

Academic Freedom, University Autonomy and Quality Assurance

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Academic Freedom

Historical:

Linked to the rise of the modern research university and the Humboldtian model of higher education from the 19th Century

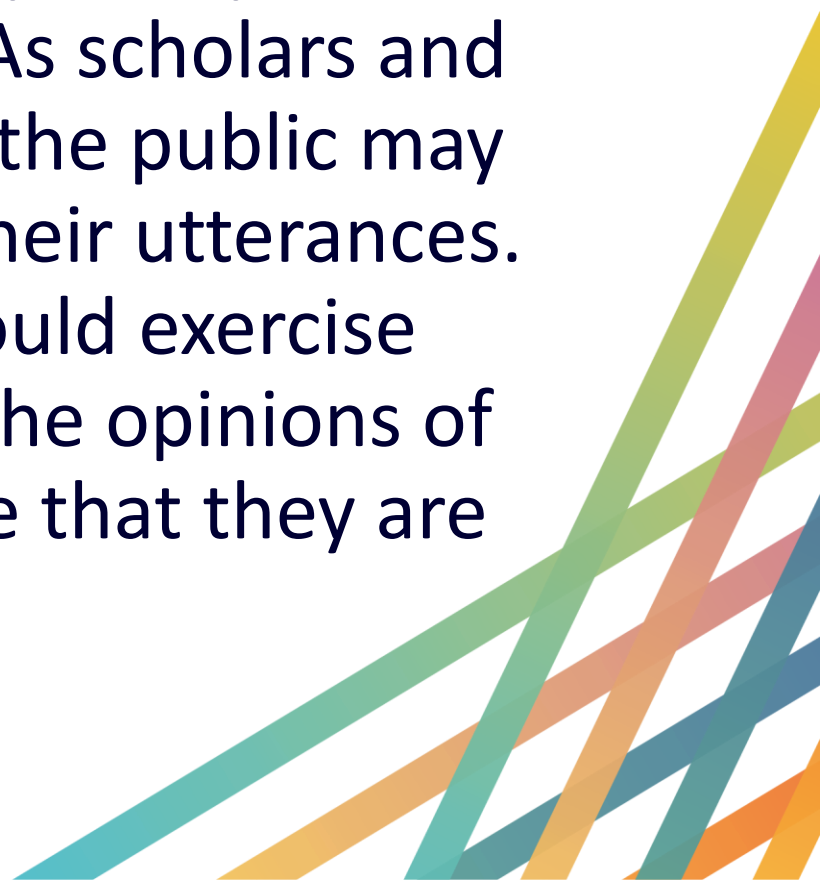
1915: American Association of University Professors (AAUP)
Declaration of Principles (on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure)



Academic Freedom

“College and university teachers are citizens, members of a learned profession, and officers of an education institution. When they speak or write as citizens, they should be free from institutional censorship or discipline, but their special position in the community imposes special obligations. As scholars and education officers, they should remember that the public may judge their profession and their institution by their utterances. Hence, they should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution..”

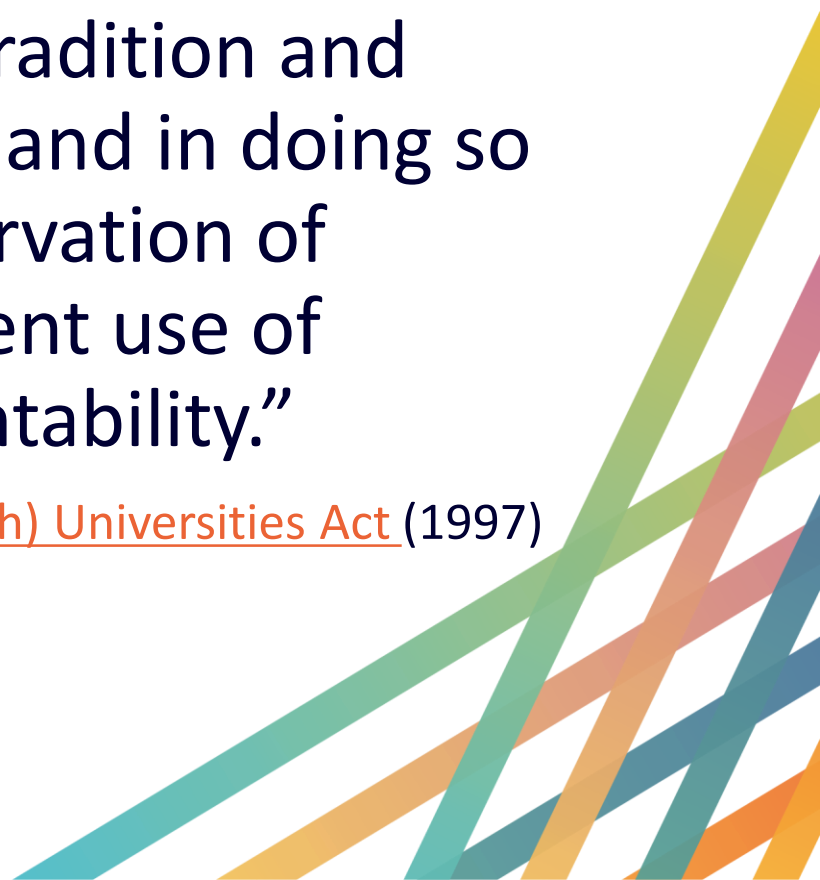
AAUP [Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure](#) (1940)



