

6th Central European Higher Education Cooperation (CEHEC) Conference

23 April 2021

Roundtable on the Crisis of Academic Freedom

Introducing the work of the Global Observatory on Academic Freedom, our first public event gathers distinguished scholars to debate the key issues that have incited us to create the Observatory. Academic Freedom, as an empiric and an intellectual concept, is facing new challenges in all corners of the world and Europe, the West and the East, the Global North as much as the Global South. What is our modern day understanding of academic freedom and how can we, as academic community, respond?

Moderator:

Milica Popovic, Visiting Researcher, OSUN Global Observatory on Academic Freedom, CEU Vienna

Participants:

Sjur Bergan, Head, Education Department, Directorate of Democratic Participation / DG Democracy, Council of Europe

Nandini Ramanujam, Professor, Co-Director and Director of Programs of the Centre for Human Rights and Legal Pluralism, Faculty of Law, McGill University

Michel Wieviorka, Professor, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris

Liviu Matei, Provost, Central European University, Vienna and Budapest and Director, Yehuda Elkana Centre for Higher Education)

Summary:

Launching the work of the OSUN Global Observatory on Academic Freedom, as part of the Central European Higher Education Conference 2021, **Milica Popović**, Visiting Fellow at GOAF, presented the current and future work of the Observatory; its main goals and planned activities; the invited speakers and continued to moderate the debate starting with the question what is our modern day understanding of Academic Freedom and how can we, as academic community, respond.

Sjur Bergan, Head of the Education Department of the Council of Europe, introduced the debate presenting the achievements and the challenges of the European Higher Education Area in regards to the fundamental values of Higher Education: Institutional Autonomy, Academic Freedom and Integrity, Participation of Students and Staff in Governance and Public Responsibility of and for Higher Education. Out of all the recognized values, as Bergan noticed, Academic Freedom remains least explored. He highlighted the decline of democracy in Europe underlining the importance of the relationship between public authorities and the academic community, as well as the need for a clear delineation between Institutional Autonomy and Academic Freedom. Bergan concluded that a determined stand to do more in safeguarding Academic Freedom, than simply cooperate and dialogue, within the EHEA, is essential for moving forward.

Beyond these repertoires of action raised by Bergan, Professor **Nandini Ramanujam**, the Co-Director and Director of Programs of the Centre for Human Rights and Legal Pluralism at McGill University's Faculty of Law and the McGill representative for the Scholars at Risk Network, focused on the issue of freedom to teach and to learn. Critical engagement with teaching and learning is a crucial endeavor of Higher Education, both by students and professors, who commit to an implicit contract to share and build knowledge together. Such endeavors are endangered by attacks from outside, as much as within, with special note of the detrimental influence of social media to critical thinking and taking of an informed position. Knowledge, indeed, is power and as such a threat to authoritarian regimes, but also any dogmatic approaches on the whole of the political spectrum.

The dangers of political infringements on Academic Freedom was further elaborated by Professor **Michel Wieviorka**, Professor at l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. Professor Wievorka explained how in Europe, notably in France since 2015, moderate political forces are more and more leaning towards creating alliances with the right-wing parts of the society, resulting in Neo McCarthyist tendencies. As the experience has taught us, liberal democracy is unfortunately not always a guarantee of Academic Freedom; yet the question remains if Academic Freedom is a guarantee of democracy?

As Professor Wievorka drew attention to the need to clarify what do we mean by Academic Freedom, Professor **Liviu Matei**, Provost of Central European University and Director of Yehuda Elkana Centre for Higher Education, unfolded two set of reflections – the analysis of the crisis of Academic Freedom and possible solutions. Looking at many harmonized tools and mechanisms of advancement of Higher Education in the EHEA – like Quality Assurance, the European Standards and Guidelines, the European Quality Assurance Register, Professor Matei opened the question if we need a new or an updated shared definition of Academic Freedom, that could amount to a certain common European reference framework, following the heritage of the 1975 Helsinki accords.

As the debate launched the issues of extraterritorial protection and intervention of AF given the transnational mobility developments in Higher Education; the understanding of AF for students; the challenges of rising self-censorship among academics and the issue of the responsibility of the state – unquestionable in Institutional Autonomy, yet more complex for Academic Freedom; the first event of the OSUN Global Observatory on Academic Freedom successfully opened a new platform for further research and promotion of Academic Freedom in the world.