

Bonn Declaration on Freedom of Scientific Research

Adopted at the Ministerial Conference on
the European Research Area
on 20 October 2020 in Bonn



The relevance of freedom of scientific research for the progress of our societies

The freedom of scientific research is a universal right and public good. It is a core principle of the European Union and as such anchored in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU. It is also protected by the United Nations' International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights ratified by more than 170 states. It has constitutional or legal status in most EU Member States. The freedom of scientific research applies to all types of research organisations¹ and scholarship and to all academic disciplines. 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.

A shared definition of freedom of scientific research

Freedom of scientific research is related to freedom of expression, freedom of association, the freedom of movement and the right to education, among other rights. It encompasses the right to freely define research questions, choose and develop theories, gather empirical material and employ sound academic research methods, to question accepted wisdom and bring forward new ideas. It entails the right to share, disseminate and publish the results thereof openly, including through training and teaching. It is the freedom of researchers to express their opinion without being disadvantaged by the system in which they work or by governmental or institutional censorship and discrimination. It is also the freedom to associate in professional or representative academic bodies. Freedom of scientific research needs opportunities for physical and virtual mobility in pursuit of one's research work, requires a culture of gender equality and the freedom to interact with students and colleagues. Freedom of scientific research is informed by the standards of academic disciplines. At the same time, it enables researchers to challenge these standards when and if new research results begin to question their current validity.

Any limitation on the freedom of scientific research must be still compatible with the nature of this right and be determined through regular procedures of the rule of law. Scholars' exercise of rights derived from the freedom of scientific research must take into account the rights of others.

¹ The term research organisation is used in its widest sense to include publicly and privately financed research funding and performing organisations as well as higher education institutions.

The role of governments to protect the freedom of scientific research

We stand committed to the freedom of scientific research, especially in times when there are increasing reports of violations of this freedom around the world, including in Europe. We strongly condemn all violations of the freedom of scientific research and will strenuously oppose them. We are committed to solidarity with researchers around the globe whose right to freedom of scientific research is violated.

As well-founded scientific knowledge and perspectives are derived transparently and are refutable, they deserve our highest degree of protection. Consequently, we will continue to express our conviction that critical discourses are not disloyalty, but essential elements of a democratic society. Freedom of scientific research is inseparable from a plurality of voices. We recognise the importance of having strong legal frameworks in place, based on the rule of law and guaranteeing and protecting the scientific freedom of research organisations as well as of individual researchers. We are committed to preventing and confronting any interference that endangers the full application of the freedom of scientific research in our research organisations and will support our research organisations in their efforts to counteract the distortion of facts and disinformation campaigns.

We highly value the full circle of knowledge production, dissemination and use to maximise the overall performance, relevance and impact of the European Research Area. We therefore consider a healthy equilibrium between bottom-up and top-down research and innovation policy approaches necessary; this is in line with the freedom of scientific research, in particular with respect to an effective contribution of scientific research to wider policy goals, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

We encourage close cooperation between the European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area, in particular with regard to adequate and interoperable academic careers. We acknowledge and support the development of more effective instruments, including monitoring, for the full implementation and safeguarding the freedom of scientific research in the context of the Bologna Process within the European Higher Education Area. We will closely follow the establishment of a monitoring system on academic freedom in the European Higher Education Area and assess its implications for research in particular with respect to potential indicators and monitoring methods and their relevance for monitoring freedom of scientific research within the European Research Area.

We will continue to strengthen academic freedom and institutional autonomy coupled with long-term as well as reliable and stable institutional financing as necessary prerequisites for freedom of scientific research, including modern and accessible research infrastructures and institutions, adequate research careers, in particular for early-stage researchers, and incentives for open collaborations.

The roles and responsibilities of research organisations

Science has a responsibility towards society to ensure clarity, transparency and comprehensibility when sharing and communicating research findings, and to explain the difference between non-scientific opinions and scientifically verifiable findings. We encourage and support our research organisations in their efforts to communicate scientific processes and results and to engage with society in order to suppress the distortion of facts and disinformation campaigns. Trust in science is key for an inclusive, open and democratic society.

We understand that the exercise of scientific freedom is necessarily linked to a professional system of responsible self-regulation of academic and research institutions. We encourage and support high standards of good scientific practice, guidelines and advisory structures for safeguarding integrity, responsible research and ethical boundaries, including transparent, fair and excellence-based procedures for academic advancement and the competitive allocation of funding. This includes creating incentive and reward systems that promote independence, integrity and transparency of research, as well as implementing support and guidance for the professional development of researchers.

The role of freedom of scientific research in global research collaborations

Freedom of scientific research should be a visible common norm guiding any research and innovation policy dialogue and research cooperation involving EU Member States, the Commission and international partner countries and regions. It should be understood, practiced and promoted by all Member States of the European Union and the Commission, including as an integral part of our science diplomacy activities.

We call on our global partners to reaffirm our common ground in the protection of freedom of scientific research to enable flourishing research cooperation based on the principles of Open Science. Global research networks of excellence, joint responsibility for global challenges and the protection of democratic values thus have a reliable basis.

We encourage our research organisations and their researchers to establish strong research cooperation around the world and to uphold and promote the freedom of scientific research when working with researchers from all countries including those that do not always share our values and principles. We will provide full support to our research organisations in this endeavour and encourage them to promote and anchor the principles of academic freedom in their international relationships.

We will ensure that freedom of scientific research is acknowledged as an important element in establishing our global collaborations, including through future negotiations with third countries and international organisations, and for the renewal of agreements on scientific and technological cooperation.

Conclusion

We see Europe as a guardian of freedom, equality and the rule of law ensuring democracy. We understand the European Research Area as the safeguard of freedom of scientific research, as the precondition for a dynamic research and innovation landscape which strives for the advancement of knowledge and the benefit of society.

We, the Research Ministers of the European Union and the European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, met at the Ministerial Conference on the European Research Area in Bonn, Germany on 20 October 2020 to affirm the central role of freedom of scientific research as a common core value and principle for research cooperation within the European Research Area and with international partners. We extend our gratitude to our international partners for their commitment to upholding the principles of this declaration in their countries. Other countries are invited to express their support for the Bonn Declaration in the future.

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