

Exploring Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression in Higher Education: A Scoping Review

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Abstract

Background:

Academic freedom and freedom of expression have become increasingly contested in higher education, shaped by both internal governance structures and external sociopolitical pressures. While theoretical discussions are growing, there remains a lack of systematic synthesis of how these issues are explored through empirical research, especially in relation to institutional practices.

Objectives:

This study aims to map existing research on academic freedom and freedom of expression in higher education institutions. It seeks to identify dominant themes, methodological approaches, research gaps, and future directions, with a particular focus on institutional responses and contextual factors.

Methods:

A scoping review methodology was employed, drawing on four academic databases, supplemented by grey literature searches. Thematic analysis, supported by Python-based topic modelling, was used to categorise and interpret findings from selected studies. Internal and external influences on academic freedom were analysed across multiple levels.

Key findings:

While existing studies address various aspects of academic freedom—such as governance, social media, and external pressures—the overall literature remains fragmented and limited in scope. Significant gaps include the lack of empirical research from non-Western contexts, minimal inclusion of students, staff, and administrators as participants, and insufficient attention to the interaction between institutional and external influences. Most studies are descriptive and qualitative in nature, with limited efforts to build theoretical models or test hypotheses. These gaps highlight the need for more comparative, interdisciplinary, and methodologically diverse research in this area.

Conclusions:

This review highlights the fragmented and uneven nature of research on academic freedom in higher education. It underscores the need for more empirical, comparative, and interdisciplinary work that bridges theory and institutional realities. As the initial stage of a larger project, this study provides a foundation for future research and policy development.

Keywords:

Academic freedom; freedom of expression; higher education; scoping review; institutional governance; social media; university policy

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1. Introduction

Academic freedom and freedom of expression are fundamental to the integrity of higher education. They ensure that scholars can engage in open inquiry, critical thinking, and the dissemination of knowledge without undue interference. However, these freedoms have faced increasing challenges over the past decade due to political, social, and institutional pressures. There is a growing need to systematically map the existing academic literature on these issues to understand the key concerns studied, the research methodologies employed, and the major conclusions drawn. This scoping review aims to identify and synthesise peer-reviewed academic research on academic freedom and freedom of expression in higher education between 2015 and 2025, providing an overview of key themes, methodological approaches, and findings.

Rationale for conducting a scoping review

A scoping review is a preliminary assessment of the potential size and scope of available research literature, aiming to identify the nature and extent of research evidence, often including ongoing studies (Grant & Booth, 2009). While some may use the term ‘scoping review’ to describe a rapid, less systematic examination of the literature, others, as stated by Levac et al. (2010), argue that scoping studies are particularly valuable for mapping areas of research where the evidence is not yet fully developed.

The rationale for conducting a scoping review is to explore the breadth of existing literature and identify key research gaps. This type of review provides a valuable mapping of the current evidence base, rather than undertaking a detailed critical appraisal or synthesis of findings (Munn et al., 2018). Scoping reviews are particularly useful in areas where the literature is complex or not yet comprehensively reviewed, helping to inform future research directions. According to Gough et al. (2012), scoping reviews offer more flexibility compared to systematic reviews, particularly in terms of methodology and scope.

Research questions and objectives

RQ1: What are the key issues studied in relation to academic freedom and freedom of expression in higher education from 1 Jan 2015 to 28 Feb 2025?

RQ2: What research designs, methodologies, and tools have been used to study these issues?

RQ3: What are the key findings and conclusions drawn from this body of research?

2. Methodology

This scoping review adopted the methodological framework proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). Eligibility criteria were set to define which studies to include based on relevant characteristics. A comprehensive search strategy was applied across selected databases using defined keywords and filters. Studies were screened in two stages—titles/abstracts followed by full-text review—by multiple reviewers. Data from included studies were then analysed and synthesised narratively or thematically. Results are reported using flow diagrams, summary tables, and structured descriptions.

Framework and guidelines

Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) framework is a widely recognised methodology for conducting scoping reviews, providing a structured approach to explore the breadth of research in a given field. It comprises six key stages: (a) identifying the research question, (b) identifying relevant studies, (c) study selection, (d) charting the data, (e) collating, summarising, and reporting the results, and (f) an optional consultation stage with stakeholders. The framework emphasises flexibility and adaptability, enabling researchers to map a wide range of evidence without the need for exhaustive systematic evaluation. Further recommendations by Levac et al. (2010) enhanced the framework by stressing the importance of clearly linking the purpose and research question, ensuring feasibility while maintaining comprehensiveness, employing an iterative approach for selecting studies and extracting data, and incorporating both numerical summaries and qualitative thematic analysis. The final stages focus on considering the implications of findings for policy, practice, and future research. Although the consultation stage is optional, it is recommended as a key component for knowledge translation and increasing the practical relevance of the review. This framework is particularly valuable for organising complex topics, such as indigenous scoping or narrative reviews, and for informing the development of environmental scans or assessment frameworks.

Arksey and O'Malley Framework Stage	Description
1: Identifying the research question	Identifying the research question provides the roadmap for subsequent stages. Relevant aspects of the question must be clearly defined as they have ramifications for search strategies. Research questions are broad in nature as they seek to provide breadth of coverage.
2: Identifying relevant studies	This stage involves identifying the relevant studies and developing a decision plan for where to search, which terms to use, which sources are to be searched, time span, and language. Comprehensiveness and breadth is important in the search. Sources include electronic databases, reference lists, hand searching of key journals, and organizations and conferences. Breadth is important; however, practicalities of the search are as well. Time, budget and personnel resources are potential limiting factors and decisions need to be made upfront about how these will impact the search.
3: Study selection	Study selection involves <i>post hoc</i> inclusion and exclusion criteria. These criteria are based on the specifics of the research question and on new familiarity with the subject matter through reading the studies.
4: Charting the data	A data-charting form is developed and used to extract data from each study. A 'narrative review' or 'descriptive analytical' method is used to extract contextual or process oriented information from each study.
5: Collating, summarizing, and reporting results	An analytic framework or thematic construction is used to provide an overview of the breadth of the literature but not a synthesis. A numerical analysis of the extent and nature of studies using tables and charts is presented. A thematic analysis is then presented. Clarity and consistency are required when reporting results.
6: Consultation (optional)	Provides opportunities for consumer and stakeholder involvement to suggest additional references and provide insights beyond those in the literature.

Figure 1 A framework for conducting a scoping review¹

In order to address the research questions for this review a series of inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed.

Eligibility criteria

Inclusion Criteria:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 1 Jan 2015 and 28 Feb 2025.
- Studies focusing on supporting academic freedom and/or freedom of expression within the higher/tertiary education sector.
- Empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods).
- Studies published in English.
- Open access
- full text

Exclusion Criteria:

- Studies that focus on freedom of expression outside higher education contexts.
- Non-peer-reviewed sources (to be included separately in the grey literature search).
- Articles published before 1 Jan 2015 or after 28 Feb 2025.

Search strategy

A systematic search was undertaken across four major academic databases to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant literature (Appendix II). These databases include Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Scopus and Web of Science which were chosen for their broad interdisciplinary reach and citation tracking capabilities. ERIC was included to capture education-focused studies. Google Scholar was used to identify supplementary sources, including works not indexed in traditional databases. Boolean operators, controlled vocabulary

¹ Note: Cited from (Levac et al., 2010).

(where applicable), and clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to retrieve relevant, high-quality studies.² Key words are listed as follows:

Table 1 The keywords for searching strategy

Keywords	<i>“Freedom”</i>	<i>“Support”</i>	<i>“Higher education”</i>
Synonyms	“Academic freedom”	“Promote”	“Universit*”
	“Academic freedom of speech”	“Uphold”	“College*”
	“Freedom of expression”	“Protect”	“Third level education”
	“Freedom of speech as an academic”		
	“Free expression”		
	“Scholarly autonomy”		
	“Intellectual freedom”		
	“Knowledge production”		

Study selection, screening, analysis and synthesis

The study selection process was managed using Covidence, an online platform designed to support systematic review workflows. The initial phase involved title and abstract screening within Covidence, led by Rhoda Jiang (RJ). During this stage, any uncertain entries were discussed collaboratively with John Devaney (JD) to ensure consistency and clarity. This was followed by a full-text review, which was conducted jointly by both reviewers to enhance accuracy and minimise bias. Data extraction was also carried out within Covidence, using a structured extraction form to capture key details such as title, year, country, methodology, main findings, and conclusions. This task was initially completed by RJ and subsequently double-checked by JD for quality assurance. Finally, data analysis involved a thematic approach to identify core themes emerging across the included policies and programmes.

