Academic Freedom at Risk:

Empirical Insights and Best-Practice Guidelines for the Social Sciences

March 2026

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University of Erfurt

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1. Introduction

The scholarly community across the world has increasingly been facing threats to academic freedom. According to the Free to Think 2025[1] report (covering July 2024–June 2025), there were 395 documented attacks on scholars, students, and institutions across 49 countries and territories.

These attacks did not only include major incidents such as the intentional destruction of higher education infrastructure during armed conflicts, but also more subtle and systemic forms of repression. These include the suppression of dissent, arrests of scholars, the passing of new illiberal laws, restrictions on university autonomy, acts of intimidation, and violent attacks against individuals within academic spaces. Such restrictions are not limited to authoritarian regimes, where academics are often repressed for criticizing the government. Rather, these episodes are becoming increasingly visible even within democratic regimes. For instance, in the United States, there have been attempts to infringe upon academic freedom through the politicization of the grant system, funding cuts, and suppression in certain research fields such as climate change. Similarly, in Europe, data from the V-Dem Academic Freedom Index shows that since 2020, there has been a sharp decline of approximately 7%. In Germany in particular, the decline in the academic freedom index has been around 8%, which is higher than the European average.[2] These developments motivated our study to explore the possible reasons behind these changes and to understand how the academic community perceives and experiences these shifts.

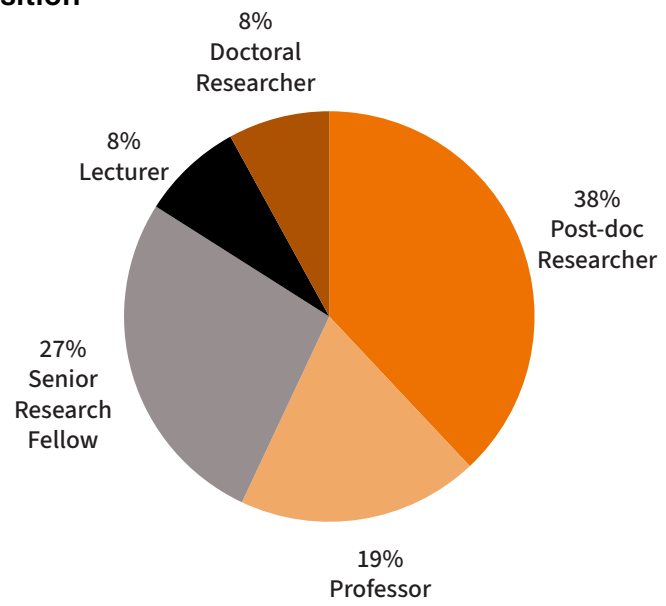
For the purpose of this study, academic freedom is understood in broad terms, referring to the ability of academics and scholars to research, teach, and publish without feeling infringements or restrictions on their academic work, including situations where such constraints may be implicit or unspoken rather than formally imposed. Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative approach in order to gain deeper insights through expert interviews. The participants consisted of academics and researchers whose identities have been kept anonymous to ensure their protection. These interviews were conducted with academics working in the social sciences across various German universities and research institutes, with the aim of deriving insights that could inform policy recommendations in this area.

The study was conducted over a three-month period beginning in mid-October. It started with a literature review to define academic freedom within the scope of the study, followed by the design of the questionnaire. Identification and contact of potential participants were carried out concurrently. Interviews were conducted with individuals who explicitly agreed to participate, while additional contacts were made in parallel to increase the

1. Scholars at Risk, Free to Think 2025: Report of the Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project (New York: Scholars at Risk, 2025), 2, https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/free-to-think-2025/.
2. https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/

sample size. Data were entered simultaneously into Kobo Toolbox, and the study concluded with the analysis of the fully completed dataset from all 26 participants. In total, 26 participants from academic and research institutions across Germany were interviewed for this study. Although 84 individuals were contacted, only 26 responded and subsequently participated in the interviews, which represents approximately 30% of those contacted. We acknowledge that the limited number of responses constrains the generalizability of our findings. However, the breadth of topics covered, the depth of the answers provided, and particularly the insights offered in the open-ended questions allow us to capture important features of the current situation. We consider this study a pilot that can inform and guide future research on the topic.

Figure 1: Percentage of Participants by Current Position



The interviewed participants had academic experience ranging from one to more than 16 years, allowing the study to capture perspectives from individuals holding permanent professorships or research positions as well as postdoctoral researchers with term-limited contracts. A majority of the participants were German nationals, accounting for 53% of the total sample. However, the remaining participants represented a diverse range of backgrounds, including individuals from the Middle East, South America, Asia, and other parts of Europe. The participants coming from different regions of the world have received their academic training from their home countries and then their further education in Germany. However, some of the German academics also had received academic training in other European countries as well as the US. Women made up 38.7% of those who took part in the interviews, representing a little over one-third of the total respondents.

