the pandemic seem to restrict this freedom. The literature showed that “[s]cience and

research are crucial to tackling the COVID-19 crisis” (Chan, 2020, p. 10), moreover, AF can strengthen researchers' creativity and innovative skills, which are essential in times of crisis (Corona Times Editorial, 2020).

Meanwhile, lack of AF can result in negative effects. For instance, it may weaken the success of sustainable solutions and support governments' hidden agenda threatening democracy and the rule of law.

The Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi, 2020) recognizing the changing landscape and insufficient knowledge about factors that sustain and threaten AF undertook an important initiative. In collaboration with the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, the Scholars at Risk Network, and the V-Dem Institute, the GPPi developed the Academic Freedom Index (Afi) with the intention to monitor and protect AF across nations. Current data illustrates that nations where institutional autonomy is respected have a higher level of AF in terms of research and teaching (GPPi, 2020).

Based on the most current international literature, this paper presents impact of the pandemic on AF. In the following section, we first provide clarification about the notion of AF and how we understand it in our work. Then we move to discuss specific examples where AF was impacted by developments in HEIs across nations. Thoughtful of the length constrains of the paper, our attention was devoted to key teaching and researching practices.

## **Notion of academic freedom**

In connection to the purpose of this paper, we understand academic freedom as the right to (a) teach and express one's validated truth, (b) conduct research based on own research interests without political and commercial influence, (c) share research findings and ideas within chosen professional and public platforms. According to us, the following two definitions are relevant today as they were years ago.

Seventy years ago, Albert Einstein declared the following:

*By academic freedom I understand the right to search for truth and to publish and teach what one holds to be true. This right implies also a duty: one must not conceal any part of what one has recognized to be true. It is evident that any restriction of academic freedom acts in such a way as to hamper the dissemination of knowledge among people and thereby impedes rational judgment and action. (Reichman, 2017, para 2)*

Meanwhile, more than 30 years ago, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights provided the following understanding of AF (UN, 2020b, p. 6):

*Members of the academic community, individually or collectively, are free to pursue, develop and transmit knowledge and ideas, through research, teaching, study, discussion, documentation, production, creation or writing. Academic freedom includes the liberty of individuals to express freely opinions about the institution or system in which they work, to fulfil their functions without discrimination or fear of repression by the State or any other actor, to participate in professional or representative academic bodies, and to enjoy all the internationally recognized human rights applicable to other individuals in the same jurisdiction.*

The above provided definitions reflect our stand on AF. We also recognize that times of crisis call for taking AF with special care, sensibility, and consideration for consequences. To that end, scholarly literature emphasizes researchers'

responsibility to be objective and transparent. As academics we have much to offer, this includes awareness that even our truths might at times be temporary and clouded, especially in times of crisis. Therefore, in order to serve as contributors of sustainable solutions in this global time of uncertainties we need to be highly reflective of AF in our practices. Part of the right to AF entails freedom to refrain from reactive comments and rushed publications recognizing that in this situation there is more that we do not know than we do know.

### **Challenges of the changing landscape**

With the outset of 2020, COVID-19 became one of the most popular research topics. The pandemic's widespread effects involved researchers from every discipline and every continent trying to find solutions to the issues caused by the pandemic. Since the mission of research is to critically investigate a given phenomenon and its reactions, scientists engaged in debates with each other and with the governments (Corona Times Editorial, 2020). It was not surprising that scientists articulated their views about the actions of governments and international organizations. With help of social media, diverse types of information, at times contradicting, rapidly reached people making them at times unsure of what is credible (Chan, 2020).

The engagement of different education stakeholders in finding solutions, especially in areas of teaching and researching showed that AF matters and needs to be safeguarded. In fact, several challenges pertaining to AF in research intensified with the pandemic. It must be noted that not all the nations were able to release reliable research, reports and recommendations regarding the pandemic or relevant education strategic planning. Less democratic nations as well as authoritarian figures in democratic nations have restricted dissemination of scientific knowledge differing from the official narratives. Some scientists have been censored by their governments in the process of trying to share information about Covid-19. According to news reports, as of 2020 there was an increase in online harassment and censorship (e.g., deleted posts from social media, canceled presentations) as well as investigations and suspensions of academics by universities. It is worth noting that such practices are used not only to silence specific scholars but also to send a strong message to others to self-censor.

Although AF is guaranteed in many nations, it is evident that researchers whose ideas differ from the government's views are exposed to harassment. In the past year, many reports showcased instances where governments attacked researchers for their views and questions raised. As reported by Vaughan and Ncayiyana (2020), Glenda Grey, a pediatrician and scientist who also served on the Ministerial Advisory Committee for the South African government during the pandemic was chastised publicly for contradicting government policy. After expressing her concerns about some restrictions implemented during the pandemic, she was accused of distributing false allegations. It was rewarding to see that academic community defended Grey reaffirming that freedom of speech of competent specialists is in interest of the public. As reported by several news platforms, the Academy of Science of South Africa released a public statement defending Dr. Grey and stating that "to threaten researchers and to muzzle their voice would have a chilling effect on creativity, innovation and experimentation" (ASSAf, 2020).

