



UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN

# ACADEMIC FREEDOM

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

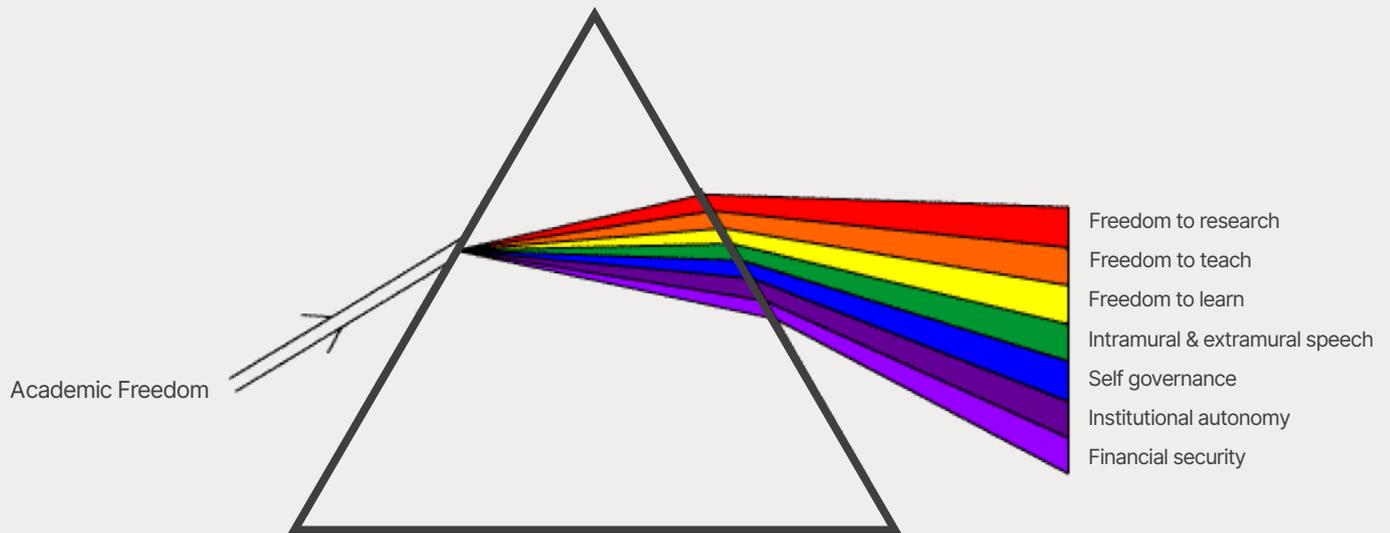
RECTOR'S  
ASSIGNMENT

UCPH Forward,  
Cohort IV



# The Prism of Academic Freedom

THE MANY FACETS OF ACADEIC FREEDOM



# Academic Freedom

**Research freedom is ensured by law in Denmark. But what about academic freedom? What is the difference?**

Research freedom is a part of academic freedom if we follow most definitions. The majority of modern definitions follow a Humboldt model of freedom to teach (including extramural dissemination), freedom to learn and research, and freedom of the academic institution.

**To what extent does academic freedom include academic citizenship?**

Academic citizenship is vital to academic freedom. An ongoing (and unending) discussion about academic freedom must be secured at UCPH - the issue of academic freedom is not resolved by this Rector's Assignment, nor by the Coordination Group on Academic Freedom. It's a collective effort and a collective negotiation of what academic freedom is and can be.

**What is the relation to the UCPH merit criteria?**

Academic freedom is something we can all work with should we choose to do so. Work on this should be recognised as good citizenship or outreach.

**What is your role/responsibility as an independent expert?**

We all have a responsibility for defending academic freedom not just for the University but for a functioning democratic society.

# Academic Freedom

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## **How to enact academic freedom?**

We are clear that this cannot be solved in a 10 minute PowerPoint. Work must be done continuously and well beyond the Senate's two-year project.

## **How can we ensure academic freedom at UCPH without damaging the organization?**

Institutional autonomy and self-governance are crucial.

## **Can/should one separate private and professional viewpoints and behavior?**

Academic freedom, as conceptualised by most major definitions, do not make a clear distinction between intramural and extramural speech. This makes such a distinction quite difficult.

## **To what extent do important political agendas impact university and the academic freedom of individual researchers?**

Political interests will always interfere with University business. We see this in recent funding for security-related topics. It is the University's job to protect academic freedom even in the midst of these political interests. Not only as a matter of principle but as a matter of democracy.

# Three Points of Friction

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## TRUST IN SCIENCE



Political agendas increasingly redefine what counts as good scientific practice and scientific findings are dismissed as “opinions.”

There are legion examples of researchers being accused of activism – from social scientists accused of “woke indoctrination” to climate and biomedical scientists of pursuing “radical agendas” when communicating results.



## FUNDING

The university is increasingly dependent on external funding.