Reporting and presentation

Findings have been summarised using a narrative synthesis to provide a coherent account of the evidence identified across the included studies. The synthesis will be supported by summary

² Note: Boolean search terms like: "academic freedom" OR "freedom of expression") AND ("higher education" OR "universities" OR "colleges"

tables and visual figures to present study characteristics, thematic groupings, and geographical or methodological trends. Study characteristics were analysed using appropriate Python-based tools and databases. Preliminary themes will first be identified using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) modelling and subsequently refined through manual review by RJ to ensure contextual accuracy and depth of interpretation.

3. Results

Study selection process (PRISMA diagram)

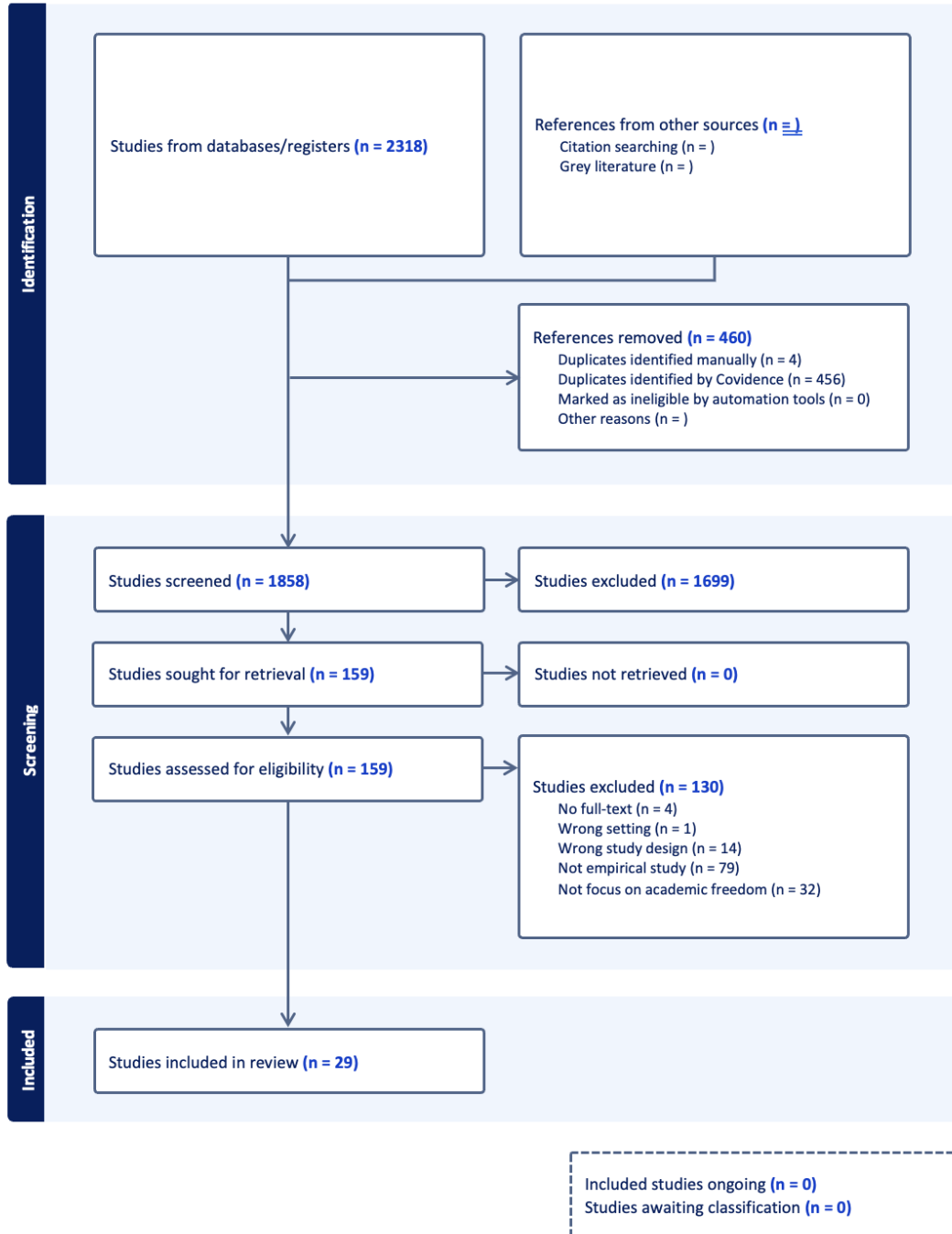


Figure 2 PRISMA diagram for the results of academic freedom project

Characteristics of included studies

Table 2 Characteristics of 29 included studies

<i>Lead author(s)</i>	<i>Published year</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Methodology</i>
<i>(Craddock, 2015)</i>	2015	Fiji	Qualitative
<i>(Zain-Al-Dien, 2016)</i>	2016	Egypt	Quantitative
<i>(Kimoga et al., 2017)</i>	2017	Kampala - Uganda	Qualitative
<i>(Diamond, 2017)</i>	2017	The USA	Mixed method
<i>(Hoepner, 2019)</i>	2019	Multiple countries	Mixed method
<i>(Cortina et al., 2019)</i>	2019	The USA	Qualitative
<i>(Svartefoss, 2020.)</i>	2020	Norway	Quantitative
<i>(Võ & Laking, 2020)</i>	2020	Vietnam	Qualitative
<i>(Wang, 2020)</i>	2020	The USA	Qualitative
<i>(Shiple, 2020)</i>	2020	Canada	Qualitative
<i>(Lanfod, 2021)</i>	2021	The USA	Qualitative
<i>(Al-Saeed, 2021)</i>	2021	Saudi Arabia	Quantitative
<i>(Ruan, 2021)</i>	2021	China	Qualitative
<i>(Qorraj et al., 2022)</i>	2022	Kosovo	Quantitative
<i>(Garces et al., 2022)</i>	2022	The USA	Qualitative
<i>(Prelec et al., 2022)</i>	2022	The UK	Quantitative
<i>(Pham, 2023)</i>	2023	The USA	Qualitative
<i>(Maranto & Bradley-Dorsey, 2023)</i>	2023	The USA	Quantitative
<i>(Kealoha, 2023)</i>	2023	The USA	Qualitative
<i>(Pearce et al., 2023)</i>	2023	The UK	Quantitative
<i>(Lo, 2023)</i>	2023	China	Qualitative
<i>(Godfrey, 2023)</i>	2023	The UK	Qualitative
<i>(Groton et al., 2023)</i>	2023	The USA	Quantitative

<i>(Mohammed & Cai, 2024)</i>	2024	Ghana	Quantitative
<i>(Joudieh et al., 2024)</i>	2024	Lebanon	Quantitative
<i>(Lo & Auld, 2024)</i>	2024	China	Qualitative
<i>(Tarrayo & Potestades, 2024)</i>	2024	The Philippines	Qualitative
<i>(Finley & Tiede, 2025)</i>	2025	The USA	Quantitative
<i>(Ashraf et al., 2025)</i>	2025	Bangladesh	Quantitative

Publications by year

The publication output spans from January 1st 2015 to February 28th 2025, showing a gradual increase over time. The year 2023 stands out with the highest number of studies, totalling seven. This is followed by 2020 and 2024, each contributing four publications, and 2021 and 2022 with three each. Earlier years such as 2015 and 2016 recorded only one study apiece, indicating relatively limited activity. Overall, the data suggest a growing research interest in recent years, with a notable peak in 2023.

