

Beyond the Brave New World: Defending Academic Freedom Today

Prof.dr. Caspar van den Berg

NRIN Conference, Wereldmuseum Leiden, 17 October 2025

Ninety-two years ago today, Albert Einstein arrived in the United States after fleeing Nazi Germany. He was one of many scientists who left Europe to continue their research elsewhere, not because German universities had suddenly lost their academic excellence, but because certain scientists were branded scapegoats by the politicians of the day and no longer found protection in academia.

In the decades that followed, thousands of European scientists followed in Einstein's footsteps. The United States' open attitude, combined with sustained public investment, enabled it to become the world's leading scientific nation.

Today, the contrast could hardly be greater. Across the Atlantic, scientists, students, and university leaders face political, legal, and financial pressures that threaten the free pursuit of science.

History offers other warnings. The Soviet Union's infamous case of Trofim Lysenko, whose pseudoscientific agricultural theories were enforced by Stalin, shows what happens when ideology replaces evidence. Scientists who contradicted him were imprisoned or executed, and the resulting crop failures led to famine and death on a vast scale.

More recently, Hungary has shown how quickly academic freedom can be dismantled. In 2019, the Central European University was forced to leave Budapest after sustained political pressure.

These examples remind us that scientific freedom cannot be taken for granted.

The Dutch Context

Can we be sure that such things will never happen here? The honest answer is: no.

Even in the Netherlands, researchers are now facing questions they rarely had to ask before, about whether approved funding will continue, which words they can safely use, or whether they should self-censor before attending conferences abroad.

In 2024, the PVV's education spokesperson claimed that universities were "captured by woke ideology" and suggested that cutting a billion euros would be helpful because it would make them "rethink their priorities." The tone was alarmingly similar to recent

rhetoric in the U.S. about sanctioning elite universities like Princeton, Harvard, and Columbia.

Nor is this confined to one party. The BBB has attempted to influence how university boards respond to campus protests over violence in the Middle East. Universities are, of course, no place for intimidation, vandalism, or hate. We condemn such acts unequivocally. But universities must remain places where sharp debate and peaceful protest are possible, and where politicians respect institutional autonomy.

That principle, however, is increasingly under strain.

A recent parliamentary motion proposed cutting off public funding to organizations that boycott Israel. While universities were not mentioned explicitly, the motion's wording would allow subsidies to be withdrawn from institutions, including universities, that follow advice from committees deemed "undesirable." Similarly, the VVD asked the education minister to admonish supervisory boards over safety policies, arguing that, since the minister appoints those boards, he could also intervene.

Earlier this year, former minister Eppo Bruins warned against exactly this:

"I want the minister to have less power after my term, not more. I want less political influence on science policy. Politics should have no say in that. The person in my chair doesn't wield the power of an American president—but one day, someone very different might sit in it."

He was right in that.

What Academic Freedom Really Means

When universities are attacked, they often invoke academic freedom, and rightly so. It is one of our foundational principles. Without it, it becomes far more difficult, not to say impossible, to exchange new ideas or challenge established paradigms.

Autocrats have always had little patience for such freedom. You should not, after all, train citizens too well in questioning, or overturning, dogma.

History shows that countries with strong academic freedom thrive. In the seventeenth century, the Dutch Republic's universities, Leiden, Utrecht, Groningen, and Franeker, were centers of radical openness. They nurtured homegrown talent such as Van Leeuwenhoek, Huygens, and Grotius, and attracted great minds from abroad: Descartes, Spinoza, Locke. These institutions were engines of progress, advancing science, law, commerce, and religious thought.

But what makes academic freedom *academic*?

It is not a shield to keep outsiders off campus or a license to say anything without consequence. It is the freedom to research, teach, and publish without external interference, *provided* this is done according to the standards of careful, honest, and verifiable science.

In that sense, academic freedom is less a right than a responsibility. It demands a higher level of accountability than ordinary expression. Scientists must substantiate their claims, test them, and continuously expose them to critique. That is something very different from freely expressing opinions on a talk show.

Yet in today's polarized climate, this concept is often misunderstood, or even misused. Some treat academic freedom as the right to say anything at all, even when careless or intimidating. Others use it as a label for acts that have nothing to do with science. When a university of applied sciences decides to rename religious holidays, that is not an exercise of academic freedom. You can debate it, but it is not scholarship.

It is my strong belief that protecting the meaning of academic freedom is essential, because its erosion gives ammunition to those who wish to undermine it.

The Dangers of Political Pressure

Political attacks on science have consequences. In the United States, a year before Donald Trump's first election, 54% of Republicans believed universities had a positive impact on the country. A year later, that number had dropped to 36%.