Figure 2: Percentage of Participants by Years Working in Academia

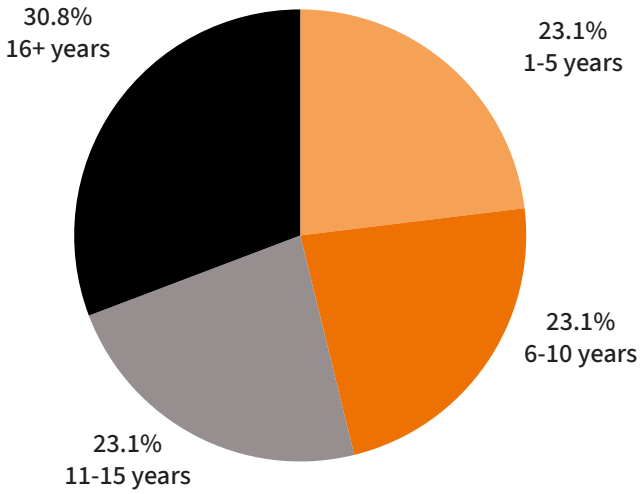


Figure 3: Percentage of Participants by Gender

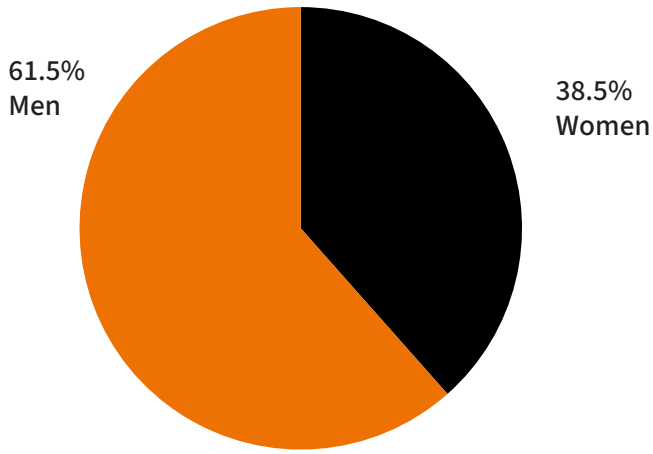
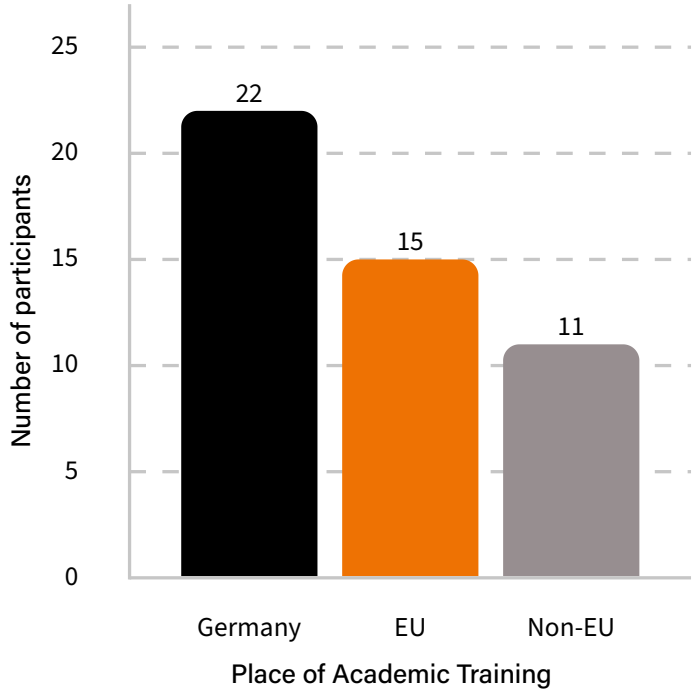


Figure 4: Number of Participants by Place of Academic Training (Multiple Possible)

