

Position paper

**Higher education
and
international collaboration
in a changing
European and Swedish
political context**

written by the SUHF Global Relations Advisory Group

Higher education and international collaboration in a changing European and Swedish political context

“The foundation of education is sharing. And when people from different cultures and countries are involved, it is even more enriching.”¹

Due to rising domestic polarisation and geopolitical tensions the pursuit of academic research has become increasingly complicated and dangerous. These problems affect academic freedom as well as international collaboration. In this position paper, we map out the main challenges and make a few preliminary suggestions on how to ensure and defend academic freedom at home and responsible international engagement and cooperation beyond Sweden.

1. Introduction

Our world today is in flux and some of the basic rules of conduct in politics, international and domestic, and society can no longer be taken for granted. These include the future of democracy, a consensus on the benefits of international collaboration and exchange, and the sanctity of personal rights and freedoms. Academic institutions are part of society and are thus affected by these trends as well. The purpose of this position paper is to map out some of these challenges that Swedish academia faces with a particular focus on international collaboration and suggest possible ways to manage them.

In the past couple of years, the Swedish international context has changed dramatically. The security dimension of institutional exchanges between Sweden and the global community has steadily become more salient and thus the need to address these issues. The academic community is a sector that heavily relies on international cooperation and communication - both for the advancement of knowledge and for education — and where the need for greater awareness and ability to manage potential security risks is clear. There is, however, also another risk: exaggerated responses and countermeasures on national and institutional levels, and by individuals, which could significantly damage science and society, both in Sweden and globally. Historically Sweden has been, and remains, a small country reliant on exports and other international exchanges for its development and prosperity. This industrial and technological performance is facilitated by a strong international scientific community well integrated into global research and tech networks. These values and institutional foundations must not be weakened through an overcautious approach to international academic exchange with countries that are considered politically problematic. Otherwise frameworks and processes related to scientific development, that have their own unwritten rules of conduct and ethics, risk being reduced to extensions of security-related policies.

¹ President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen speaking at the Fourth European Education Summit on key building blocks towards reaching the European Education Area by 2025. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/AC_21_6743

Shrinking civil space and academic freedom is a global phenomenon. Sweden and other countries rightly problematize these trends in other parts of the world. We must however also be cognisant of the fact that our own academic freedoms are often based on unspoken rules of agreed-upon behaviour - in essence, assumptions that have become traditions. As such these unspoken rules are vulnerable to shifting political fortunes and climates. Sweden therefore needs to safeguard academic freedom by enacting laws to this effect.

2. Context

Since the end of the Cold War, European higher education and research policies have been pursued with the mistaken belief that this can be done free of politics and ideology. The underlying assumption was that liberal values and excellence in science and research were necessarily linked. The competitive capacities of autocratic states were considered to be limited to certain technical fields and of a temporary nature (e.g. Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the rising geopolitical tensions between the US and China are some of the developments that challenge the above-mentioned assumption, calling for a re-examination of the relationship between science and the state. Many of these conflicts are fuelled by ideological rivalries, competition over the mastery and appropriation of core technologies, and the continuous erosion of democracy and civil discourse, both among and within countries. This increasing polarisation affects how knowledge, science and academic freedom are valued. As a result, there are demands on universities to replace an unequivocally positive view of international exchange with a more aware and prudent approach. While this is, in itself, not problematic it runs the risk of easily evolving into an overcautious and restrictive understanding of how academic exchange should be conducted.

In particular, governments increasingly expect and require research and higher education institutions to ensure that international collaboration does not undermine national, and even economic, security. Nonetheless, international collaboration is essential to the advancement of knowledge and its utilisation. Furthermore, in a time of increasing nationalism, protectionism, and isolationism, academia can and should play a vital role in contributing to mutual understanding, exchange and dialogue between countries and regions that do not share the same political, institutional, cultural, religious or economic frameworks and structures.

3. Challenges for higher education institutions

There is an urgent need to defend the core values and functions of academic work: openness, the quest for knowledge, education, and academic freedom while (and by) showing that we can meet new demands for research security. Education and research are pillars of a functioning liberal democracy and a democratic society. Democracies with illiberal tendencies and governance structures as well as authoritarian regimes constitute a new danger to this system and values as they create parallel educational systems to public higher education, for instance by issuing degrees and appointing professors. Their higher educational policies also undermine and delegitimize liberal values by making their claims to objective and non-ideological science, thus portraying their enemies as ideological and biased. The whole sector is under attack, but academic fields such as

gender studies, migration studies, and environmental studies have been particularly exposed. The liberal democratic response to these challenges is often to highlight the plight of single individuals who are “at risk”. This individual security framing misses the structural dimension that needs to be tackled on national and international levels of higher education.

Maintaining and developing international cooperation in the fields of science is an absolute necessity and unavoidable due to the very nature of scientific progress and our shared challenges. This must however be conducted responsibly: maintaining openness, while being mindful of security issues and other kinds of risks both for institutions and individuals. These risks range from navigating academic cooperation with institutions in less free societies or on strategic or sensitive topics to conducting fieldwork in dangerous environments to attacks and restraints on academic freedom at home. At the same time, mindful of the changing security environment in the world, academia needs to be more attentive to the risk of deliberate unauthorized interference in what kind of, and how, research is conducted.

There is also an increased frequency of individual researchers being threatened, harassed, and sometimes also used as hostages by states. Researchers are exposed to these kinds of problems both when in their own national contexts and when visiting other countries for research purposes.

Universities already have mechanisms in place to handle some risks in international collaboration, in particular ethical standards and frameworks. These mechanisms and institutions are the results of historical legacies, like authoritarianism and the Cold War, or experiences of governance of academic knowledge production. What the Cold War experience tells us is that a key element in helping sustain academics and preserve what freedom of thought they may have in illiberal systems is maintaining and sustaining the exchange with their academic communities.

4. Devising and implementing a response

- **Promoting intra-university awareness:** Collaboration is not without risks, therefore universities should set up joint consultative bodies based on the expertise that faculty members have gained through their experience and evaluation of existing cooperation projects.
- **National coordination** and pooling of knowledge and best practices initiated and led by the academic community itself. This could be in the shape of a watchdog function for Swedish academic freedom and a network for responsible academic exchange.
- **Legal frameworks and guidance:** As the dangers to academic freedom at times come from within the institutions, academics must have access to university-funded legal support to be able to safeguard their rights. National legislation enshrining academic freedom should be enacted.

- **Emphasising the value of people-to-people dialogue:** Academic cooperation should also include nontraditional academic cooperation. The present system of cooperation focuses on joint publications and research projects. Practices developed during the Cold War, like people-to-people dialogue, are often a vital first step in building trust between scholars from opposite sides of political fault lines.
- **Outreach beyond academia – raising awareness in government and the public:** Portraying different countries as “evil” precludes the kind of nuanced approach needed to grapple with political conflicts and the repercussions they have on academia. Academia is needed for understanding these conflicts and academic cooperation is a necessary element in bridging differences and promoting change. Academics who have experience and expertise in these fields should speak up in public and should be acknowledged as experts.