Ms. Khan who is UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression stated the following:

*Censorship kills scholarship. Attacks on academic freedom corrode the pillars of democratic life, scientific progress, human development, and also the right of all human beings to freedom of opinion and expression... In the face of the unprecedented challenge of finding an effective response to COVID-19 pandemic, it is more important than ever that the academic community be allowed to research, debate and disseminate and share knowledge freely including through across border cooperation without harassment, repression or persecution.* (UN, 2020a, paras 5-6)

In other cases, AF was restricted through provision of financial support to HEIs by authoritarian governments. As reported by Rónay and Niemczyk (2020) even prior to the pandemic, universities and funding agencies supported specific type of research according to their agenda. In order to get the funds, researchers were placed in a position to maneuver between their research interest, requirements of the funding agency and publishing possibilities. In many cases, COVID-19 is also used as an excuse by governments to reduce AF by direct tools, or indirectly, reallocating financial sources, or simply creating a public mood in which the scientists feel insecure. Chan and colleagues (2020, p. 18) stated that “Now governments threaten to regulate freedoms and the withdrawal of funding to ward off evidence and comments that do not support the narrative they wish to paint”. In addition, Furstenberg, Prelec and Heathershaw (2020) reported that the need for funding has forced many HEIs to collaborate with governments in authoritarian states, whose policies delimit the space for freedom of expression and thinking by controlling what is taught, researched, and discussed at university campuses. To that end, human rights experts often criticized institutions and nations for relying on funds that come with a list of expectations.

Not only aspects of research activities were influenced by the pandemic but also teaching practice. The pandemic forced universities to move to online teaching creating several vulnerabilities and challenges. Some of the documented struggles include planning to include all students, providing access to technology and resources, designing new support services and developing new curricula. The use of e-platforms such as Zoom or Skype provided a setting and a solution for effective online teaching. However, it also introduced some challenges. As reported by Poliakoff (2020), prior to pandemic, classroom discussions were kept mainly confidential, however, with the online platforms and virtual permanent record, the privacy of classroom conversations disappeared. He further adds that:

*Students and faculty alike need concrete, credible guarantees that the classroom does not become like Twitter, where a statement can go viral, ruin one’s career, and exist on the permanent record.* (Poliakoff, 2020, para 8)

Loss of classroom privacy and lack of security measures in accessing video-conferencing platforms impacted aspects of AF. Although threats posed to academics existed long before the pandemic, the new phenomenon called “Zoombombing” escalated the situation, exposing academics’ reputation and career to harm. As described by Bearfield (2020, para 2) zoombombing refers to a situation “when outside parties seek to disrupt Zoom or other online chats and gatherings with potentially harmful behavior. These types of attacks have been occurring at an alarming rate and are threatening to the educational community.” As reported by

McKenzie (2020), the incidents of disruptions in online educational platforms are becoming more frequent. Sometimes, the disruptions are random, other times specific institutions and classrooms are being targeted.

Unfortunately, there are cases reported where students shared details and passwords to scheduled online Zoom meetings with others. After the intruders enter the meeting, often posing as students, they disrupt class meetings by making irrational questions and vulgar comments; promoting specific political views and sharing racial remarks; or posting inappropriate images and sounds. Professors, especially those with little experience with video conferencing platforms such as ZOOM reported struggling to manage their e-classroom. With awareness of the above-mentioned risks, many universities adapted new policies prompting students and staff to cope with the remote teaching and online communications in respectful ways. The institutions also made use of protective practices such as using passwords and codes in order to enter scheduled meetings. Some HEIs published preventative intrusion guides (McKenzie, 2020).

As evident, closure of HEIs and shift to online interactions exposed many vulnerabilities. Professor Katrin Kinzelbach warned that although the closure of universities was a justified way of combating the pandemic, there was a risk that some governments may use the crisis as a pretext to increase political control over HEIs (Sawahel, 2020). For instance, in Hungary, the government announced a state of danger. This decree ensured the government an extra power, which the Parliament enforced (to assess this, see Chan et al., 2020). However, not this extra power was the tool of AF's restriction. The Hungarian government party has an extra majority in the Parliament, which allowed them power and offered by the pandemic situation to pass some crucial amendments. While most people were occupied with the virus concerns, many state universities became so-called foundation university. This means that the maintainer of these HEIs is not the state anymore, but several foundations, which are financed by the state and whose governing board members are delegated by the government. Most of these members are current ministers or people belonging to the sphere of interest of the government party. The most important element of this model (which was introduced originally by the Act XIX of 2019) is that this governing board can take away the senate's former power. Thus, they can decide on all matters of education, inside regulation, and university leaders' appointments, including the rector. With this amendment, that type of university lost its autonomy and the AF.