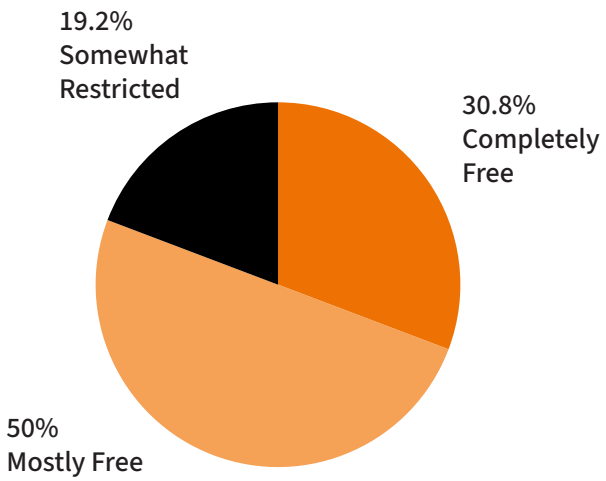


The remainder of this report is structured as follows. First, we examine individual and institutional autonomy, distinguishing between scholars' perceptions of their personal freedom in research and teaching and their assessments of the broader institutional conditions that shape academic work. This section highlights the extent to which participants feel able to pursue their research agendas independently while also addressing concerns about the long-term autonomy of academic institutions. Second, we turn to experiences of self-censorship and harassment, exploring the forms of direct and indirect pressure that influence how scholars communicate, select research topics, and engage in public debate. Third, we analyze the origins and institutional locus of constraints by identifying the key actors, structures, and contexts both within and outside academia that participants perceive as limiting academic freedom. The subsequent section reviews existing institutional protection mechanisms, assessing their visibility, accessibility, and perceived effectiveness, as well as the gaps and structural challenges that remain. Building on these empirical findings, the final section presents a set of recommendations and best-practice guidelines aimed at strengthening academic freedom and improving institutional support within the social sciences. Finally, an appendix provides the questionnaire that was developed and used for the purposes of this research.

2. Individual and Institutional Freedoms

This study investigates academic freedom on two levels: the individual researcher's day-to-day ability to pursue their own work, and the broader institutional environment that sustains that work over time. Our findings reveal that participants feel freer on a personal level than they are confident in the institutions that sustain their work.

Figure 5: Percentage of Participants by the Degree to Which They Feel Free to Develop and Pursue Their Own Research



At the individual level, the majority of participants reported feeling completely free or mostly free to develop their own research: 30.8% said they felt completely free, and 50% reported feeling mostly free. While nobody reported feeling completely restricted, 19.2% said they felt somewhat restricted. In contrast to these relatively positive assessments of individual autonomy, participants expressed greater concern when discussing the institutional level.

62%

of participants said that they perceive the autonomy of their institution to be under pressure.

This signals that participants are worried about the long-term autonomy of their institutions, even if this pressure has not yet translated into direct constraints on their own work.

The most common reason participants gave to explain why they believe the autonomy of their institution is under threat was financial, with participants pointing to budget cuts, postponed projects, the loss of professorships, and increasing reliance on external or performance-based funding, all of which limit universities' autonomy to set research and teaching priorities. Beyond financial factors, several participants also expressed concerns about institutional self-governance, including political interference in leadership selection and state intervention in campus events and protests. Finally, several participants noted limited awareness of institutional dynamics, which they attributed to their position within the university or lack of fluency in German

77%

of respondents said that conditions related to institutional and/or individual academic freedom have changed in recent years.

Explanations as to how conditions have changed fall into the following categories: politicization of research topics, funding constraints, informal surveillance, global threats to academic freedom, and the devaluation of the humanities. The most commonly cited category was the politicization of research topics, with 11 participants mentioning that researchers studying controversial topics — such as the war in Gaza, gender studies, Islamic studies, or migration — experience more backlash than ever before. A second major category concerned funding constraints, mentioned by seven participants, who emphasized increasingly competitive grant systems, reduced overall funding, and high funder expectations. Thirdly, six respondents mentioned increases in informal surveillance, such as syllabus monitoring and increased questioning from supervisors. Fourth, four participants said that recent threats to academic freedom in other countries have created an increased sense of threat in Germany. Namely, the increased visibility of institutional restrictions limiting academic freedom in the United States has increased concern about potential restrictions on academic freedom in Germany. Two also mentioned that visa denials and travel restrictions prevented them from conducting research in the US. Finally, three participants mentioned that they believe humanities research is being devalued. While the participants said that the perception that STEM research is more valuable than the humanities has existed for a long time, participants said that this trend has accelerated in recent years.

3. Self Censorship and Harassment

Self Censorship

73%

of participants have felt indirect or unspoken pressure to self-censor.

In response to the question "Have you ever felt indirect or unspoken pressure to self-censor?", a clear majority of interviewees reported having experienced such pressure. Out of 26 participants, 19 indicated that they had felt indirect or unspoken pressure to self-censor, while seven stated that they had not. Those who answered negatively often emphasized confidence in their academic work or a clear separation between institutional politics and their teaching or research. One interviewee explained, "I feel confident in what I present, so I have never felt that," while another noted that restrictions existed more broadly at the political or institutional level, but "that's outside the curriculum … it's not in class."

Among those who reported experiencing self-censorship, pressure was most commonly described as situational rather than constant. Several participants stressed that they do not routinely censor themselves, but become more cautious depending on the topic or context. As one respondent summarized, "Overall I did not feel the need to censor myself. However, depending on the context, sensitive topics must be approached carefully." Others echoed this conditional nature, stating that "it doesn't happen that often," or that it is "always present but rather in some specific events or settings."