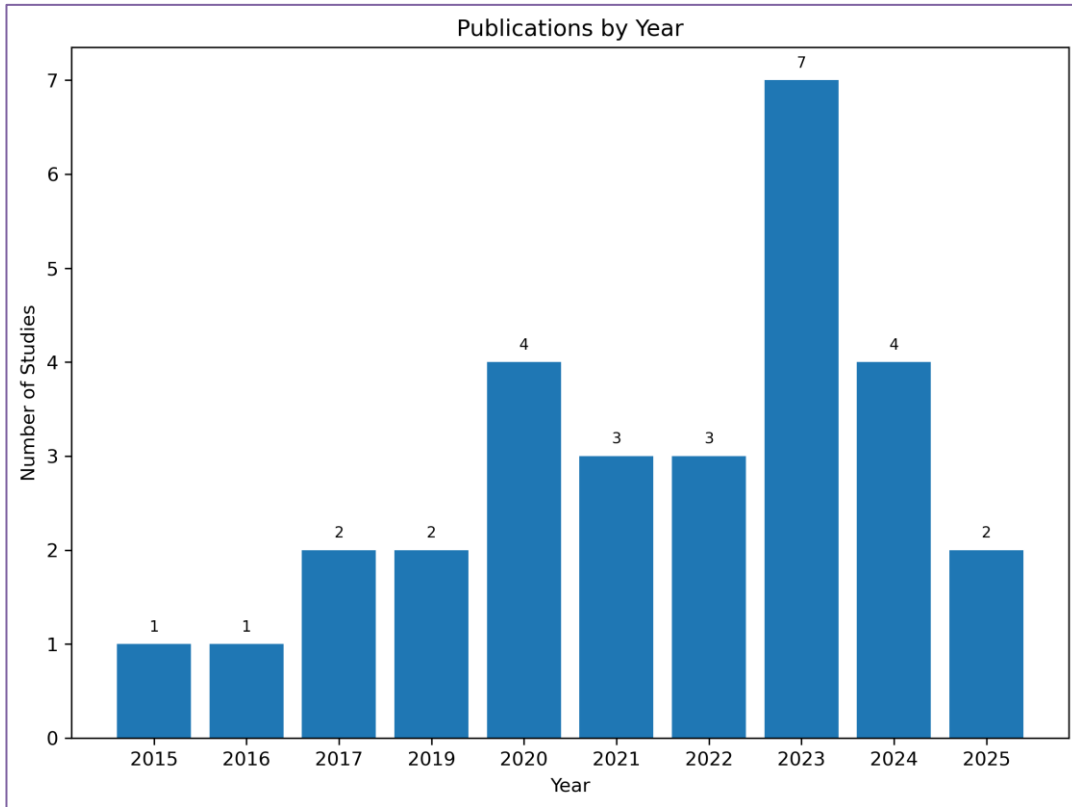


Figure 3 Annual publication trends (2015–2025) of 29 studies

Country distribution

The dataset comprises studies conducted across a wide range of countries, with a strong representation from the United States, which accounts for 10 studies. The United Kingdom and China follow, each contributing 3 studies. A few other countries are represented by a single study each, including Uganda (Kampala), Ghana, Kosovo, Egypt, Norway, Lebanon, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Canada, Saudi Arabia, the Philippines, and Fiji. Additionally, one study spans multiple countries. This distribution suggests a dominant presence of research originating from high-income or Anglophone contexts, while also reflecting a modest degree of global diversity in the research locations.

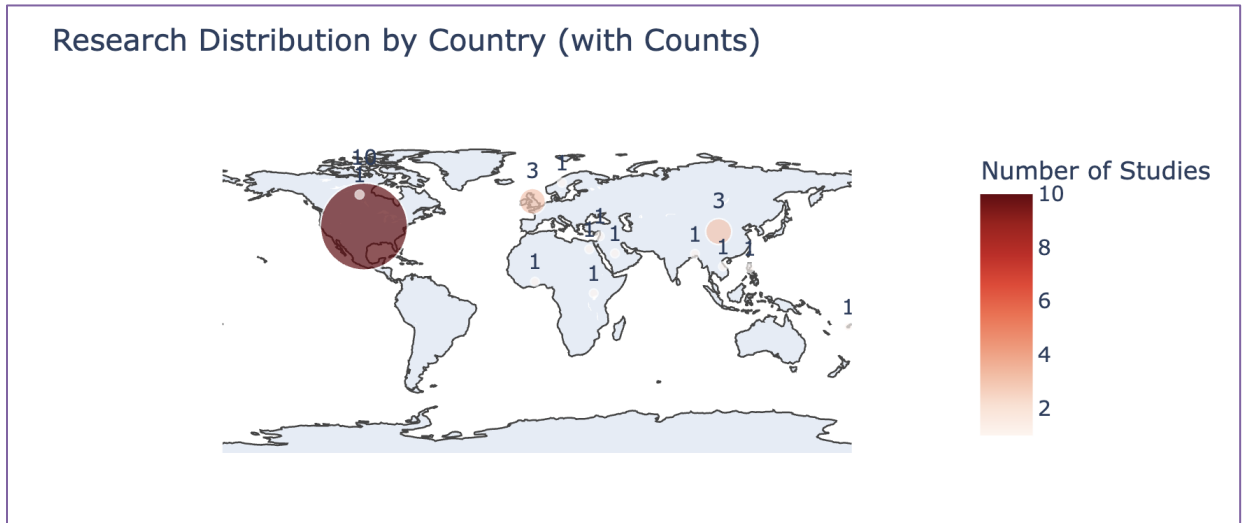


Figure 4 Geographic distribution of 29 studies

Question(s) patterns

To examine how the research questions of the included studies relate to two predefined conceptual categories—*Academic Freedom* and *Freedom of Expression*—a text analysis was conducted on the included 29 peer-reviewed articles. Rather than allowing themes to emerge inductively, the analysis adopted a deductive approach, using these two concepts as reference points. A Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) model was applied to determine the probabilistic association of each study with the conceptual centres, based on the textual content of their research aims and questions. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was then used to reduce the high-dimensional textual data into a two-dimensional space, enabling a visual representation of semantic similarity among studies. In the resulting thematic map, each node represents a study, coloured according to its proximity to one of the two themes—blue for academic freedom and red for freedom of expression. The thickness of each edge reflects the model’s confidence in that thematic alignment. The visualisation reveals a concentrated cluster around academic freedom, suggesting stronger commonality in how these studies formulate their research focus. In contrast, studies associated with freedom of expression are more widely dispersed, indicating greater thematic diversity within that conceptual area.

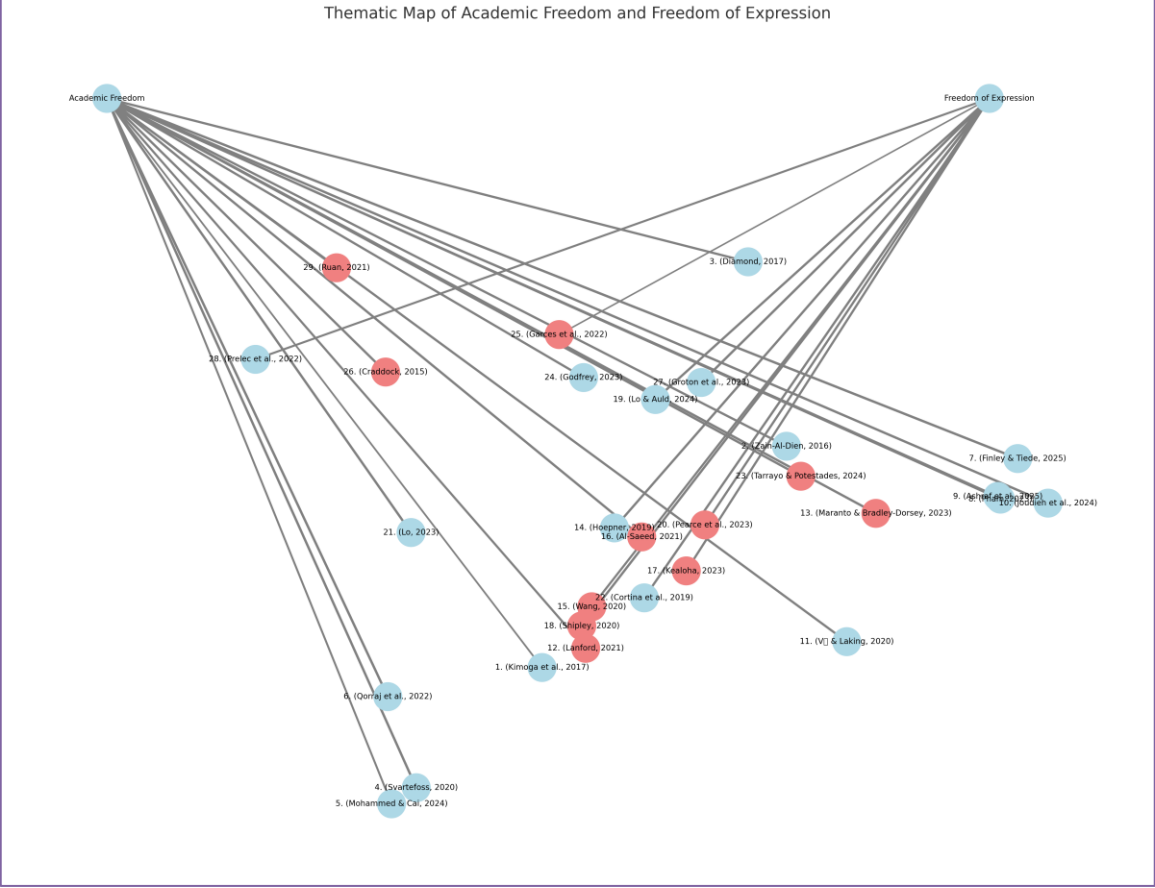


Figure 5 Thematic map of academic freedom and freedom of expression

Methodology distribution

The dataset reflects a diverse range of research methodologies, with qualitative approaches being the most prevalent, featured in 15 studies. Quantitative methods follow closely, appearing in 12 studies, highlighting a strong orientation towards empirical, measurable outcomes. A smaller number of studies, specifically two, adopted a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative techniques. This distribution suggests a balanced but slightly greater emphasis on exploratory and interpretive research in the field.