### **Conclusive thoughts**

While academic freedom was already vulnerable in the last decades, its vulnerability increased as the entire education sector had to face unexpected new challenges opposed by the pandemic. Due to Covid-19, AF is threatened not only by government policies and funding agencies, but also by the censorship of scientists which became more prominent along with restrictions of free speech practiced by the universities themselves. Scholars agree that only AF can ensure the successful handling of all aspects related to COVID-19. Yet, it must be noted that the online teaching and intensified use of technology in research maximized the fragility of AF. Some reactions, even those of the academia are worrisome and raise further questions. For instance, where is the border between practicing responsible criticism

by scholars and self-censorship? How stable can AF be considering that researchers themselves give up easily? Through this work, we aim to promote much needed conversation about AF during the time of crisis. Without doubt, the pandemic has a complex impact on AF, which needs to be closely monitored and implications anticipated.

## References

- ASSAf (2020): ASSAf Statement on Academic Freedom and the Values of Science. Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf). [https://research.assaf.org.za/bitstream/handle/20.500.11911/168/2020\\_assaf\\_academic-freedom-values-science.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://research.assaf.org.za/bitstream/handle/20.500.11911/168/2020_assaf_academic-freedom-values-science.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y) (Accessed 07.02.2021).
- Bearfield, H. (2020): The Risks of “Zoombombing” in Education. <https://www.blumshapiro.com/insights/the-risks-of-zoombombing-in-education-during-covid-19/> (Accessed 06.02.2021).
- Chan, H. F., Ferguson, N., Savage, D., Stadelmann, D. & Torgler, B. (2020): Is science able to perform under pressure? Insights from COVID-19. CREMA Working Paper No. 2020-07. Center for Research in Economics, Management and the Arts (CREMA), Zürich. <https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/225549> (Accessed 06.01.2021).
- Chan, R. Y. (2020): Studying Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Global Higher Education: Evidence for Future Research and Practice. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3622751> (Accessed 06.01.2021).
- Corona Times Editorial (2020): Academic freedom in times of Covid-19. *Corona Times*, 26 March. <https://www.coronatimes.net/academic-freedom-covid-19/> (Accessed 06.01.2021).
- Furstenberg, S., Prelec, T. & Heathershaw, J. (2020): The Internationalization of Universities and the Repression of Academic Freedom. Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/internationalization-universities-and-repression-academic-freedom>. (Accessed 06.02.2021).
- GPPi (2020): Free Universities: Putting the Academic Freedom Index into Action. <https://www.gppi.net/2020/03/26/free-universities> (Accessed 06.02.2021).
- McKenzie, L. (2020): Zoombies’ Take Over Online Classrooms. *Inside Higher Ed*, April 3. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/03/zoombombing-isn%E2%80%99t-going-away-and-it-could-get-worse> (Accessed 06.02.2021).
- Poliakoff, M. (2020): What Will Covid-19 Mean for Academic Freedom? *Forbes*, April 21. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelpoliakoff/2020/04/21/what-will-covid-19-mean-for-academic-freedom/?sh=7eb4290c684c> (Accessed 06.01.2021).
- Reichman, H. (2017): Einstein on Academic Freedom and Political Inquisitions. <https://academeblog.org/2017/06/11/einstein-on-academic-freedom-and-political-inquisitions/> (Accessed 06.02.2021).
- Ren, K. & Li, J. (2013): Academic Freedom and University Autonomy: A Higher Education Policy Perspective. *Higher Education Policy*, 26, 507-522.
- Rónay, Z. & Niemczyk, E. K. (2020): Institutional and individual autonomy in relation to research productivity in Hungarian and South African higher education contexts. In: N. Popov, C. Wolhuter, L. de Beer, G. Hilton, J. Ogunleye, E. Achinewhu-Nworgu & E. Niemczyk (Eds.) *Educational Reforms Worldwide* (pp. 240-247). BCES Conference Books, Vol. 18. Sofia: Bulgarian Comparative Education Society.
- Sawahel, W. (2020): University shutdowns bring new challenges to academic freedom. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200415091915993> (Accessed 06.01.2021).

- UN (2020a): Academic freedom essential to fight COVID-19, says UN expert. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26412&LangID=E> (Accessed 06.02.2021).
- UN (2020b): Promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. <https://www.undocs.org/A/75/261> (Accessed 06.02.2021).
- Vaughan, C. & Ncayiyana, D. (2020): Is academic freedom really protected in South Africa? The World University Rankings. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/academic-freedom-really-protected-south-africa> (Accessed 06.02.2021).

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Zoltán Rónay, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary

Prof. Dr. Ewelina Kinga Niemczyk, North-West University, South Africa