This allows external actors to steer research priorities and shapes research towards what is fundable rather than what is interesting.



## SELF-GOVERNANCE

There is a lack of transparency in how power is distributed across the University and how senior appointments are made.

There is an absence of faculty participation in the appointment of senior leadership and the board has relatively unbalanced power.

# Eroding Trust in Scientific Knowledge



Sustaining trust in scientific knowledge in broader society is a continuous collective task for university leadership, individual researchers and students. Many good measures for supporting academic freedom and strategies already exist but they lack visibility or are not directly connected to this issue.

# Eroding Trust in Scientific Knowledge

## SOLUTION 1



## Publicly promote and defend academic freedom

We find it essential that the rectorate and top leadership consistently promote academic freedom and publicly advocate for the validity of scientific knowledge – and that they publicly support researchers when singled out on political grounds.



## Establish independent academic freedom ombudsperson

We propose that the university establishes an Ombudsperson for Academic Freedom to ensure it lives up to its own commitments. The ombudsperson should be able to open investigations independently and handle complaints and, importantly, should have direct access to both rector and the board. There are a limited number of universities internationally that have different constellations of ombudsfuctions to draw inspiration from, but the particular focus on academic freedom would be a – very timely – innovation.



## Improve accessibility to researcher support services

There are great, centralised opportunities at the university for getting media training and direct help from communication specialists when facing public or political backlash from disseminating findings.

However, this information is difficult to locate on the intranet, and many researchers do not know it exists. The intranet notes that legal and psychological help is available, but on the actual page only psychological support is accessible.

# Eroding Trust in Scientific Knowledge

## SOLUTION 4



## Assign merit

Recognise researchers' work to advocate for academic freedom, for example by adding it to the inspiration catalogue on criteria for merit.

Recognising researchers' advocacy for academic freedom as meritorious work strengthens the university's credibility by reinforcing researchers' independence from political or managerial pressure, protecting early-career scholars whose vulnerability leaves the research culture exposed, compelling the institution to uphold transparent and arms-length governance, legitimising researchers who publicly defend evidence during controversy, and demonstrating that the university actively safeguards the conditions for honest inquiry—the very foundation on which public trust in science depends.

# Over-reliance on Funding



Increasing dependence on external funding skews research priorities toward what is fundable rather than what is scientifically meaningful. This affects not only tenured scientists but also early-career researchers, who are often employed on PI-funded projects with little opportunity to pursue independent research questions and cultivate intellectual autonomy. Structural investments in academic independence could counteract this trend, safeguard epistemic diversity, foster genuine innovation, and mitigate the systemic bias toward short-term, grant-driven topics.

# Over-reliance on Funding

## SOLUTION 1



# Fund independent PhD fellowships annually

Allocating just 20% of the anticipated annual savings from the administrative reform would establish 30 competitive, independent PhD fellowships each year. These fellowships would be awarded through university-wide competition and provide full funding for candidates who defined their research project in collaboration with a supervisor of their choice. This scheme would strengthen UCPH's talent pipeline by fostering early intellectual autonomy and position young researchers for highly competitive international funding opportunities.

# Over-reliance on Funding

## SOLUTION 2



## Provide baseline support for early career faculty

Allocating 20% of the anticipated annual savings would make it possible to offer “springboard fellowships” of 250,000–500,000 DKK annually for the first four years to all newly appointed permanent VIP faculty. This would help new faculty consolidate their research independence and establish the foundation for securing larger grants in the future. Also this investment ensures that young faculty are led by scholarly judgment rather than short-term external funding pressures and will strengthen UCPHs talent pipeline.

# Over-reliance on Funding

## SOLUTION 3



# Create universal basic research funding for all researchers

In the longer term, baseline operational funding could be extended to all research-active faculty, following the Ghent model in which each researcher receives about 250,000 DKK annually to develop independent research. A similar scheme in Denmark would reduce reliance on external grants and strengthen idea-driven basic research. The financing of such an ambitious project (approx. 400 million) could be achieved by private funding institutions pledging an additional 10% to an independent national basic research fund each time they finance mission-oriented research.

# Bolstering Self-Governance



In an era of rising populism and authoritarianism, where critical knowledge is treated as a threat to centralised power resulting in constraining knowledge and information, freedom of thought and the generation of new knowledge are a frontline defense of democracy. Given the importance of the University as an epistemic institution, self-governance and institutional autonomy are crucial to safeguarding not only the University and academic freedom but also democracy. We identify two structural areas where UCPH must strengthen autonomy and self-governance: (a) the absence of faculty participation in appointing senior leadership, and (b) the lack of transparency in how power is distributed and appointments are made.



## New UCPH policy on democratic consultations for leadership

A new internal policy on a consultative and democratic appointment process for the appointment of senior University leaders (e.g., Rector, Deans, and HoDs).