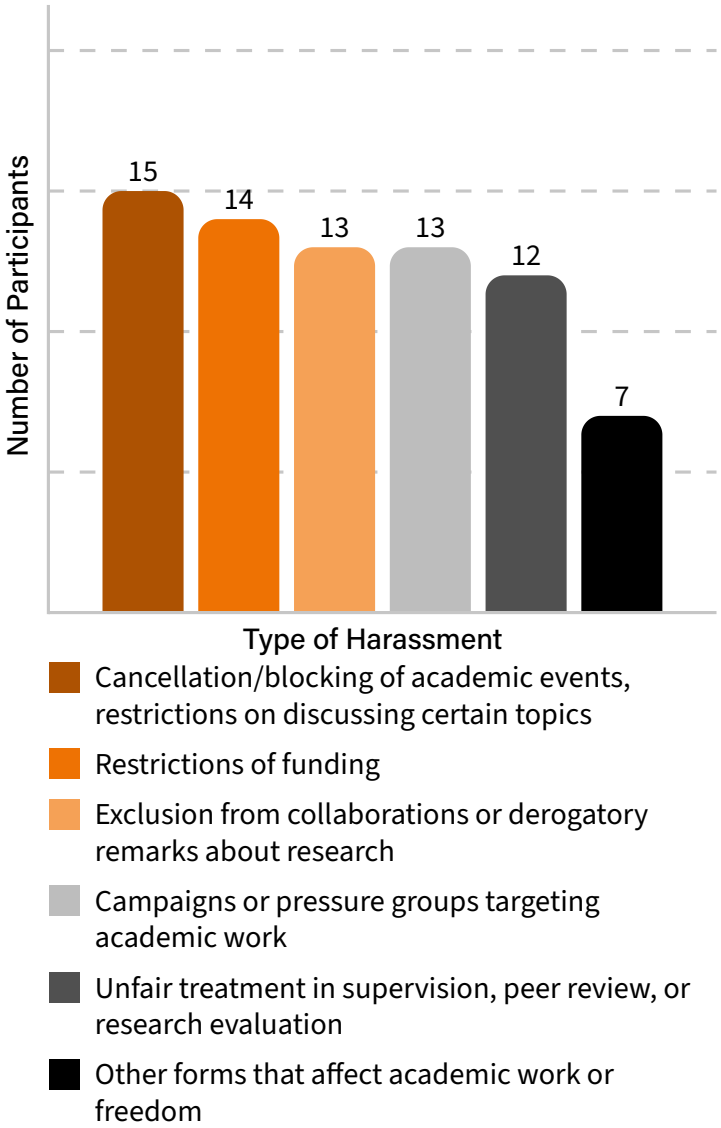
Institutional and collegiate environments were frequently mentioned as sources of indirect pressure. Some interviewees described adapting their language or framing in response to leadership expectations, funding structures, or dominant views within their departments. One participant recounted a presentation to senior colleagues, explaining: "They were very interested in my talk but wanted it to avoid being too political because most of the funding for our Center comes from private sources." Another highlighted the role of peer dynamics, noting that "when there is a dominant consensus among my colleagues, I don't feel comfortable disagreeing." These experiences suggest that self-censorship often arises from anticipation of professional consequences rather than from explicit instructions. Highly politicized or sensitive topics were repeatedly identified as moments when self-censorship becomes more pronounced. Several interviewees explicitly mentioned Israel–Palestine, far-right politics, and climate-related research. One respondent stated plainly, "Personally, I self-censor, especially on Israel–Palestine," while another reflected that "when I talk about sensitive topics, it happens to me more." In some cases, external political pressures reinforced this caution. As one participant explained, "Since the AfD has sued researchers as an intimidation tactic, I have been very careful to avoid mistakes when working on far-right topics."

Additionally, career stage and visibility were described as shaping how self-censorship is learned and practiced. Interviewees reflected on the longer-term effects of speaking out and the need to develop strategic communication skills. One participant observed, "If you speak out enough, you become the difficult one… I had to learn to change my voice and use political language to get my point

across." Another emphasized how structural dependency affects research choices, noting that "especially when writing grant proposals, it affects my case selection and my word choice." Together, these accounts illustrate self-censorship as an adaptive response to perceived professional risk, influenced by institutional context, topic sensitivity, and career precarity.

Harassment

Figure 6: Number of Participants by Forms of Harassment Experienced



Harassment affecting academic work and academic freedom was explored through the question: "Have you ever experienced, or witnessed among your colleagues, forms of harassment that affected academic work or academic freedom?" Out of 26 interviewees, 24 provided a substantive response, indicating a high level of engagement with the topic. The distribution of responses is summarized in Figure 6, which illustrates both direct experiences and cases witnessed among colleagues.

