THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

Academic Freedom Typology

2026

Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression Working Group

Typology of challenges

1. Overview

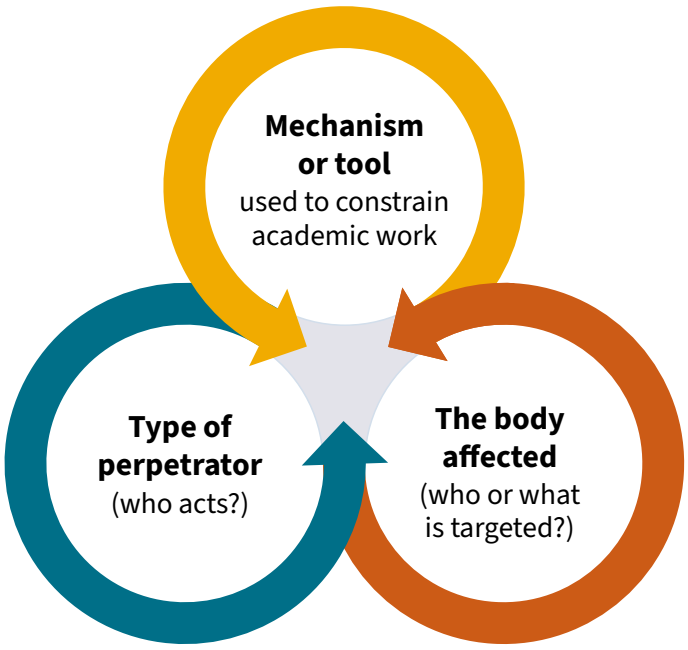
This abridged document brings together a working typology of challenges to academic freedom and institutional autonomy, developed from recent incidents across several jurisdictions. The typology is intended to be used alongside the master dataset of cases, as a shared vocabulary for coding and comparison rather than as a closed theory.

Each incident is organised along three intersecting dimensions:

- **the mechanism or tool** used to constrain academic work;
- **the type of perpetrator** (who acts?); and
- **the body affected** (who or what is targeted?).

Taken together, these dimensions allow incidents to be viewed either as discrete harms to individuals, institutions or practices, or as nodes in a wider pattern of governance, funding and security measures.

Intersecting Dimensions of Constraints and Harms



2. Mechanisms: how academic freedom is constrained

2.1 Direct physical and legal repression

- Killings, violence and disappearances: assaults, shootings, bomb threats, vandalism and clashes on or around campuses.
- Wrongful imprisonment and prosecution: arrest, detention and trial under broad security or public order laws for non-violent expression or research.
- Loss of position and expulsion: dismissals, non-renewals, stand downs and expulsions linked to disfavoured teaching, research or speech.
- Improper travel restrictions: visa denials, entry bans and exit controls used to punish or chill academic work.

2.2 Systemic and policy-based interference

- Legislative and administrative measures eroding autonomy: laws and regulatory changes that centralise political control over governance, curriculum, appointment and funding.
- Political and ideological control or censorship: topic bans, loyalty expectations, red lines in the curriculum and guidance that narrows the range of permissible discourse.
- Funding as a lever of control: targeted cuts, conditional grants and financial penalties used to steer academic agendas or punish institutions and individuals.
- National security instruments: vetting regimes, foreign influence registries and security framing of collaborations that reclassify academic work as a risk.
- Transnational repression: foreign governments surveilling or threatening students and scholars abroad, often through pressure on families or communities.
- Manipulation of information online. Awareness of the risks of LLM misuse.

2.3 Institutional and societal pressures

- Censorship and cancellation of events: postponements, venue downgrades and cancellations justified on security or reputational grounds.
- Online harassment and surveillance: over-monitoring, recording, data tracking and technological tools that chill participation or expression.
- Erosion of institutional autonomy: audit culture, politicised leadership and donor pressure that weaken self-governance and academic decision-making.
- Restrictions on student expression and protest: new protest rules, injunctions, heavy policing, suspensions and expulsions.
- Moral panic and weaponised accusations: the use of labels such as antisemitism, Islamophobia, extremism or hate speech as tools to curtail debate rather than to address genuine harms.
- Influence of private interests: corporatisation and donor leverage shaping programmes, leadership profiles and research agendas.