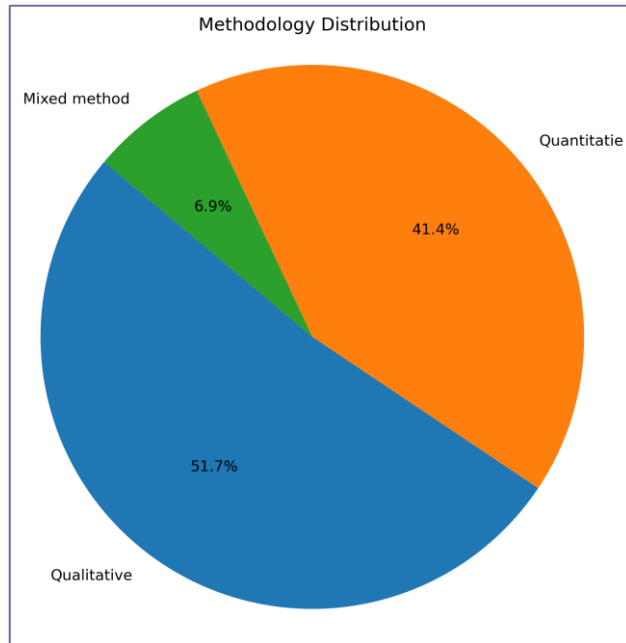


Figure 6 The methodology distribution of 29 included studies

Research design types and frequency

The dataset reveals a predominant reliance on two principal research designs: qualitative research and non-randomised experimental studies, each accounting for 12 studies. This suggests a balanced preference between exploratory approaches and structured interventions without random assignment. In contrast, other designs appear only once each, including a cross-sectional study, a clinical prediction rule, a court case analysis, a descriptive embedded single-case study, and a case report. The diversity of lesser-used designs reflects occasional tailoring to specific research questions, but the overall pattern indicates a clear methodological concentration in the field.

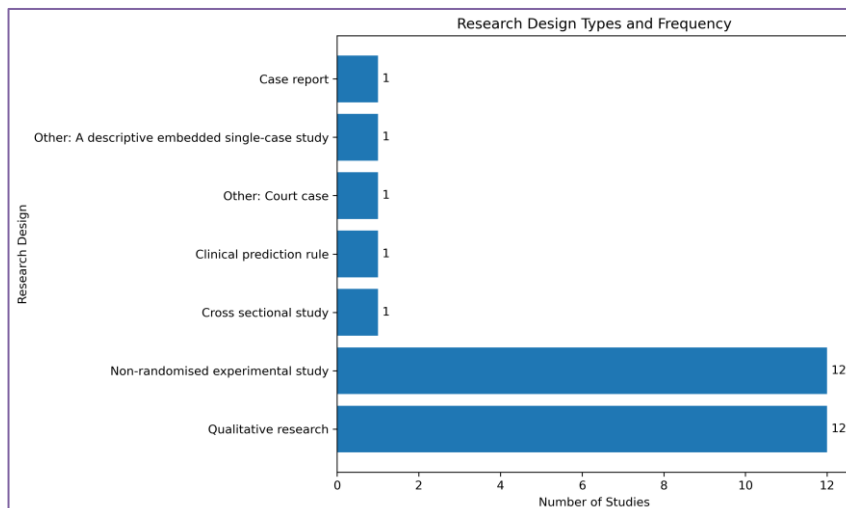


Figure 7 Research design types and frequency

Data category types and combinations

Most studies in the dataset employed textual data, with 15 studies relying on narrative or qualitative sources. Primary numerical data featured in 10 studies, reflecting a substantial focus on quantifiable outcomes. A small number of studies combined data types, including one study that integrated both textual and primary numerical data, one categorised as mixed, and another utilising secondary numerical data. Additionally, one study used a combination of textual and narrative formats. Overall, the dominance of textual data suggests a strong emphasis on descriptive and interpretive analysis within the field.

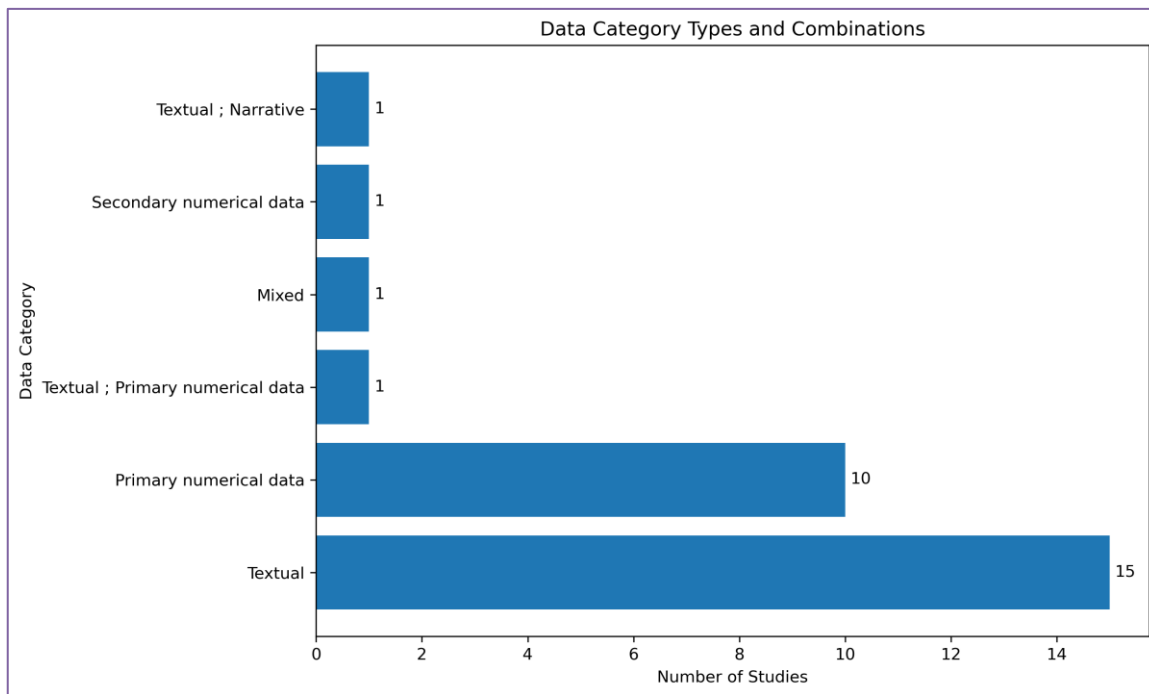


Figure 8 Data category types and combinations

Tools for data collection

The most employed tools for data collection were questionnaires and surveys, used in 14 studies, reflecting a strong emphasis on structured, self-reported data. Close behind were structured or

semi-structured interviews, appearing in 13 studies, indicating widespread use of qualitative inquiry techniques. Document analysis featured in 4 studies, while focus groups were used in 2. Less frequently utilised methods included ethnographic observation and news analysis, each appearing once. This distribution highlights a methodological tendency towards participant-driven responses, supported by complementary qualitative and documentary sources.

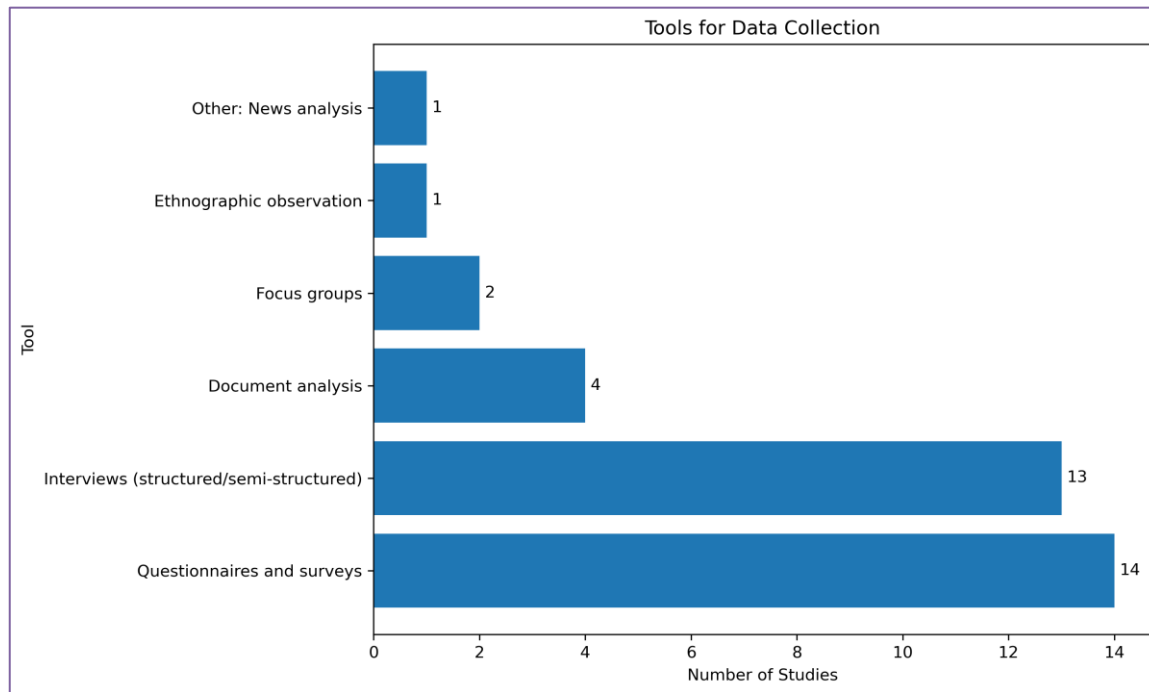


Figure 9 Tools for data collection

Preliminary themes

Preliminary themes reveal diverse experiences and perceptions of academic freedom across contexts. Influencing factors include both external pressures, such as political and societal influences, and internal elements like institutional governance and academic culture. The loss of academic freedom may lead to consequences such as self-censorship and reduced scholarly engagement. Some institutions have introduced measures to safeguard academic freedom, although tensions persist between this principle and other values, including national security and inclusivity. The review also identifies notable research gaps, highlighting the need for further inquiry and broader perspectives.