Across these responses, harassment was most frequently described as indirect and career-related rather than overtly confrontational. Eight participants reported forms of harassment that operated through professional mechanisms such as exclusion from collaborations, gatekeeping, funding-related pressures, or the removal of content perceived as politically sensitive. These forms of harassment were often described as difficult to document or challenge, yet highly effective in shaping academic behavior. As one interviewee noted, "Colleagues who adopt more radical approaches are simply not invited." A second recurring pattern concerned online harassment and public visibility. Six participants reported exposure to hate speech, intimidation, or threats of violence, particularly in connection with public engagement, media appearances, or social media activity. In these cases, harassment extended beyond institutional boundaries and directly affected personal safety and willingness to participate in public discourse. One respondent described this experience succinctly: "I receive a lot of hate emails and comments online, including death threats."

Finally, five participants emphasized that harassment is unevenly distributed, disproportionately affecting early-career researchers and women. Gendered harassment, dependency on supervisors, and precarious

career positions were described as amplifying the silencing effects of intimidation. One interviewee highlighted this dynamic by observing that "in particular young women get very harsh, very violent comments once they become visible." Together, these accounts suggest that harassment functions as a significant, if often informal, constraint on academic freedom, intersecting with visibility, gender, and career vulnerability.

4. Constraints, Actors, and Settings

Participants listed a variety of influences from both internal academic institutions and external political and social contexts when considering which actors create the most restrictions to academic freedom. Over half of the respondents (54%) said they had personally felt constrained by colleagues, while half (50%) pointed to media, journalists, or activists as significant sources of pressure. This finding highlights that constraints are not only imposed from outside but also arise within the academic community, where professional expectations and peer dynamics can limit open debate.

Approximately 42% of participants mentioned government or state actors as a constraining force, referring to national political climates, policy priorities, and state-level oversight. Others emphasized more diffuse pressures: social media users (35%), supervisors (31%), students (27%), and administrative staff (23%), pointing to a multilayered network of both internal and external influences.

Table 1: Actors and the Amount of Participants Who Have Felt Constrained by Them

Actor	Frequency	Percentage
Colleagues	14	53.9%
Media/journalists	14	50%
Government/state actors	11	42.3%
Social media users	9	34.6%
Supervisors	8	30.8%
Students	7	26.9%
Administrative staff	6	23.1%

When participants were asked who or what currently creates the greatest constraint to academic freedom, their answers showed just how complex these pressures can be. Several participants said that governments and political actors create the strongest limits on academic freedom. They felt that political changes and polarization make some topics harder to discuss openly. A few also mentioned right-wing movements, saying these can influence which research feels safe to do or share. Others spoke about the role of the media and lobby groups, which they saw as powerful but often indirect sources of pressure.

The participants highlighted three main areas as the most significant influences on research freedom: funding and financial structures, civil society, and conservative pressure. Many pointed out that financial limitations are a major barrier. As one participant said: "Financial constraints create the greatest restriction — government budget cuts constitute a significant restriction on academic freedom."

Civil society was also seen as a source of external influence. One participant mentioned, "one of the biggest threats comes from the German-Israeli society," indicating that societal pressures can shape which topics researchers feel able to explore.

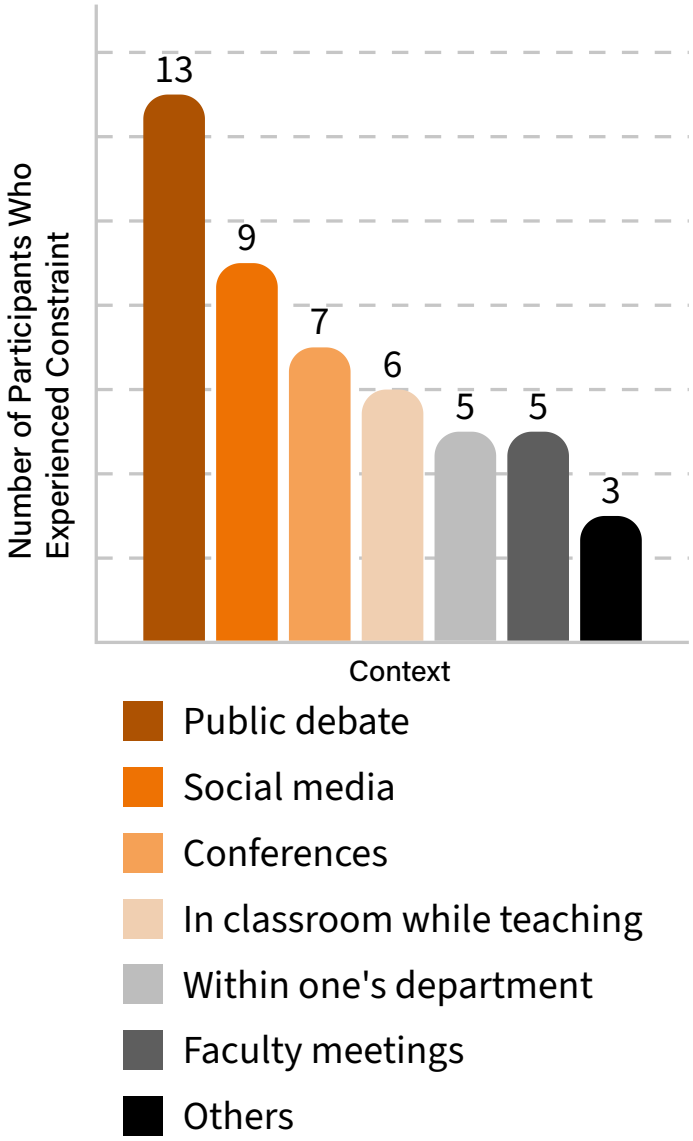
Finally, participants emphasized the impact of conservative pressure. Some participants noted that "external right-wing pressure affects research topics," highlighting how political forces can limit the scope of academic inquiry.

