

# Internationalization and Academic Freedom

## Freie Universität's Principles of International Cooperation

Strategy Paper by the Executive Board  
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## 1) Pursuing Responsible Internationalization

Debates surrounding academic freedom and the proper way to handle relations with universities in countries where science and research have become subject to systematic restrictions demand our attention more and more, especially today. Although academic freedom in democratic countries also faces threats from populist movements and politicians in those countries, relations with universities and research institutions in authoritarian states demonstrate how potential conflicts of interest can create a schism between internationalization and academic freedom.

For over twenty years, internationalization has been a driving force for change in the academy. From strengthening intercultural dialogue through university exchanges to solving global problems through international research partnerships, internationalization is a foundational component of the global community of knowledge. The fact that the exchange of knowledge has been subject to tight restrictions, during the Cold War for example, is something that seems to be forgotten quickly. The numerous violations of academic freedom documented by the New York University-based organization Scholars at Risk alone show that this exchange has never been completely without boundaries. The topic has generated strong public interest due to prominent developments in the more recent past, including Central European University's move from Hungary to Austria, the alleged murder of an Italian doctoral student by security forces in Egypt, and the exodus of at-risk scholars from Turkey. Herta Müller's words from her speech at Freie Universität's 70th anniversary celebration ring true here: we only learn to value freedom once it is gone.

Freie Universität Berlin, as the International Network University, is directly affected by restrictions to academic freedom around the world. It has a duty to take a stand on developments like those mentioned above and to show its solidarity. The University must consider carefully how to protect its doctoral students and professors when they plan and conduct field research in countries where research itself involves risking life and limb. As the first German member of Scholars at Risk and through its participation in the "Academy in Exile" as well as the establishment of the mentoring project "Academics in Solidarity," Freie Universität not only offers persecuted and refugee scholars a safe haven, but it also actively contributes to the debate on how research, teaching, and university exchange can persist even in crisis situations.

In this respect, Freie Universität believes that a policy to protect academic freedom goes hand in hand with a responsible and conscientious approach to internationalization. This means first and foremost that the University must review and rethink its approach to cooperation with institutions and states in which academic freedom is systematically restricted and, if necessary, act accordingly. What is the University's response to partner institutions that dismiss students or researchers for political reasons? What boundaries might limit cooperative efforts when partner universities and research institutions are operating in countries where academic freedom is systematically restricted? What factors should be considered when implementing projects abroad (for example, bilateral degree programs, strategic partnerships, Merian Centers, liaison offices, or joint doctoral programs), especially given that the projects rely on certain conditions being met, such as the freedom to choose which research topics to work on and whom to work with? These questions are not simply questions about how to protect the University's own researchers against attacks. They also

raise a question of principle, namely, to what extent should the University's founding principles of "Justitia, Veritas, Libertas" extend beyond a domestic circle of influence and become a stronger part of how the University conducts projects internationally?

First, responsible internationalization must be understood as a process that takes into account the goals and impact of various forms of academic exchange. The process should also consider the regional contexts in which the University and its members engage with each other. The process also involves trying to find the proper balance between academic freedom and cultural exchange, between the ambition of wanting to solve global problems and adherence to one's own values, and the balance between acquiring scientific knowledge and cooperating with partners whose academic systems are not based on the principles of a free democracy.

The process of finding a balance does not mean assuming a relativistic stance toward certain values, rather it requires being aware of the specific context in which violations against those values take place and being able to assess who is behind the violations (state institutions, universities). These processes have been a basic element of science diplomacy for decades. In times of renationalization and "shrinking spaces" in individual countries, this form of diplomacy gains significance – in all of its forms: as "diplomacy for science" (support for international cooperation through diplomatic channels), as "science for diplomacy" (a form of communication that can act as a substitute for traditional diplomacy where it is no longer tenable), or as "science in diplomacy" (as a central theme within diplomatic relations, such as in the area of climate protection).

The principles presented here make an explicit distinction between academic responsibility and the responsibility of the University's members. In the interest of scientific knowledge and intercultural understanding, the individual research interests of scholars and scientists should be given as much freedom as possible, as long as their research activities are based on the ethical principles of academic work. Students, doctoral candidates, and career researchers are called upon to follow these principles internationally and to observe the country-specific regulations when they go abroad. The principles established in the following guidelines serve primarily as a way for the University management to support students, doctoral candidates, and researchers in an increasingly difficult international environment. They also indicate, however, where the University management draws the line with its partners, especially when it has to do with university-wide projects or partnerships.