Experiences and perceptions of academic freedom

Academic freedom is not experienced uniformly across stakeholders. Instead, it is filtered through positionality, institutional context, and social identity. The literature illustrates how perceptions of academic freedom vary notably among students, academics administrators, and sometimes even within these groups.

Students' experiences of academic freedom differ across cultural and institutional contexts. In Egypt, it is generally perceived at a moderate level, with male students reporting greater freedom in research and expression than female students—reflecting wider societal norms (Zain-Al-Dien, 2016). Students also reported emotional strain and disillusionment due to poor communication and a lack of visible moral support from university leadership during political protests (Lo & Auld, 2024). Elsewhere, students of colour in Western universities have expressed dissatisfaction with institutional responses to hate speech, prompting them to create their own support networks (Garces et al., 2022). These findings reveal that access to academic freedom remains uneven, often shaped by gender, race, and the responsiveness of the institution.

Academic staff often report uncertainty about their rights and the extent of their academic freedom (Pham, 2023). In Saudi Arabia, younger and lower-ranked lecturers showed greater awareness than senior staff, and female academics reported more perceived freedom than males (Al-Saeed, 2021). In the UK, social science lecturers described the academic environment as harsh and intolerant of personal beliefs (Godfrey, 2023). Scholars also raised concerns about legislation—such as HB-233 in the US—fearing its chilling effect on expression and professional autonomy (Groton et al., 2023). Ruan (2021) found that women in “softer” disciplines (e.g., social sciences, humanities) often had to “earn” their freedom, facing institutional and cultural barriers, whereas those in “harder” fields like psychology experienced earlier autonomy.

University administrators tend to view academic freedom through a managerial lens. They are more likely than faculty to value social media for professional engagement, whereas faculty often remain wary of its risks (Diamond, 2017). Administrators may also support policies like Prevent, while academics criticise these measures for undermining free expression and discouraging open dialogue with students (Pearce et al., 2023). These differing perspectives often reflect a tension between institutional image management and the protection of academic values.

Factors influencing academic freedom

Academic freedom is shaped by a complex interplay of **external** and **internal** factors. These influences can either protect or erode autonomy in teaching, research, and expression.

External factors

Positive external drivers include international frameworks. International collaboration and regional policy alignment have shown promising effects. In Kosovo, academic freedom has been supported by integration into EU initiatives such as Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020, which exposed institutions to global academic standards and practices (Qorraj et al., 2022). Similarly, in India, the University Grants Commission (UGC) serves as a semi-autonomous body that mediates between government and institutions, helping maintain legal autonomy (Lo, 2023). Collective bargaining agreements also play a protective role, especially in public universities where unionisation grants faculty some power over employment terms and protections against censorship (Cortina et al., 2019). International cooperation has emerged as a positive influence on academic freedom, particularly through partnerships and exchange programmes that promote global standards and best practices. Such initiatives expose institutions to diverse perspectives and foster environments more supportive of intellectual openness and academic freedom (Qorraj et al., 2022).

Restrictive factors involve state interference and legislative overreach. Political interference remains one of the most critical threats. Academic staff in Uganda face state intervention in curriculum content without clear national or internal policy safeguards (Kimoga et al., 2017). In Vietnam, governmental decrees regulate tuition fees, staffing decisions, and curriculum, leading to highly constrained autonomy despite nominal legal protections (Võ & Laking, 2020). Moreover, performance funding schemes incentivise conformity, reducing faculty control over curriculum and fostering “chilling effects” on innovation (Lanford, 2021). Accreditation processes, though intended for quality assurance, may also restrict freedom. While standardisation had a surprisingly positive impact, accreditation processes negatively affected both academic freedom and learning quality in Bangladeshi private universities (Ashraf et al., 2025). Legislative interventions also present risks. For instance, the Prevent Duty in the UK and HB-233 in Florida have raised concerns about surveillance and intimidation. British academics often hesitate to report radicalisation due to fear of infringing free speech (Pearce et al., 2023). In the U.S., HB-233 was perceived by many as damaging morale, fostering self-censorship, and intimidating faculty (Groton et al., 2023).

Internal factors

Positive internal factors include inclusive classroom cultures that value open dialogue and academic risk-taking. In classrooms, discussion-based pedagogy, particularly in theoretical disciplines, supports freedom of expression (Zain-Al-Dien, 2016; Finley & Tiede, 2025). Institutional recognition of academic rights, strong governance processes, and inclusive academic climates also contribute positively (Pham, 2023). Participatory governance has been proposed to align institutional priorities with academic values (Mohammed & Cai, 2024). In Bangladesh, standardisation was unexpectedly linked to increased academic freedom, while accreditation

processes had a negative effect (Ashraf et al., 2025). Similarly, decentralised control over research and finance supported autonomy in Vietnamese universities (Võ & Laking, 2020). Negative internal forces often manifest as managerialism, administrative silence, or internal censorship. Neoliberal logic suppresses controversial teaching in favour of "safe" institutional images (Godfrey, 2023). Fewer than 40% of U.S. faculty believed that administrators would support them in contentious situations (Finley & Tiede, 2025). Organisational pressures, such as fear of reputational damage, lead to widespread self-censorship, avoidance of controversial topics, and increased emotional distress (Hoepner, 2019). Internal hierarchies and management styles also contribute to constraints. Faculty in Lebanon face institutional discrimination tied to religious and political affiliations (Joudieh et al., 2024). Similarly, faculty in Vietnamese universities report being subject to rigid staffing structures controlled by the Ministry of Education (Võ & Laking, 2020). This uncertainty often impacts academics' willingness to assert their rights effectively, highlighting the need for clearer institutional communication and guidance on academic freedom (Pham, 2023; Al-Saeed, 2021). In sensitive research areas, informal silencing by peers revealed how academic freedom could be constrained by institutional norms and emotional responses, even without formal censorship (Hoepner, 2019).

Consequences of losing academic freedom

The erosion of academic freedom can have cascading effects across institutions and societies. Key consequences include the compromise of truth-seeking, weakened institutional reputations, stagnation in intellectual progress, and the inability to nurture talent (Pham, 2023). Performance pressures also diminish collaborative governance and scholarly exploration (Lanford, 2021). The loss of academic freedom is closely linked to demoralisation and anxiety among faculty. Academics targeted by HB-233 legislation have reported feelings of fear, anger, and existential threat (Groton et al., 2023). Faculty have expressed concern over being "demonised" and losing trust in their institutions. Many choose to self-censor out of fear of student complaints or institutional backlash. The boundary of acceptable research often becomes visible only after it has been crossed, leaving scholars unprotected despite adhering to academic norms (Hoepner, 2019). This form of silencing weakens academic integrity and devalues scholarly contributions. Beyond the individual level, institutional credibility is also at stake. When universities are perceived as instruments of political or economic agendas, they risk losing legitimacy as producers of knowledge (Svartefoss, 2020). Consequences may include public distrust, declining enrolment, and loss of international standing.

Restrictions on academic freedom have substantial implications for both society and educational quality. Limited freedom threatens innovation, critical thinking, and intellectual diversity, undermining the university's role as a driver of democratic discourse and societal progress (Pham, 2023; Lanford, 2021). Furthermore, institutional competition intensified by performance-based funding negatively affects educational quality, curbs academics' intrinsic motivation, and restricts open intellectual exchange (Lanford, 2021; Ashraf et al., 2025).