While the most alarming predictions about the previous Dutch cabinet have not come true, the danger to free science has not disappeared. The university sector must actively strengthen itself against political interference and uphold both academic freedom and scientific integrity.

The Netherlands has a proud tradition of self-regulation in science, and our system of research integrity is a prime example. We have a national Code of Conduct for Scientific Integrity that the sector itself owns and enforces. Our institutions have robust procedures to investigate alleged violations, guided by our own experts, many of whom are here today. Crucially, it is a self-learning system. When procedures or standards no longer meet social or scientific expectations, we update them. A commission of experts examined whether the 2018 Code still reflected current realities, and a new drafting committee is now revising it.

Self-governance, however, also requires self-reflection. We are sometimes slow to act, or a little stubborn. The full and systematic publication of professors' ancillary activities only became standard after media investigations revealed shortcomings. That is part of our decentralized structure: no one is truly "the boss." It is a source of creativity and independence, but it can also frustrate public expectations in an era of impatience and scrutiny.

Listening to Society Without Losing Ourselves

Another test of self-governance came with universities' recent plans for internationalization. By mutual agreement, institutions decided to convert some bachelor's programs from English to Dutch and to address negative effects while preserving the benefits.

As publicly funded institutions, universities must remain connected to society. Public support is essential for legitimacy. When criticism is widespread and shared across the political spectrum, it deserves to be heard. We exist *for* society, not apart from it.

Listening, however, is not the same as yielding. Universities must weigh arguments and respond reasonably. Refusing to do so breeds misunderstanding and invites political intervention. The universities' own plan on internationalization, adopted by Parliament instead of the more restrictive Foreign-Language Education Test, showed that acting responsibly can preserve both autonomy and trust.

Still, our system has weaknesses. Unlike many other European countries, the Netherlands offers no legal or constitutional protection for academic freedom. We now rank near the bottom in Europe on that front. The Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences has rightly opened a debate on whether stronger legal safeguards are needed. But whatever the legal framework, one truth remains: academic freedom is never absolute. It constantly demands responsibility, to students, colleagues, politics, society, and science itself.

We must foster a culture where differing views are sought out and debated with respect and evidence. We share collective responsibility for the quality and integrity of science and for the professionalism of our institutions. Society must be able to trust that.

Bridging the Divide

Our greatest challenge now lies in reconnecting with the broader public.

Perceptions of internationalization, for example, vary widely. Some see it as contributing to housing shortages and the dominance of English in everyday traffic; others as a source of innovation, cultural richness, and much-needed talent. Both perspectives can be true at the same time.

As Professor Mark Bovens recently argued in his farewell lecture, education itself has become a new form of social division. People increasingly live, work, vote, and form relationships within their own educational group. That also affects how universities are viewed. What we in academia consider "normal" or "in the public interest" may not feel that way to most citizens.

We must remain conscious of that gap, not only through communication, but in how we define our role and responsibilities. If the average taxpayer can no longer recognize the public value of universities, we become vulnerable very quickly.

At the same time, we must stand firm when our values are attacked. Too often, universities internalize every accusation shouted from the sidelines. We should be more confident in explaining what we do and why it matters. The claim that universities allow only progressive voices is simply untrue. The daily reality in most disciplines is a diverse intellectual environment where a wide range of perspectives meet and challenge one another.

In my classes at the University of Groningen, I repeatedly invited Jenny Douwes, a leading figure in the pro-Black Pete movement. The classroom discussion was sharp, but the environment was safe because of the academic setting, and everyone understood its purpose. Scholars such as Afshin Ellian, Ad Verbrugge, Barbara Baarsma, Beatrice de Graaf and Elbert Dijkgraaf are further proof that a variety of worldviews flourish within Dutch academia.

Universities do not, and really do not have to, mirror the political preferences of the country at large. Journalism offers a useful comparison: many journalists vote progressive, yet *Elsevier Weekblad*, *De Telegraaf*, and SBS all operate freely and professionally. The same applies to universities. It is not about political colour, but about professional standards and academic integrity.

We should not be defensive about that. When our integrity is questioned, we must respond calmly, firmly, and with evidence.

Looking Ahead

Are we safe from the dystopian scenarios Huxley imagined? The honest answer is: we cannot be sure. Developments in the United States show how quickly academic freedom can erode, not only for institutions, but for individual researchers.

Yet political favour and public trust are not the same thing. The Dutch university has survived nearly half a millennium because it stands for something larger than itself: curiosity, openness, and responsibility to the truth.

With our backs straight and our gaze outward, we can keep our universities not only at the top of the world—but also at the heart of our society.

Thank you.