

Academic freedom in times of wokeness and cancel culture

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Is academic freedom in jeopardy? Lately we are receiving some alarming reports about this from time to time. Mostly coming from the United States and the United Kingdom. These reports [focus](#) mainly on the risks of the 'woke' movement, which allegedly aims to establish a tyranny of political correctness that is said to not only pose a threat to academic freedom, but also impair common sense. Particularly from the United Kingdom there have been reports of disturbances and incidents over the past year. John Cleese, for example, proactively [placed himself](#) on a blacklist of undesirable people with undesirable opinions at the Cambridge Union. The most striking case involved philosophy professor Kathleen Stock, who resigned from the University of Sussex following a campaign led by students and academic staff regarding her opposition to transgender self-identification. Stock [described](#) the situation as one of harassment and self-censorship, [as well as](#) an attack on academic freedom.

'Wokeness' and the cancel culture that appears to be inextricably linked to it have also [attracted](#) plenty of [attention](#) in the Netherlands. But institutions like the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) and the [Association of Universities in the Netherlands](#) seem to believe the most prominent threats to academic freedom originate from governmental institutions and knowledge institutes themselves, because they could (potentially) have too much influence on research, particularly through funding. They also see threats coming from social media, on which recently a lot of very disturbing utterances have been posted addressed to supposedly left-wing scholars, to COVID-19 researchers and to scientists in general. I agree that this threat is urgent and requires a firm response, but I do doubt whether the KNAW's conclusion is justified that there is no cause for concern about a lack of diversity or structural self-censorship. Although we [don't have a clear picture](#) of the extent of the problem, signs that there is in fact an issue [are most definitely there](#). In my role as Rector Magnificus I also experience this in the form of questions from lecturers and, in addition to questions, an occasional petition by students. The signs may not be numerous, but they are there, and that is reason to be vigilant. After all, part of the essence of academic freedom is that scientists can at their own discretion choose and report on their research and teaching topics, based of course on recognised scientific and methodological insights.

Why is this academic freedom so important? According to [Kinzelbach](#) et al., this freedom is essential to high-quality education and research: it drives innovation, strengthens the ability of scholars and students to acquire and generate knowledge, and through this preserves society's capacity for self-reflection. The Dutch legislature also [considers](#) academic freedom a necessary condition for science to flourish, as it enables the development of the independent and critical thinking this requires. Yet it is interesting to note that academic freedom in the Netherlands is only provided for at the level of the law (in Article 1.6 of the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act, to be

precise), and is not anchored in the Constitution. Now this freedom is unremittingly associated with texts of a high(er) legal precedence, such as Article 13 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Usually, however, a [connection is sought](#) with texts that protect freedom of expression, such as Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 7 of our own Dutch Constitution. This in itself is understandable, but it can also lead to misunderstandings. Every citizen has the right to freedom of expression, including those in academia. But academic freedom is about significantly more than just expressing opinions: as said, it's about teaching and conducting research at one's own discretion – provided the content is academically sound – and reporting on this accordingly. Academic freedom therefore entails more than the freedom of expression: it also implies a particular responsibility to do one's job according to scientific standards. KU Leuven rector Luc Sels made this clear in his [speech](#) at the opening of the 2021-2022 academic year. Professional standards and values must be upheld. In the Netherlands, this largely concerns the [2018 Code of Conduct for Research Integrity](#). Within that code, the core of Standard 53 is crucial: be transparent and honest about the limitations of your own expertise. It also contains an important line between exercising academic freedom and freedom of expression: an academic may think and say anything, and may even act broadly as a public intellectual in that regard, but may only attribute scientific authority to those views that are based on their own expertise or the expertise of other academics. Incidentally, it would be good for the authority of science if forms of peer review were developed and applied for this purpose as well.

Academic freedom is also limited in another way. Staff at universities work within institutions that have an education and research policy. Education is subject to teaching and examination regulations. Scarce resources are made available in a targeted manner. Dutch law [recognises](#) the possibility for institutions to impose these restrictions. I agree with [Van Gestel](#) and the KNAW that risks are involved. At the same time, universities bear a unique responsibility in this regard as well. After all, it has also been internationally recognised that academic freedom has an institutional and organisational dimension. This has a protective aspect, in the sense that governments must respect the autonomy of higher education institutions, but it also holds an aspect of responsibility, as in that university institutions must in turn ensure that 'university boards have the responsibility not to interfere in education and research more than is reasonable, in view of promoting good scientific practice', according to the KNAW. What is 'reasonable' is of course up for discussion, and that debate must take place openly within the institution with the aim of finding broad support among academics. Of course, this debate is also fuelled by the [layered structure](#) of the university organisation in which, pursuant to Article 9.15 of the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW), the deans bear primary responsibility for the organisation and programming of education and research, and in turn it is the professors who are predominantly responsible for developing their designated scientific field and the corresponding courses (Article 9.19 (2), WHW).

That universities are expected to protect academic freedom is also evident in the wording of Article 1.6 of the WHW: 'At the institutions academic freedom shall be complied with.' This [implies](#) that there has to be plenty of room to express points of view which are based on scientific insights, and that academics are protected in this regard not only externally, in the public debate, but particularly and above all within their own institution. In fact, high-quality scientific practice benefits tremendously from an ongoing discussion based on scientific standards. It goes without saying that students play a key role in this as well. After all, universities have the task to develop their independent and critical thinking so clearly [cannot](#) engage in indoctrination. On top of that, based on Article 1.3 (5) of the WHW, universities are responsible for fostering students' personal development and promoting their sense of social responsibility.

In that respect, many of the discussions sparked by the 'woke' movement should be welcomed. Wokeness in the area of inclusivity in research (is the question objective? do we have an overview of all relevant target groups? are there other explanations?) and education (are all relevant perspectives covered?) can certainly help to further improve the quality of education and research. This applies not only to the humanities and social sciences, where the 'woke' debate [mostly](#) seems to be taking place thus far, but also to the STEM fields, as aptly [described](#) by Julie Posselt. It is important though to engage in the debate with respect for everyone's academic freedom, *and* with due observance of legal authorities, responsibilities and procedures. A cancel culture in which people and opinions are boycotted by definition has no place at a university. The same largely applies to the creation of so-called safe spaces, in which students and staff are protected from confrontation with certain people or views. This confrontation is inherent to the task of universities to promote independent, critical thinking and to develop a sense of social responsibility. In that context, it seems fine to pay a bit more attention to so-called 'trigger warnings', notices that the content of education and research could be confrontational. We give these warnings in other areas as well, as long as there is room for the confrontation. As mentioned, certain legal responsibilities and procedures will also have to be taken into account during these confrontations. This applies in particular to the issue of 'decolonising' the curriculum, or making it more inclusive. Part of academic freedom is the lecturer's right to determine the content and method of the courses to be taught. But that freedom is not unlimited. There is an important responsibility here for degree programme advisory committees, which are charged with safeguarding and advancing the quality of education and with advising the degree programme board and the dean on the teaching and examination regulations and all other education-related matters within the programme (Article 9.18 of the WHW).

Academic freedom is a valuable asset, but also a vulnerable one, as international studies [teach](#) us. It is up to everyone involved – students, lecturers, researchers and administrators – to cherish and protect this freedom. Thanks to academic freedom, anything can be researched, taught and discussed. Woke students and academics can go against the grain as much as they wish, as long as the tradition of academic freedom itself remains intact.