Institutional efforts to safeguard academic freedom

While threats persist, various institutions have taken proactive steps to protect academic freedom, with mixed results. In India, the role of the UGC as an intermediary body helps buffer universities from direct governmental influence (Lo, 2023). In the UK, some universities have incorporated academic freedom into formal policy documents, though awareness and enforcement remain limited (Prelec et al., 2022). Grassroots resistance is also significant. In Fiji, when a student's scholarship was revoked for political reasons, student journalists and lecturers used media exposure to pressure the institution, resulting in the scholarship's reinstatement (Craddock, 2015). Similarly, student affairs professionals in U.S. community colleges responded to hate speech by developing equity training and peer support networks (Kealoha, 2023). However, not all efforts are effective. Many university responses to hate speech have been criticised as performative and insufficient (Garces et al., 2022). Students reported that institutional neutrality often protected dominant groups at the expense of vulnerable ones. The perceived lack of care led to distrust and emotional burnout among those trying to fill the gaps (Lo, 2023).

Tensions between academic freedom and other values

Academic freedom frequently conflicts with institutional demands for civility, inclusion, and control. Tensions have been documented between the creation of “safe spaces” and the need for “better spaces” that allow challenge and intellectual discomfort (Godfrey, 2023). While protection from harm is important, some faculty advocate for environments where critical debate and confrontation are possible. Civility itself may be used to suppress dissent; well-intentioned calls for politeness can be repurposed to discourage critique and resistance (Cortina et al., 2019). Debates surrounding hate speech and free expression remain particularly complex. Students of colour have expressed support for freedom of speech, but reject institutional neutrality when it fails to address structural harm (Garces et al., 2022). These tensions cannot be resolved through binary thinking; rather, academic freedom must be continually negotiated in relation to ethical responsibility and institutional justice (Wang, 2020; Shipley, 2020).

In sensitive research areas, social norms and emotional responses can act as informal censors. Moral discomfort often prompts individuals to silence or punish research that challenges dominant beliefs—particularly in politicised domains such as public health (Hoepner, 2019). These responses tend to bypass formal review and rely instead on social pressure, undermining open scholarly exchange.

Research implications

The five studies discussed below are among the few that explicitly address these dynamics, and their implications reveal that both internal institutional factors and external sociopolitical pressures significantly shape the state of academic freedom in higher education. Within universities, challenges often arise from governance structures, administrative attitudes, and internal policies. A lack of understanding among university administrators—particularly those without academic backgrounds—creates a disconnect between institutional policy and the principles of academic freedom, especially in relation to social media regulation (Diamond, 2017). Proposals for decentralised governance, improved transparency, and greater academic involvement in decision-making aim to reinforce institutional autonomy and align policies with core academic values (Mohammed & Cai, 2024). In addition, faculty wellbeing and freedom of expression are undermined by hierarchical power structures and insufficient support mechanisms, necessitating greater attention to civil discourse and psychological safety in politically charged contexts (Finley & Tiede, 2025).

Outside the university, academic freedom is increasingly shaped by societal and ideological forces that can override institutional protections. Despite adherence to academic standards, researchers whose work challenges dominant political or cultural narratives may face institutional silencing due to external pressures such as corporate partnerships or national image concerns (Hoepner, 2019). Meanwhile, universities are called to adopt proactive, anti-racist responses to hate speech and systemic discrimination, not through neutral statements but through inclusive curricula, direct messaging, and robust support for affected student groups (Garces et al., 2022). These findings collectively underscore the need for institutions to strengthen academic freedom not only through internal reform but also by taking a socially responsible stance in the broader public sphere.

Future research directions

Inside the university

Future research on academic freedom within higher education institutions should be developed along two key dimensions: individual experiences and organisational structures, with additional focus on topic-specific sub-directions. At the individual level, scholars should explore how demographic variables—such as age, gender, educational background, cultural experience, and career stage—influence perceptions of academic freedom and social media use among faculty and students (Diamond, 2017; Al-Saeed, 2021). Moreover, identity-based power dynamics and institutional hierarchies may impact faculty members' capacity for open expression and psychological safety within politically charged environments (Finley & Tiede, 2025). From a theoretical perspective, future research could adopt frameworks such as Self-Determination Theory to better understand the interplay between individual autonomy and institutional control (Ashraf et al., 2025). Students, as integral members of the academic community, should also be

more prominently included in these discussions. Despite being among the most active users of digital platforms, their concerns about privacy, institutional surveillance, and freedom of expression remain underexplored (Diamond, 2017).

At the organisational level, future studies should examine how institutional governance practices shape the protection and limitation of academic freedom. Decentralised models of governance, increased faculty participation, and greater transparency and accountability are frequently recommended as mechanisms to promote academic autonomy and safeguard academic values (Mohammed & Cai, 2024). Furthermore, the pursuit of international rankings and accreditation may inadvertently undermine educational quality and academic independence. Research should critically evaluate how institutions can balance performance-based incentives with the core mission of higher education (Ashraf et al., 2025). Within this context, three specific sub-areas merit further attention. First, the governance of social media presents legal and ethical challenges in balancing risk management with rights-based protections (Diamond, 2017). Second, the influence of accreditation and ranking systems on institutional autonomy requires ongoing scrutiny (Ashraf et al., 2025). Third, universities' structural responses to systemic racism and hate speech—through inclusive curricula, clear policy messaging, and support for marginalised students—should be investigated as part of a broader inquiry into equity-driven academic governance (Garces et al., 2022). Additionally, comparative studies on public versus private, for-profit versus non-profit, and vocational versus comprehensive institutions would help reveal systemic factors that either facilitate or constrain academic freedom (Diamond, 2017; Pham, 2023).

Outside the university

At the external level, future research on academic freedom should address both structural influences and ideological-cultural risks. Structurally, scholars have noted that academic freedom is increasingly compromised by pressures from external political forces, including governments, media, and public opinion. Academics may face institutional silencing despite adhering to scholarly standards if their work challenges dominant political or social narratives (Hoepner, 2019). Moreover, universities' efforts to maintain public image, secure industrial partnerships, or align with national development goals may result in the erosion of academic values. Further research is needed to understand how these external interests reshape university priorities and impact the conditions under which academic work is conducted (Hoepner, 2019). In addition, the role of funding models—particularly their impact on research equity in the humanities—should be critically assessed. The increasing marketisation of higher education may exacerbate resource imbalances and undermine the academic independence of disciplines engaged in critical inquiry (Pham, 2023).

In terms of ideological and cultural risks, academic freedom is subject to more diffuse yet potent challenges arising from globalisation and political polarisation. Internationalisation, particularly

in fields such as International Relations and Area Studies, may expose scholars to heightened risks when collaborating with authoritarian states or conducting politically sensitive research. Yet, there is limited understanding of whether internationalisation exerts consistent effects across different educational systems and political regimes (Prelec et al., 2022). Equally, the relationship between domestic concerns—such as what some scholars refer to as *cancel culture*—and anxieties over foreign repression remains poorly understood. Drawing on Prelec et al. (2022), this term is used here not as a neutral descriptor, but as part of a broader discourse that highlights ideological divisions within and between academic communities. Whether such concerns arise from similar ideological frameworks or reflect distinct scholarly traditions remains an open question. Future research should therefore adopt a comparative, cross-national approach to examining how academic freedom is threatened, negotiated, and defended across different institutional and geopolitical contexts.

4. Discussion

Gaps identified in literature

Some studies suggest several significant research gaps regarding academic freedom in a digital and global academic landscape. There is a notable lack of understanding among university administrators about academic freedom in the context of social media, particularly compared to faculty members' interpretations (Diamond, 2017). A gap between theoretical frameworks and practical policy-making was identified, with calls for models that integrate legal, institutional, and cultural dimensions (Svartefoss, 2020). The more subtle, institutionalised forms of academic silencing remain under-researched, as current studies tend to focus on high-profile controversies (Hoepner, 2019). Furthermore, there is limited knowledge about the relationship between concerns over foreign authoritarianism and domestic threats like cancel culture (Prelec et al., 2022). Demographic and disciplinary comparisons were also found to be lacking, limiting nuanced understandings of academic experiences (Godfrey, 2023). Some research has underscored the need to explore how race, disability, misogyny, sexism, gender and disciplinary identity interact with institutional practices in shaping perceptions of academic freedom (Ruan, 2021). Finally, the exclusion of students, staff, and administrators from many studies restrict the development of inclusive and effective policy (Groton et al., 2023).

Limitations of current studies

Seven studies explicitly address limitations, revealing various factors that constrain the reliability and generalisability of their findings. Several works relied on narrow samples or limited institutional scope. For instance, one study used a researcher-developed questionnaire and focused only on Egyptian universities, which limits both validity and applicability (Diamond,

2017). Another study reported a low response rate from just four out of eleven universities, reducing the representativeness of its sample (Groton et al., 2023). One study concentrated solely on extreme cases of public backlash and largely excluded academics from non-Western contexts, limiting global relevance (Hoepner, 2019). The complex, interdisciplinary nature of higher education was also identified as a barrier to generalisation, with additional data potentially revealing contradictory themes (Godfrey, 2023). In some cases, such as research into internationalisation and academic risk, small subgroup sizes hindered the robustness of conclusions (Prelec et al., 2022). Another study, while highlighting gender and institutional identity issues, acknowledged that its small sample size limited generalisability (Ruan, 2021). In addition, few studies adequately capture subtle forms of academic suppression or explore the nuanced interactions between domestic and international influences on academic freedom (Hoepner, 2019; Prelec et al., 2022). What is more, research often focuses on single-country or single-institution cases, restricting broader applicability and comparative insights (Al-Saeed, 2021; Vö & Laking, 2020). Finally, one study noted that disciplinary variation and external performance pressures complicate the interpretation of academic freedom and called for replication using broader datasets (Svartefoss, 2020).