Also, participants mentioned that they experienced the most constraints in public debates (50%) and social media (34.6%). The main reasons for these constraints were:

- Institutional pressures: short-term contracts and concerns about securing funding.
- Student and public expectations: the need to be careful with egalitarian or sensitive approaches.
- Social media influence: Quick and divided speech.
- Departmental and international considerations: restrictions from higher management or political sensitivities.

Additionally, participants reported that social media and media interactions frequently made them cautious when expressing their opinions. Some also highlighted conflicts between activism and academic work, which caused them to leave particular organizations. Topics that participants feel riskier to discuss publicly are mostly Middle East–related conflicts (especially Israel–Palestine and Gaza), migration and minority issues, racism and far-right actors, as well as colonial and decolonial studies.

Figure 7: Number of Participants by Contexts in Which Constraints Were Felt



5. Existing Protections

Availability of Protection Mechanisms

83%

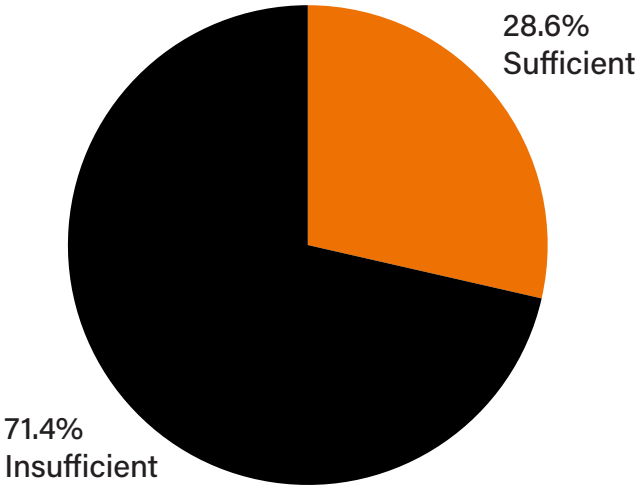
of respondents said their institution provides mechanisms for their protection.

Survey respondents generally recognized that their institutions have formal ways to protect academic freedom. These included ombudspersons, ethics committees, grievance procedures, works councils, and officers responsible for equal opportunity or research integrity. Some respondents also mentioned training programs and informal support from supervisors. However, many respondents were not aware of these mechanisms or were unsure where to seek help.

Perceived Sufficiency of Existing Mechanisms

A majority of respondents (15) reported that existing protection mechanisms are insufficient, compared to six who viewed them as sufficient. Respondents had mixed opinions about whether current measures adequately protect academic freedom. Some trusted their institution's framework, while others noted that protections are mostly procedural and might not be effective under pressure. Even those who said that existing mechanisms are sufficient often clarified that protections depend on specific situations, individual people, or informal relationships and may not be guaranteed safeguards in every situation.

Figure 8: Percentage of Respondents by Whether They Perceive Their Institutions Mechanisms for Protecting Academic Freedom to be Sufficient



Identified Gaps and Areas for Improvement

The responses highlight several structural challenges that continue to shape respondents' experiences of academic freedom. A prominent concern relates to employment security, especially the widespread use of short-term contracts and unclear career paths, which respondents see as creating vulnerability and discouraging involvement in critical or sensitive academic work. Participants also stressed the need for independent support and legal guidance, noting the lack of neutral organizations or accessible legal advisory services that could help before or during conflicts. Issues of transparency and awareness also surfaced, with many reporting limited knowledge of their rights, available procedures, and existing protections. Additionally, respondents pointed to political and external pressures, describing subtle influences that may steer research agendas or limit certain topics. Lastly, although institutional policies are officially in place, concerns were raised about how well they are implemented, with respondents uncertain about the effectiveness of these mechanisms in real conflict situations. Overall, these findings suggest that strengthening academic freedom requires not just formal safeguards, but also secure employment conditions, independent support systems, clearer communication, and more reliable enforcement. The following quotations illustrate key themes about how participants felt about existing institutional protections:

"Short-term contracts and uncertain career prospects make it difficult to feel fully protected when engaging in critical or controversial research."