Finally, a responsible approach to internationalization means taking a critical look at academic freedom on our own campus. How can academic discourses and the culture of academic debate be protected from political attacks and intimidation? How can we make sure that funding institutions and donors, whether abroad or in Germany, do not exert an undue influence on the academic work they are supporting? And how can students and researchers be protected from the targeted surveillance measures of domestic and/or international actors?

## 2) Guidelines for a Responsible Approach to Internationalization

What does responsible internationalization look like and what processes need to be put in place in order to support it? The following is an attempt to establish guidelines for international cooperation at Freie Universität Berlin based on the situation described above.

1. **Commitment to our founding principles:** Freie Universität Berlin and its members understand the founding principles of “Justitia, Veritas, Libertas” as an expression of their commitment to their work, both nationally and internationally. They see the protection and defense of academic freedom as an important goal of their international activities.
2. **Open dialogues:** As a university characterized by its unique network of research institutions specializing in different regions, Freie Universität pursues cooperation from a transcultural perspective. It is aware of the different historical conditions that have shaped academic and scientific systems around the world. With this in mind, Freie Universität does not advocate retreat or isolation, but rather seeks mutual engagement with partners around the world – even in times of crisis. We understand academic freedom as part of a negotiation process inherent to the complex relations involved in working together with international partners.
3. **Multiple perspectives:** Internationalization at Freie Universität is driven by the idea that exchanges between students, doctoral candidates, researchers, and administrative staff not only contribute to better intercultural understanding, but they also benefit research itself significantly, for example, by helping to overcome Eurocentric approaches. In this respect, it is also important to keep channels of communication and exchange open for as long as possible, even in the face of conflict. Individual cases might require us to explore alternative forms of collaboration.
4. **Willingness to take a stand:** The University is aware that there can be diverging goals when working together with other universities and research institutions, especially in countries that restrict the autonomy of universities. In countries where research and education are subject to systematic restrictions, those limitations usually come to bear on the collaborative activities with university partners. It is our duty to address these conflicts, to seek solutions actively, and to have the patience to endure conflict while working through it.
5. **Consistent course of action:** If the restrictions continue at a partner institution and teachers and students are intimidated or politically persecuted, if international cooperation serves political white-washing, if ethical principles are abused (e.g., through ethical dumping), and if these conflicts cannot be resolved through dialogue and debate, the cooperation must be evaluated and reconsidered and, if necessary, actions must be taken that are consistent with our principles. This applies especially to partnerships between Freie Universität and other universities as a whole, as well as partnerships involving state authorities.

### 3) Procedural Measures to Protect Academic Freedom

In order to lend weight to the principles outlined above and to assist members of the university in implementing them, the Executive Board of Freie Universität has agreed to develop specific procedural measures aimed at protecting academic freedom in the context of international cooperation. They pertain most immediately to cases involving central partners of our university who have been subject to systematic (i.e., repeated and severe) encroachments on their academic freedom.

Infringements are often not clear-cut matters, which is why an in-depth analysis of such cases must be the first step. Suitable forums and decision-making mechanisms are then needed to decide which reactions are effective and appropriate. A uniform code of conduct would make as little sense here as a blacklist. On the one hand, a standard procedure would itself restrict the academic freedom of university members. On the other, it would not do justice to the often complex situations in authoritarian-ruled countries, where universities are also a refuge for progressive thinking.

A more useful approach would seek to establish suitable methods to evaluate and handle the variety of different and unique cases. In order for Freie Universität to conduct its work in this area effectively, it must take into account not only the researchers and the respective administrative units and departments involved, but also the expertise of the regional officers in Division IV International Affairs. The steps in this internal process at Freie Universität include the following:

1. Draw regularly upon Freie Universität's internal wealth of regional knowledge which is available in the departments, in order to inform decisions on international partnerships.
2. Coordinate decisions and courses of action with external experts and stakeholders who work in international academic and research relations.
3. Develop tools to help conduct risk analyses for grant proposals.
4. Consider including exit clauses in cooperation agreements.
5. Establish a set of measures for managing conflict with international partners.
6. Prevention strategy – advising and support for members of Freie Universität abroad.
7. Emergency crisis management for members of Freie Universität abroad.
8. Protective measures against possible surveillance on campus.
9. Guidelines on awarding grants and prizes.