Academic Freedom

“A university, in performing its functions, shall have the right and responsibility to preserve and promote the traditional principles of academic freedom in the conduct of its internal and external affairs, and shall be entitled to regulate its affairs in accordance with its independent ethos and tradition and the traditional principles of academic freedom, and in doing so it shall have regard to the promotion and preservation of opportunity and access, the effective and efficient use of resources, and its obligation as to public accountability.”

Section 14, (Irish) Universities Act (1997)



Threats to University Autonomy?

“Throughout most of our History, America’s Colleges and Universities have been a Great Strategic Asset of the United States. Tragically, however, much of Higher Education has lost its way, and is now corrupting our Youth and Society with WOKE, SOCIALIST and ANTI-AMERICAN ideology that serves as justification for discriminatory practices by Universities that are Unconstitutional and Unlawful.

My administration is fixing this, and FAST, with our Great Reform Agenda in Higher Education.”

President Donald J. Trump, [Truth Social post, 12 October 2025](#)



Trump Administration

Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education (Oct 2025)

1. Equality in admissions
 2. Marketplace of ideas and civil discourse
 3. Non-discrimination in faculty and administrative hiring
 4. Institutional neutrality
 5. Student learning
 6. Student quality
 7. Financial responsibility
 8. Foreign entanglements
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Europe and Academic Freedom (1)

What can Europe and its universities do to halt the erosion of academic Freedom?

Monika Steinal – Deputy Secretary General, EUA, September 2025)

A right and a responsibility

“Universities can do a lot, but they cannot do it alone. A stable and secure legal and political framework is paramount to academic freedom. But universities also need society’s trust and, resulting from this, solidarity.



Europe and Academic Freedom (2)

“Instead, day-in day-out we hear about the weaponisation of science and growing public mistrust in academia. Faced with this reality, the university sector also has to ask itself some tough questions. Have we been good enough at making a public case for academic freedom?”

We must bear in mind that academic freedom is not a mere professional privilege, but a right and responsibility. Indeed, it is the lifeblood of any meaningful scientific endeavour and a fundamental principle that sustains universities’ countless contributions to societal advancement.”



What role can Quality Assurance play to counter threats to University Autonomy and Academic Freedom?



Currently we have, in place



University Autonomy and Quality Assurance

The *European Standards and Guidelines* are based on four principles for quality assurance in the EHEA.

The first of these principles is ‘university autonomy’.

“Higher educational institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance.”

Context, Scope, Purposes and Principles [European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance \(2015\)](#)



Autonomy, Accountability and QA

ESG 1.1: POLICY FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is **made public**. All internal stakeholders assume responsibility for quality and engage in quality assurance at all levels of the institution.

In order to facilitate this, the policy has a formal status and is **publicly available**.

Such a policy supports;

- academic integrity and freedom
- guarding against intolerance of any kind or discrimination against the students or staff



Autonomy, Accountability and QA

ESG 1.4: STUDENT ADMISSION, PROGRESSION, RECOGNITION and CERTIFICATION

It is important that access policies, admission processes and criteria are implemented consistently and in a transparent manner.