Reflection on preliminary findings

Recent literature has made valuable progress in exploring academic freedom and freedom of expression within digital and globalised contexts, offering important conceptual foundations. These insights provide a useful baseline upon which further research can build to address remaining conceptual and practical challenges. The current body of research often suffers from limited sampling frames, fragmented theoretical models, and the consistent exclusion of key stakeholder groups such as administrators and visiting scholars (Waiton, 2020). These omissions not only weaken the representativeness of existing studies but also restrict the applicability and inclusivity of policy recommendations. Furthermore, there is a tendency in the field to focus on overt, highly publicised cases, while more subtle and institutionalised forms of academic suppression remain under-researched. In areas such as transnational risk, identity politics, and governance responses, much of the existing literature remains largely descriptive, lacking critical engagement across disciplines and socio-political contexts. Future studies must move beyond normative definitions of academic freedom to investigate how it operates within structurally unequal systems and shifting power relations (Sridhar, 2024).

In parallel, it is important to reflect critically on the methodological limitations of the current scoping review. The review was conducted using four primary academic databases. Although supplementary searches of websites and grey literature were undertaken, the total number of relevant sources retrieved was relatively limited. This may be partly due to the keyword strategy, which may not have captured the full scope of the field, particularly given the exploratory nature of the study. Additionally, the use of Python-based topic modelling during the data analysis stage, while useful for identifying initial themes, focused mainly on article conclusions and

summaries, which may have overlooked nuanced details and contextual insights. The scope of this study was also closely tied to our institutional context, with an emphasis on internal governance and university-level policy issues. As a result, broader socio-political dynamics and ideological structures influencing academic freedom were not extensively addressed. While this narrower focus allowed for practical relevance, it necessarily limits the generalisability of the findings to other contexts.

5. Implications for future research

Drawing on insights from the literature, the internal–external institutional divide, and reflections on this review’s methodology, several key directions emerge for future research on academic freedom:

(1) Deepen inquiry within the university context:

- Explore how governance structures, policy-making, and individual academic experiences shape academic freedom.
- Pay particular attention to students, underrepresented disciplines, and marginalised academic groups, especially in digital learning and communication environments.
- Investigate how institutions navigate tensions between student demands for inclusive and safe environments and academic calls for freedom of expression and open debate.
- Examine how these competing values—EDI and academic freedom—are differently experienced and interpreted across diverse university stakeholder groups.
- Focus on three institutional sub-themes:
 - Social media governance and the role of 'pile-ons' in shaping or policing academic freedom
 - Accreditation and ranking systems and their impact on academic autonomy
 - Inclusive policy frameworks that support equity and diversity in academic settings

(2) Address broader external and geopolitical influences:

- Internal academic practices are shaped by external societal and political pressures; these must be studied in tandem.
- Investigate how academic freedom is affected by:
 - Internationalisation and cross-border research collaborations
 - Transnational repression and authoritarian influence
 - Ideological trends such as “cancel culture”

- Future research should adopt comparative, cross-national approaches to understand how academic freedom is defined, practised, and contested in different political and cultural settings.

(3) Evolve methodological approaches:

- Qualitative research—including single case studies—remains essential, offering depth, contextual understanding, and insight grounded in credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.
- At the same time, expanding the methodological toolkit can enhance the field’s capacity to engage with diverse research questions. This may include:
 - Mixed-methods designs for broader insight
 - Quantitative approaches to test hypotheses and strengthen empirical foundations
- These methods can support:
 - The development and validation of theoretical frameworks
 - Improved comparability and generalisability across institutions and contexts
 - A more robust evidence base for future policy and institutional decision-making

By addressing these dimensions together—internal dynamics, external pressures, and methodological diversification—future research can contribute to a more comprehensive and practically grounded understanding of academic freedom in today’s increasingly complex and contested higher education landscape.

6. Conclusion

This study provides a structured overview of the literature on academic freedom using a scoping review approach. The analysis included trends in publication year, country distribution, research methods, data types, and tools used. Thematic findings revealed how academic freedom is experienced and shaped by both internal factors—such as governance, institutional culture, and policy—and external pressures, including political interference and international dynamics. The review also identified key consequences of restricted academic freedom, tensions with other institutional values, and various institutional efforts to protect it. These insights informed a set of research implications and future directions, organised around challenges within the university and broader societal influences.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first scoping review to focus specifically on academic freedom and freedom of expression in the context of higher education institutions. By applying thematic analysis, the study not only synthesises the dominant topics currently addressed in the literature but also identifies key gaps that remain underexplored. As such, it provides a structured foundation for future research and offers a valuable point of reference for scholars and

practitioners aiming to better understand and respond to the evolving challenges surrounding academic freedom and expression of freedom.

Building on these insights, the next stage of the project will involve more targeted empirical research—potentially through case studies, surveys, or interviews—with a focus on institutional practices, stakeholder perspectives, and policy implementation. Further theoretical development will also be pursued, drawing on the identified gaps to formulate testable hypotheses and conceptual models. Ultimately, the goal is to contribute not only to academic knowledge but also to practical frameworks that support the protection and responsible governance of academic freedom in diverse institutional and political contexts.

Statement:

I acknowledge that I used ChatGPT-4o to assist with grammar and syntax refinement during the writing process. However, the design of the study, literature search, data selection, and thematic analysis for the scoping review were conducted independently by the author without the involvement of any AI tools.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Scoping review protocol

1. Title

A Scoping Review of Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression in Higher Education (2015–2025)

2. Background and Rationale

Academic freedom and freedom of expression are fundamental to the integrity of higher education. Academic freedom ensures that scholars can engage in open inquiry, critical thinking, and the dissemination of knowledge without undue interference. However, these freedoms have faced increasing challenges over the past decade due to political, social, and institutional pressures. There is a growing need to systematically map the existing academic literature on these issues to understand the key concerns studied, the research methodologies employed, and the major conclusions drawn. This scoping review aims to identify and synthesise peer-reviewed academic research on academic freedom and freedom of expression in higher education between 2015 and 2025, providing an overview of key themes, methodological approaches, and findings.

3. Scoping Questions

This review seeks to answer the following questions:

From the job description:

- What are the key issues studied in relation to academic freedom and freedom of expression in higher education from 2015 to 2025?
- What research designs, methodologies, and tools have been used to study these issues?
- What are the key findings and conclusions drawn from this body of research?

*From *The Times Higher Education academic freedom survey 2024*

- What factors facilitate or hinder the realisation of academic freedom and freedom of expression?
- What are the differences in attitudes and experiences of academic freedom and freedom of expression among different groups, like academic staff (with and without permanent contracts), and students
- How are the boundaries of academic freedom defined?
 - Under what circumstances might academic expression be restricted by law, academic institutions, or social norms?

- What factors (e.g., legal frameworks, institutional policies, societal expectations) influence the extent of academic freedom?

4. Methodology

4.1 Framework and Guidelines

A scoping review is a preliminary assessment of the potential size and scope of available research literature, aiming to identify the nature and extent of research evidence, often including ongoing studies (Grant & Booth, 2009). While some may use the term ‘scoping review’ to describe a rapid, less systematic examination of the literature, others, such as Arksey and O’Malley (2005), use it to refer to what are commonly known as ‘systematic maps’—reviews that outline the landscape of a research field. As defined by Levac et al. (2010), scoping studies are particularly valuable for mapping areas of research where the evidence is not yet fully developed.

The rationale for conducting a scoping review is to explore the breadth of existing literature and identify key research gaps. This type of review provides a valuable mapping of the current evidence base, rather than undertaking a detailed critical appraisal or synthesis of findings (Munn et al., 2018). Scoping reviews are particularly useful in areas where the literature is complex or not yet comprehensively reviewed, helping to inform future research directions. According to Gough et al. (2017), scoping reviews offer more flexibility compared to systematic reviews, particularly in terms of methodology and scope. While not always mandatory, many academic journals recommend registering a protocol for scoping reviews to ensure transparency in the research process. The PRISMA-ScR guidelines, developed specifically for scoping reviews, suggest using a protocol but allow for greater methodological flexibility compared to the more rigorous requirements of systematic reviews.