3. Perpetrators: who does the constraining

3.1 State and government actors

Legislatures, ministries, regulators, police, courts, border agencies and public funding bodies. Their tools include legislation and regulation, arrests and prosecutions, funding leverage, institutional takeovers, security vetting, travel restrictions and transnational pressure.

3.2 Intra university authorities and communities

University systems, structures, and authorities as potential controls. Student organisations, informal peer networks, and individual members of staff and students. They can become perpetrators of constraint through student-on-student or student–staff violence, peer surveillance and reporting, disruption of events and social pressure that induces self-censorship.

Recent cases suggest that states and regulators are increasingly hands-on, institutions act as primary day-to-day enforcers, external actors set agendas from outside, and internal actors police one another horizontally.

3.3 Non-state external actors

Donors, advocacy groups, media ecosystems, extremist networks and hackers. They exert influence through lobbying, public and social media campaigns, threats of funding withdrawal, physical attacks and cyber-attacks.

Typology of Constraints and Harms

Mechanism or tool

- Physical & legal repression
- Policy & regulatory interference
- Institutional & societal pressure

Perpetrator

- Government
- Universities
- External actors
- Internal communities

Body affected

- Individuals
- Institutions
- Academic practice
- Student groups

4. Bodies affected: who or what is targeted

4.1 Individuals

Scholars, students and staff whose safety, liberty or livelihoods are directly affected.

- Threats to safety: violence, intimidation and credible threats.
- Threats to liberty: arrest, prosecution and detention.
- Threats to livelihood: loss of employment, non-renewal of contracts and career damage.
- Threats to mobility: deportation, denial of visas and other restrictions on travel.
- Threats to day-to-day expression: surveillance, harassment and disciplinary pressure.

4.2 Institutions

Universities, faculties, departments and research centres whose autonomy or functioning is constrained.

- Governance: politically driven appointments, restructurings and takeovers.
- Budgets: targeted cuts, financial penalties and loss of core funding.
- Mission: imposed strategic priorities and restrictions on institutional identity or partnerships.
- Autonomy: regulatory sanctions, intrusive oversight and donor leverage.
- External partnerships and collaborations.

4.3 Academic practices and specific fields

Specific disciplines, topics and modes of academic work that are directly reshaped.

- Topic bans and red lines: explicit or implicit limits on what may be researched, taught or debated.
- Compelled narratives: pressure to align with official, institutional or donor-preferred positions.
- Security framing: collaboration, data sharing or critical inquiry recast as a national security risk.
- Event controls: cancellation or downgrading of talks, panels and exhibitions.

4.4 Student groups and expression

Student unions, societies and informal collectives whose collective rights are narrowed.

- Rules and codes of conduct that restrict protest, association and speech.
- Policing and surveillance of demonstrations and meetings.
- Stigma and labelling that delegitimise student activism or particular causes.
- Heavy sanctions such as suspension, expulsion or loss of housing or funding.

Across these categories there is a continuum from physical harm through legal and economic pressure to subtler cultural and procedural tools that constrain dissent and critical inquiry.

5. Cross-cutting 2025 signals

Three system-level trends stand out in the recent material and inform the policy proposals that follow.

- Security framing as a policy solvent: security logics increasingly reframe collaboration and mobility as risk, justifying vetting, registries and funding conditions.
- Immigration enforcement as a speech regulator: deportation and visa tools are used against non-citizen students and scholars associated with activism or disfavoured speech.
- Hardening protest governance: injunctions, bans, disciplinary templates and policing become first rather than last resort responses to campus protest.



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