Autonomy, Accountability and QA

ESG 1.5: TEACHING STAFF

(Higher education institutions) should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of their staff.

(They) have primary responsibility for the quality of their staff and for providing them with a supportive environment that allows them to carry out their work effectively. Such an environment - sets up and follows clear, transparent and fair processes for staff recruitment and conditions of employment.



Autonomy, Accountability and QA

ESG 2.1: CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

Quality assurance in higher education is based on the institutions' responsibility for the quality of their programmes and other provision; therefore it is important that external quality assurance recognises and supports **institutional responsibility** for quality assurance.



Autonomy, Accountability and QA

ESG 3.3: INDEPENDENCE

Autonomous institutions need independent agencies as counterparts.

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Is that enough?



Do we have the correct balance between autonomy and accountability?

Remember the 'quality wars' – Professor David Watson's phrase for the convulsions in UK higher education in the 1990s and early 2000s over the assurance of academic quality and standards.

They're not over...

[Moving beyond the quality wars](#)

Article in WONKHE by Richard Harrison, University of York (June 2025)



What are the top three strategic priorities for strengthening the role of accreditation/ (quality assurance)?

Question: to Dr. Nasser Paydar, the new President of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) in October 2025

Answer:

- To put **student success** at the centre of accreditation (persistence, completion, preparing for meaningful careers)
 - To protect **institutional autonomy** and **academic freedom**
 - To build greater **public trust** in accreditation
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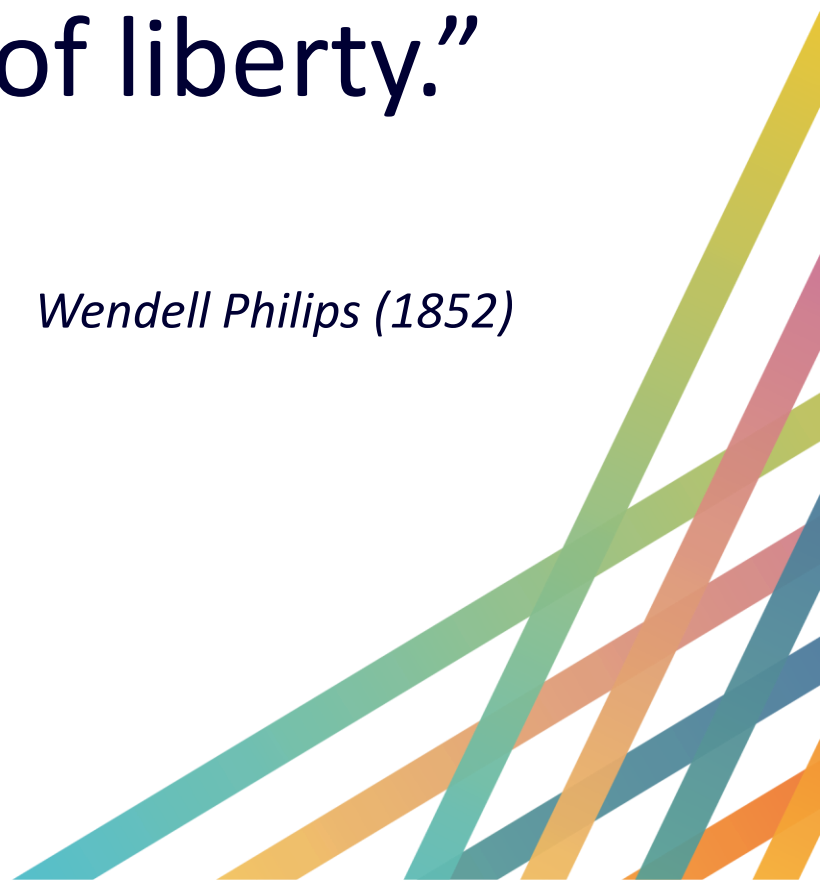
Personal View

- There is no settled status for quality assurance.
- There should always be a healthy tension between autonomy and accountability.
- There will always be roles for internal and external responsibility for quality assurance.
- The balance between these roles can and should change over time depending on behaviour and prevailing circumstances.



“Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.”

Wendell Philips (1852)



“Don’t it always seem to go,
that you don’t know what you’ve got ‘til
it’s gone?”

Big Yellow Taxi, Joni Mitchell (1970)



Thank you!