Arksey and O’Malley’s (2005) framework is a widely recognised methodology for conducting scoping reviews, providing a structured approach to explore the breadth of research in a given field. It comprises six key stages: (a) identifying the research question, (b) identifying relevant studies, (c) study selection, (d) charting the data, (e) collating, summarising, and reporting the results, and (f) an optional consultation stage with stakeholders. The framework emphasises flexibility and adaptability, enabling researchers to map a wide range of evidence without the need for exhaustive systematic evaluation. Further recommendations by Levac et al. (2010) enhanced the framework by stressing the importance of clearly linking the purpose and research question, ensuring feasibility while maintaining comprehensiveness, employing an iterative approach for selecting studies and extracting data, and incorporating both numerical summaries and qualitative thematic analysis. The final stages focus on considering the implications of findings for policy, practice, and future research. Although the consultation stage is optional, it is recommended as a key component for knowledge translation and increasing the practical relevance of the review. This framework is particularly valuable for organising complex topics, such as indigenous scoping or narrative reviews, and for informing the development of environmental scans or assessment frameworks.

Arksey and O'Malley Framework Stage	Description
1: Identifying the research question	Identifying the research question provides the roadmap for subsequent stages. Relevant aspects of the question must be clearly defined as they have ramifications for search strategies. Research questions are broad in nature as they seek to provide breadth of coverage.
2: Identifying relevant studies	This stage involves identifying the relevant studies and developing a decision plan for where to search, which terms to use, which sources are to be searched, time span, and language. Comprehensiveness and breadth is important in the search. Sources include electronic databases, reference lists, hand searching of key journals, and organizations and conferences. Breadth is important; however, practicalities of the search are as well. Time, budget and personnel resources are potential limiting factors and decisions need to be made upfront about how these will impact the search.
3: Study selection	Study selection involves <i>post hoc</i> inclusion and exclusion criteria. These criteria are based on the specifics of the research question and on new familiarity with the subject matter through reading the studies.
4: Charting the data	A data-charting form is developed and used to extract data from each study. A 'narrative review' or 'descriptive analytical' method is used to extract contextual or process oriented information from each study.
5: Collating, summarizing, and reporting results	An analytic framework or thematic construction is used to provide an overview of the breadth of the literature but not a synthesis. A numerical analysis of the extent and nature of studies using tables and charts is presented. A thematic analysis is then presented. Clarity and consistency are required when reporting results.
6: Consultation (optional)	Provides opportunities for consumer and stakeholder involvement to suggest additional references and provide insights beyond those in the literature.

Figure 1 A framework for conducting a scoping review

4.2 Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion Criteria:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 1 Jan 2015 and 28 Feb 2025.
- Studies focusing on supporting academic freedom and/or freedom of expression within the higher/tertiary education sector.
- Empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods).
- Studies published in English.
- Open access
- full text

Exclusion Criteria:

- Studies that focus on freedom of expression outside higher education contexts.
- Non-peer-reviewed sources (to be included separately in the grey literature search).
- Articles published before 1 Jan 2015 or after 28 Feb 2025.

4.3 Search Strategy

A systematic search will be conducted in the following academic databases:

- Web of Science
- Scopus
- ERIC
- Google Scholar (for supplementary searches)

Table 1 Keywords for the academic freedom project

“Freedom”	“Support”	“Higher education”
“Academic freedom”	“Promote”	
“Academic freedom of speech”	“Uphold”	
“Freedom of expression”	“Protect”	“Universit*”
“Freedom of speech as an academic”		
“Free expression”		
“Scholarly autonomy”		“College*”

“Intellectual freedom”		
“Knowledge production”		“Third level education”

Boolean search terms like: "academic freedom" OR "freedom of expression") AND ("higher education" OR "universities" OR "colleges"

4.4 Study Selection, Screening, Analysis and Synthesis

The study selection process is facilitated by Covidence, an online tool for systematic review management. Initial screening involves title and abstract screening within Covidence, followed by a full-text review conducted by two independent reviewers to ensure accuracy and minimise bias. Data extraction is also conducted in Covidence, using a structured extraction form to capture essential details, including service or programme type, implementation processes, outcomes, and any barriers and facilitators encountered. Data analysis includes a thematic analysis to identify key themes across policies and programmes.

4.5 Reporting and Presentation

Findings will be summarised using a narrative synthesis, supported by tables and figures.

5. Web Search Protocol for Grey Literature

5.1 Objective

To identify grey literature related to academic freedom and freedom of expression in higher education.

5.2 Sources and Search Strategy

Sources include:

- Government and institutional websites (e.g., UNESCO, U.K. Office for Students, Universities Scotland).
- Think tanks and NGOs (e.g., Scholars at Risk, Council for Higher Education Accreditation).
- Higher education policy reports (e.g., OECD, World Bank).

5.3 Screening and Selection Criteria

- Reports must be published between 1st Jan 2015 and 28 Feb 2025.
- Must focus on higher education institutions.
- Must be from credible sources.
- Must provide insights into key issues related to the research questions.

6. Deliverables

1. Scoping Review Report (Academic Literature)
2. Grey Literature Search Report
3. PRISMA Flow Diagram

Appendix II: Search records

<i>Number</i>	<i>Database</i>	<i>Results</i>
1	Web of science	557
2	Scopus	1474
3	ERIC	199
4	Google Scholar	88
<i>Total</i>		2318

Appendix III: Data extraction form/template

Study ID

Lead authors contact details

APA citation

Published year

Title

Country

Research question(s)

Aims/objectives

Methodology

1. Qualitative
2. Quantitative
3. Mixed method

Research design

1. Randomised controlled trial
2. Non-randomised experimental study
3. Cohort study
4. Cross sectional study
5. Case control study
6. Systematic review
7. Qualitative research
8. Prevalence study
9. Case series
10. Case report
11. Diagnostic test accuracy study
12. Clinical prediction rule
13. Economic evaluation
14. Text and opinion
15. Delphi study
16. Other

Data category

1. Textual
2. Narrative
3. Observational
4. Primary numerical data
5. Secondary numerical data
6. Mixed
7. Visual
8. Other

Tools for data collection

1. Interviews (structured/semi-structured)
2. Focus groups
3. Ethnographic observation
4. Document analysis
5. Questionnaires and surveys

- | | |
|-----|-----------------------------|
| 6. | Standardised measure |
| 7. | Field notes |
| 8. | Social media scraping |
| 9. | Website/blog/forum analysis |
| 10. | Online behavioural tracking |
| 11. | Photo/video collection |
| 12. | Visual documentation |
| 13. | Other |

Key findings

Key conclusions/discussions

Appendix IV: Grey literature search mini report

1. Background & protocol review

Based on the previously established protocol for grey literature retrieval, I initially conducted a very basic search by entering keywords directly into Google. However, upon re-evaluating this approach, I realised that such a broad and unsystematic strategy might not yield sufficiently relevant or rigorous results. Therefore, I revised and optimised my search strategy to align more closely with the protocol's objectives.

2. Optimised search strategy

Following the protocol, I conducted targeted searches across seven pre-selected sources of grey literature, focusing on policy and advocacy materials related to academic freedom. These sources included:

- Government and institutional websites:

- UNESCO
- University and College Union (UCU)
- U.K. Office for Students

- Think tanks and NGOs:

- Scholars at Risk
- Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)

- Higher education policy organisations:

- OECD
- World Bank

The search string for each site was structured using advanced Google operators, as follows:

site:[domain] "academic freedom" filetype:pdf after:2014 before:2026

The number of results reviewed per site was adjusted based on the quantity and relevance of the materials encountered:

- Top 20 results: For sites with abundant and varied results
- Top 10 or top 5 results: For sites with fewer but more targeted documents

3. Websites and search parameters

Table 1 Search results from different websites

<i>Source</i>	<i>Search strategy</i>	<i>Number</i>
---------------	------------------------	---------------

<i>United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)</i>	top 10 related results	10
<i>University and College Union (UCU)</i>	top 20 related results	20
<i>Office for Students (OfS)</i>	top 20 related results	20
<i>Scholars at Risk</i>	top 20 related results	20
<i>Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)</i>	top 10 related results	10
<i>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)</i>	top 10 related results	10
<i>World Bank</i>	top 5 related results	5
<i>Total</i>		95

4. Preliminary filtering reflection

During the initial browsing phase, I conducted a relevance screening based on the titles and content snippets, which is simple but not useful. The filtering process aimed to retain documents that were closely aligned with the central themes of:

- Academic freedom
- Freedom of expression in higher education
- Institutional autonomy and policy frameworks

While this preliminary filtering was subjective, it was necessary to manage the volume and focus the dataset for further analysis. I acknowledge that such subjective screening may introduce some bias; however, it serves as a foundational step for more detailed evaluation later in the process. specific results are listed in the Excel file “*The list of grey literature*”.

Appendix V: List of included studies

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