



## **Editorial v.3 n.3 – 2025 - Academic freedom and its challenges: a shared responsibility for the academic Community**

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Academic freedom has been at the heart of higher education for centuries, ensuring that universities remain places where ideas can be explored freely, tested rigorously, and shared openly. It is a principle that safeguards the pursuit of truth and underpins the role of scholarship in democratic life. Yet, as we look around in 2025, it is clear that this principle faces growing challenges. These challenges do not come from a single source, nor do they always arise from overt hostility to scholarship. More often, they emerge from the complex interplay of political debates, economic pressures, institutional considerations, and the new dynamics of digital communication. Recognizing these challenges—and working together to address them constructively—has become a responsibility for all of us engaged in teaching and research.

In some settings, political debates have reached into classrooms and laboratories. Laws and regulations about what can be taught or researched may be introduced with the intention of reflecting societal values, but they can also create uncertainty and discourage faculty from pursuing certain topics. Studies have shown how restrictions on curricula and teaching materials can shape academic behavior, sometimes leading to self-censorship or disengagement from sensitive fields (Briscoe & Jones, 2024). While societies are right to expect accountability and relevance from their universities, it is also important to preserve the independence that allows scholarship to thrive. Without it, higher education risks becoming reactive rather than exploratory, narrowing its ability to respond creatively to emerging problems.

Economic forces are equally influential. The rising importance of external funding, particularly from corporate partners, has brought benefits but also challenges. Many projects of great societal value would not be possible without such partnerships, yet there is evidence that strong financial incentives can shape the direction of research agendas (Ramezani, 2024). When funding priorities lean heavily toward commercial outcomes, there is a risk that fundamental inquiry—the type of work whose value may not be immediately visible—becomes harder to sustain. Universities must continue to strike a balance between collaboration with external partners and the safeguarding

of scholarly independence, ensuring that financial support does not compromise the diversity of questions that scholars are free to ask.

Even within academic communities, pressures can emerge that subtly limit inquiry. Out of concern for reputational risk, for student or public sensitivities, or simply for career security, some scholars hesitate to pursue topics that might attract criticism. This phenomenon is not new, but recent studies have highlighted how it continues to affect knowledge production across disciplines (Clark et al., 2024). When scholars avoid important but sensitive issues, the gaps in evidence and debate can be as damaging as more overt restrictions. At the same time, administrators—responsible for protecting institutions from political, financial, and reputational risks—sometimes adopt policies that unintentionally narrow academic freedom. These policies may be well-intentioned, but they underscore the importance of transparent governance and meaningful faculty involvement in decision-making.

The digital era has added another layer of complexity. Social media has created unprecedented opportunities for researchers to share their work with wide audiences, but it has also exposed them to heightened scrutiny. While many academic discussions online are constructive, others can quickly turn hostile. Reports from several countries show that online harassment has made some scholars reluctant to participate in public debate, limiting their willingness to share evidence-based perspectives at precisely the moment society most needs them (Väliverronen & Saikkonen, 2021). This phenomenon is not unique to academia, but the implications are significant: a retreat from public engagement weakens the role of scholarship in informing democratic discourse.

Taken together, these pressures do not necessarily spell the decline of academic freedom, but they do illustrate its vulnerability. Each moment of hesitation, each policy of over-caution, each shift of priorities toward narrower goals can, over time, erode the independence that has long defined higher education. The result is not a dramatic collapse but a gradual narrowing of possibilities—a “chilling effect” that makes both teaching and research less daring, less responsive, and ultimately less impactful.

The good news is that there are constructive paths forward. Many institutions are working actively to reinforce the conditions that make academic freedom possible. Shared governance, in which faculty have a clear role in decisions about curricula and research policy, is one safeguard. Transparent disclosure of funding sources and potential conflicts of interest helps sustain trust both within academia and with the public. Professional associations and academic networks provide spaces for mutual support, especially when individuals feel vulnerable. And increasingly, universities are adopting policies to address digital harassment, recognizing that online safety has become part of protecting intellectual independence.

These measures highlight an important point: academic freedom is not simply a privilege granted to scholars; it is a shared responsibility. It exists to ensure that research and teaching can serve society in their fullest sense—by asking difficult questions, testing assumptions, and preparing students to think critically. When academic freedom is strong, it benefits not only scholars but also communities, policymakers, and citizens who rely on universities to provide independent, evidence-based knowledge.

This broader perspective is crucial for making the case to society. Academic freedom should not be framed as an internal concern of academics alone, but as a principle that directly supports public good. Restrictions on inquiry diminish the quality of research that informs policy, limit the diversity of perspectives in public debate, and weaken the role of the university as a trusted source of independent analysis. By articulating this connection clearly, academics and institutions can build stronger public support for protecting the independence of teaching and research.

At CERES – Health & Education Medical Journal, we are mindful of these challenges and committed to contributing positively to this shared responsibility. We affirm that the work of scholars should be judged by the rigor of its methods and the clarity of its contributions, not by external pressures or political trends. We value open inquiry and welcome diverse perspectives, provided they meet standards of quality and respect. We believe that academic freedom, approached with responsibility and mutual understanding, is essential to advancing knowledge in health and education and to preparing future generations for the challenges ahead.

As editors, authors, reviewers, and readers, we all play a role in sustaining this environment. Our collective efforts can ensure that academic freedom remains not only a principle we defend when challenged, but a daily practice we nurture. By doing so, we strengthen the foundation of scholarship and renew the trust placed in higher education as a cornerstone of democratic and professional life.

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