

Moral panics about free speech: How should European universities respond?

*If there are any institutions that should be above culture wars, they are universities, writes **Anne Corbett**. They live or die by their commitment to ethical standards in research, and their mission to ensure that students in the course of their studies learn to think critically about challenging ideas. Yet despite their achievements during the pandemic, universities are currently under attack by governments in many parts of Europe for allegedly embracing ideologies and restricting free speech. How might European higher education platforms help take the heat out of these polarising issues?*

Academic freedom is in the news and not just in Britain. At least four governments across Europe have claimed they need to protect those academics who assert they are a persecuted minority within universities. These developments signal a heating up of the culture wars.

The [Polish Minister for Education](#) recently announced that, 'especially in the humanities and social sciences', the way things are going is 'not in the direction we would like'. Legislation has been promised to guarantee that academics expressing conservative, Christian or nationalist views will not be disciplined.

The populist government of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, which passed a law in 2017 outlawing foreign universities, has driven the respected American-Hungarian [Central European University](#) out of the country. A ruling by the [Court of Justice of the European Union](#) that the government's actions were illegal came only after the university had moved. Since then the [Hungarian Academy of Sciences](#) has become subject to direct government control. Researchers are currently protesting that changes to research funding are framed to reward Orbán loyalists.

In France, the French Minister for Universities has been widely criticised for reviving assertions, already aired by her boss, the Minister for Education, that '[Islamogauchisme](#)' a supposed sympathy for jihadists by left wing researchers, is a 'gangrene' eating away at universities. She has ordered the CNRS, the French research agency, to conduct an enquiry into French university research focused on colonialism and race to identify those 'wanting to fracture and divide'.

Meanwhile, in England, the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, is [preparing to legislate](#) on freedom of speech as a result of 'chilling' reports from conservative academics alleging 'unacceptable silencing and censoring' of conservative academics. He will be appointing a 'free speech champion.'

Taking up proposals from the think tank, Policy Exchange, he has [issued instructions](#) to the regulator, the Office of Students, to take action against 'university administrators and heads of faculty where, [for ideological reasons](#) or to conform to the perceived desires of students, there is 'pressure or force on teaching staff to drop authors or texts that add rigour and stretch to a course.' Judging from earlier interventions by other government ministers, the study of critical race theory and 'white privilege' will be targeted regardless of how and why they have a place in social sciences teaching and research.



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In the UK, the institutional response seems to have been drowned out by the headlines given to the minister. But former ministers, on both sides of the political divide, have joined in the criticism. The [Russell Group](#) has called for a proportionate response, given that robust academic debate and the opportunity to engage with challenging ideas are fundamental to the educational experience at UK universities. [Universities UK](#), speaking for all British universities, points out there are already significant legal protections for freedom of speech.

The protests within the French university world, in contrast, have been present across the media. The university rectors of the CPU, the French equivalent of Universities UK, are calling for an end to [sterile polemics](#) explaining that 'Islamogauchisme' has no theoretical place in academic work. The CNRS, which wasn't warned about the minister's intention, is currently playing for time as to how to handle this unexpected request. And while President Macron appeared to criticise the minister following her claims, she was still in place at the time of writing.

How to move on

So how to defuse this highly polarised atmosphere within Europe? Universities have a reference point in their own [Magna Carta](#), the Magna Charta Universitatum, a declaration that the university is 'an autonomous institution at the heart of societies... which must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power'. Drawn up by the rectors of some of Europe's oldest university institutions in 1988, and recently supplemented, it has resonated with universities in 88 countries. Almost 1,000 of them have signed the charter.

Conventional NGOs are upping their game. Scholars at Risk is working with the [Global Public Policy Institute](#), to develop an [Academic Freedom Index](#) based on university practices rather than the presence of a legal text which has often proved easy to get around. Some governments are also taking a stand. Germany used the platform of the EU presidency last year to launch the [Bonn Declaration of Scientific Research](#) in October 2020, which usefully makes links between the European Research Area (ERA) and the [European Higher Education Area](#) (EHEA). Just as significant, it provided some political leadership on the need to increase public trust in science, as well as to protect research from political intervention.

The EHEA, which stretches from Western Europe to the fringes of Central Asia, has Belarus and Turkey as additional problems. Meeting [in Rome](#) last November, all 49 of its ministers, including those accused of infringements, signed a communique recognising the ambient threats to 'the freedom of academic staff and students to engage in research, teaching, learning and communication, in and with society without interference or fear of reprisal'.

In a first, they asked the management body of the EHEA, the Bologna Follow up Group, to give them a framework to 'foster self-reflection, constructive dialogue and peer-learning across national authorities, higher education institutions and organisations, while also making it possible to assess the degree to which these are honoured and implemented in our systems'. The message that the EHEA is sending is that academic freedom is not the property of the left or right and that there should be structures for scrutiny.

But to get that message beyond the bounds of ministerial communiques requires that the many actors in higher education across Europe be more assertive in defending academic freedom. There are already powerful professional networks in place that stretch wide into, and across, national systems. The EHEA itself has the European Commission, the Council of Europe, the European University Association, and the European Students Union among its permanent members. They have opportunities to stiffen the resolve of the higher education ministers who legitimate the EHEA's continuity.

Just as relevant are the actors from public intellectuals to university leadership, academics and students, and the myriad of academic and scientific associations which collaborate on European policy platforms. Facing down the current [moral panics](#) about universities requires more bridges to public understanding about what universities are for, as well as to what they do. An [JFOP](#) poll in France, taken in response to the recent controversy, shows how necessary that is: a majority of the French public believe that 'Islamogauchisme' exists in universities.

It is in the general interest that institutions which stand for certified knowledge, and those institutions with political power, reach accommodation on their mutual interests. A new social contract, in sum. The Magna Charta Universitatum may not have legal force, but it is an appropriate starting point for all concerned to re-evaluate the role of universities in society.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Shutterstock](#)