"More independent and proactive support, including legal or advisory services, would strengthen confidence in academic freedom protections."

"External or political pressures are rarely explicit, but they can still influence what topics are considered safe or acceptable to pursue."

6. Recommendations and Best Practices

The analysis presented above highlights multiple forms of pressure and structural vulnerabilities within academic institutions. In response to these findings, the following recommendations — drawn from the interviews and our own reflections on them — propose practical and institutional measures to strengthen academic freedom and create a safer academic environment. We provide three kinds of recommendations: first, recommendations for early-career academics, focusing on strategies for navigating pressures and building supportive networks; second, structural recommendations for universities, aimed at improving institutional policies, reporting mechanisms, and leadership support; and third, recommendations for changes in German academic workplace culture, emphasizing systemic reforms, job security, and the promotion of open and safe academic dialogue.

1. Recommendations for Early-Career Academics

1.1 Build Networks and Supportive Communities

Early-career academics are encouraged to connect with peers, including PhD candidates, postdoctoral researchers, and junior scholars, both within and beyond their institutions. Peer networks reduce isolation, provide emotional and professional support, and help distinguish systemic challenges from personal difficulties.

1.2 Distinguish Academic Criticism from Pressure or Threats

Constructive criticism, feedback, and academic debate are essential components of scholarly work. Before interpreting any experience as intimidation or repression, it is advisable to discuss it with a trusted external person, such as a mentor or an independent colleague. Legitimate academic critique should not be confused with harassment or political or institutional pressure.

1.3 Use Institutional Support Mechanisms

When pressures originate from supervisors or institutional structures, early-career academics should make use of formal support channels, such as staff councils, early-career representatives, or ombudspersons. In certain cases, seeking legal advice or support from NGOs offering free legal counseling may be necessary to ensure protection and fair treatment.

2. Structural Recommendations for Universities

2.1 Establish Clear, Independent, and Confidential Reporting Mechanisms

Universities should create independent and confidential channels for reporting pressure, intimidation, or conflicts, such as ombudspersons or staff councils. These mechanisms must function outside direct supervisory hierarchies and ensure protection against retaliation. Clear information about these channels should be widely communicated to all academic staff to ensure accessibility and trust.

2.2 Ensure Transparent and Accessible Institutional Procedures

Institutions should standardize and clearly communicate complaint-handling procedures. This includes outlining clear timelines, defining responsibilities, and explaining possible outcomes in an accessible manner. Transparency is essential to build trust in institutional processes and to guarantee consistent and fair application across departments.

2.3 Provide Practical Training and Preparedness Measures

Universities should offer practical training programs to help academics deal with threats, pressure, and difficult situations. These trainings may include “what-if” scenarios and case-based exercises to prepare researchers for real-life challenges.

Such initiatives can empower early-career academics and increase their awareness of available protection mechanisms.

2.4 Demonstrate Visible Leadership Support for Academic Freedom

University leadership should actively and consistently support academic freedom by publicly affirming its importance and backing researchers who face external or internal pressure. Visible leadership engagement sends a strong message that intimidation and repression will not be tolerated.

3. Recommendations for Changes in German Academic Workplace Culture

3.1 Reduce Hierarchy and Concentration of Power

Unequal concentrations of power among professors and institute directors should be mitigated through accountability and oversight mechanisms. Early career researchers should be given meaningful opportunities to participate in decision-making processes.

3.2 Increase Job Security

Universities should create more permanent positions and offer greater employment stability at earlier career stages. Structural reform is necessary in a system where over 90% of academic staff hold temporary contracts.

3.3 Reform Contract and Funding Structures

Over-reliance on third-party funding should be reduced to prevent unhealthy competition, job insecurity, and exploitation of academic labor. Stable and sustainable funding for research and teaching should be ensured.

3.4 Promote a Culture of Open and Safe Dialogue

Institutions should establish formal and informal spaces for open discussion, including anonymous channels, without fear of negative career consequences. Academic critique should focus on constructive and respectful feedback rather than personal attacks.

3.5 Reduce Language Barriers and Increase International Openness

Greater use of English can help reduce structural exclusion of international scholars. Equal participation in academic and institutional discussions should be facilitated to ensure inclusiveness.

Appendix 1: Consent Form

The following consent agreement was read at the beginning of every interview.

Dear Prof. (or Dr.) XX,

Thank you for sharing your time and expertise with me and for having agreed to this meeting.

Please let me briefly introduce myself. My name is NAME. I come from COUNTRY. I am a student of the Master of Public Policy at the Willy Brandt School, at Erfurt University, and attending a Project Course on academic freedom.