- Faculty members would have a consultative vote for 2–3 shortlisted candidates proposed by the Board and a selection committee.
- The consultative vote would be conducted using a Single Transferable Vote system to reflect broad academic consensus.
- Board would retain formal appointment power, as required by law, but would be guided by the vote.

A consultative vote system is outlined at the end of the booklet.



# Ombudsperson for academic freedom

To ensure that the university upholds its commitments to academic freedom, we propose the creation of an Ombudsperson for Academic Freedom. This independent role would have the authority to review and question institutional decisions, provide advice, and issue recommendations aimed at safeguarding the intellectual independence of the academic community.

# Organisational map and clear communication of decision-making

## SOLUTION 3



# Organisational map and clear communication of decision-making

A comprehensive overview should detail not only decision-making powers at every level, but also include the committees and boards responsible for appointing Board members, and any persons involved in the processes, by which selection committees are constituted. The overview should provide a visual representation of the governance system and establishing clear cross-links (URLs) between the webpages of all relevant bodies.

In addition, communication about the minutes of decision-making committees and boards must be strengthened—such as through a regular newsletter highlighting the latest minutes distributed to all VIP/TAP—to signal their importance and enhance institutional transparency.

# Further suggestions and engagement



# Academic Freedom Murder Mystery



## Concept proposal for an educational tool

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**Purpose:** Immersive role-playing exercise. The game invites players to step into contrasting perspectives on academic freedom, revealing that its strength lies not in uniformity but in the ability to negotiate and compromise across conflicting priorities. Participants embody different institutional roles (deanery, faculty, PhD students) and navigate competing priorities following a symbolic “murder”.

**Setting:** At Fjordhaven Hotel, a group of university representatives gathers to finalize recommendations on academic freedom. During a break, the organizer is found dead beside the coffee machine. The group begins investigating, but the “murder” turns out to be metaphorical: bureaucracy, fear, privilege blindness, control, and silence have killed the idea of academic freedom itself.

**Learning Objectives:** Stimulate reflection on institutional pressures shaping academic freedom. Encourage dialogue about balancing strategy, trust, and autonomy. Support leadership development and academic governance training.

**Gameplay Outline:** Participants receive character sheets with personal goals, values, and knowledge. A facilitator guides scenes and distributes clues. The group investigates the “death” while pursuing role-specific objectives. The game concludes with a collective reflection session, identifying real institutional dynamics mirrored in play.

**Outcome:** A reusable, ready-to-use game for seminars and academic development sessions, emphasizing the dimensions of academic freedom.

# Consultative Vote



- Faculty members would vote on 2–3 shortlisted candidates proposed by the Board and a selection committee.
- The vote would be consultative and conducted using a Single Transferable Vote (STV) system to reflect broad academic consensus.
- The Board would retain formal appointment power, as required by law, but would be guided by the democratic and consultative vote with faculty members.

The Danish University Act grants each university considerable autonomy to regulate its internal governance through its statutes. For example, the University of Southern Denmark's statutes empower the Board to establish its own rules of procedure and to define internal advisory structures. The introduction of a consultative election process for the Rector could be implemented through an amendment to the University's statutes or through Board-approved procedural rules, without contravening national legislation.

The University Act 2003 does not prohibit internal protocols so the use of a specific voting system, such as STV, would be fine, provided that the process is authorised and regulated through the University's internal statutes or by-laws. To ensure procedural integrity, the following conditions should be met: (a) A clear definition of who is eligible to vote (e.g., academic staff categories); (b) Transparent and well-documented voting procedures that ensure fairness and accountability; (c) An explicit statement in the University's statutes that the vote is consultative and non-binding, reaffirming that the Board retains formal appointment power.

Under the current legal framework established by the Danish University Act (2003), the University Board holds the formal authority to appoint (and, if necessary, dismiss) the Rector. This authority is central to the governance model introduced by the 2003 reform. The proposed system—where faculty members participate in a consultative vote on a shortlist of Rector candidates while the Board retains the ultimate power of appointment—can operate within this legal structure, provided that certain safeguards are respected. Because the Board would continue to make the formal appointment, the model is compatible with the existing legal requirements. The consultative election would serve as an advisory mechanism, allowing the academic community to express its preference while preserving the Board's statutory authority. The Board could, by policy or internal commitment, agree to give significant weight to the outcome of the consultative vote. From a legal standpoint, the Board must remain free to make the final decision, in order to stay compliant with the University Act. Although the consultative vote would not have binding legal force.

# Working group



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Photo credit: Suste Bonnén

“Academic freedom should be understood to include the freedom of individuals, as members of academic communities (e.g., faculty, students, staff, scholars, administrators and community participants) or in their own pursuits, to conduct activities involving the discovery and transmission of information and ideas, and to do so with the full protection of human rights law.”

- Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, David Kaye, A/75/261, July 2020

Rectors assignment: Academic Freedom. UCPH Forward working group