In our project, we want to investigate academic freedom in light of contemporary threats. Specifically, we are interested in personal experiences and perceptions on academic freedom of researchers at German Universities and research institutes. Our aim is to design a guide with best practices on how to identify threats and how to protect academic freedom.

I am requesting your consent to participate in the research as an expert. For this reason, I now will provide you with brief information on your interview:

Your participation in the research is completely voluntary and you have the right to terminate it at any time without giving reasons and without negative consequences. You do not have to answer all questions. In addition, if you want to withdraw all or parts of the information that you give me today, you can do so at any later time. We will then delete all your data.

Finally, we will not use your name in any publication.

The interview will take about half an hour. If you consent to, I will take written notes and an audio recording of the interview.

Please tell me if you want to participate in this interview. (Make sure to check below.)

☐ Yes ☐ No

Please tell me if you agree that I take written notes? May I also record this interview? (Make sure to check below.)

☐ Yes, written notes

☐ Yes, audio

☐ None

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

Interviewers used the following set of questions to guide their interviews.

Theme 1: Introduction & Informed Consent

Here read informed consent form (see other document).

Theme 2: Background / Interviewee Information

1. How long have you been working in academia?

2. What is your current position?

3. Where did you receive your academic training? There are three options; multiple answers are possible.

☐ Germany

☐ EU country (specify)

☐ Non-EU country (specify)

4. Optional: Where were you born?

Theme 3: Individual Academic Freedom / Autonomy

Thank you for telling me about yourself. I'll ask you now about your perception of academic freedom:

1. To what extent do you feel free to develop and pursue your own research? I will read four options. Do you feel:

☐ Completely free

☐ Mostly free

☐ Somewhat restricted

☐ Strongly restricted

2. Have these conditions changed in recent years?

☐ Yes

If yes, how?

☐ No

3. Speaking publicly: Are there topics in your field that feel "riskier" to speak about publicly?

4. If we'd talk now of your institution: Do you perceive the autonomy of your institution as under pressure?

☐ Yes

If yes, why?

☐ No

Theme 4: Self-Censorship

1. Have you ever felt indirect or unspoken pressure to self-censor?

☐ Yes

If yes: How often does this happen today? (if the atmosphere is good, you may ask: I know this is personal, but do you feel like telling me a bit more?)

☐ No

Theme 5: Harassment

1. Have you ever experienced, or witnessed among your colleagues, forms of harassment that affected academic work or academic freedom? I'll give you examples of forms of harassment, and you tell me if this applies or not to your experience, or your colleagues' experiences: (write down if the interviewee distinguishes between own and colleagues experience in any of the options below, but they don't have to say it if they don't feel like)

What about exclusion from collaborations or derogatory remarks about research?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Have you experienced or witnessed Unfair treatment in supervision, peer review, or research evaluation?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Have you experienced or witnessed cancellation/blocking of academic events, restrictions on discussing certain topics?

☐ Yes ☐ No

What about Campaigns or pressure groups targeting academic work?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Have you experienced or witnessed restrictions of funding?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Are there other forms that affect academic work or freedom that I have not mentioned?

☐ Yes , --- If yes, specify

☐ No

2. In your view, are some disciplines (for example, social sciences) more affected by harassment or backslash than others? If yes, which and why?

☐ Yes --- If yes: a) which ; b) why?

☐ No

Theme 6: Sources of Constraints (Origins)

1. We are going to talk now about the origins of constraints to academic freedom now. From your experience, have you personally felt constrained by any of the following actors? I'll read seven options.

☐ Administrative staff

☐ Colleagues

☐ Students

☐ Supervisor(s)

☐ Government / state actors

☐ Media / journalists / activists

☐ Social media users

2. And in your perception, is there a specific actor that currently creates the greatest constraints to academic freedom? Are there other relevant actors I haven't mentioned?

Theme 7: Where Constraints Occur (Locus)

1. In which settings have you experienced constraints the most?

☐ Social media

☐ Public debate

☐ Conferences

☐ Within your department

☐ In classroom while teaching

☐ Faculty meetings

☐ Other (specify)

2. What do you think were the reasons behind these experiences?

☐ Personal background (gender, ethnicity, religion, etc.)

☐ Research topic / discipline

☐ Career stage or contract type

☐ Other (specify)

Theme 8: Institutional Protections & Mechanisms

1. Does your institution provide mechanisms that make you feel protected (e.g., policies, committees, grievance systems)?

☐ Yes

If yes, can you tell me more about them?

☐ No

2. Are these mechanisms sufficient as protection for academic freedom?

☐ Yes

☐ No

3. What is missing or could be improved?

Theme 9: Reforms, Improvements, and Advice

1. What advice would you give to early-career academics facing unspoken pressures or constraints?

2. If you could change one feature of German academic workplace culture to make it safer or more open, what would it be?

Theme 10: Closing

1. Is there anything you would like to add regarding this topic?

2. Could you recommend another person who may be interested in participating?

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