Academic Freedom Index 2020

Academic freedom is a universal right and fundamental for quality higher education and scientific progress. “There are many self-commitments by states and institutions to uphold and safeguard academic freedom, yet the Academic Freedom Index demonstrates that universities are under pressure in many countries around the world,” said Katrin Kinzelbach from Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU). “Of course, there are major differences between countries, but overall we found that only about 20 percent of the world’s population lives in countries where academic freedom is well protected.”

The Academic Freedom Index (AFI) is the result of a collaboration between researchers in Germany and Sweden, as well as more than 2000 country experts from around the world. “The Academic Freedom Index 2020 covers 175 countries and territories worldwide, which is up from 144 countries in 2019. In a highly collaborative effort, scholars from around the world have assessed an important precondition for their own work: the freedom indispensable for scientific inquiry,” explained Staffan I. Lindberg from the V-Dem Institute in Gothenburg. The expert coded data get aggregated using a custom-built Bayesian measurement model.

From 2019 to 2020, the largest declines in academic freedom levels were observed in Belarus, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, and Zambia. To explain these developments, Ilyas Saliba remarked that “in most of the countries where academic freedom dropped significantly in comparison to 2019, the deterioration can be traced to either novel regulations that limit the freedom to research, teach and publish, or to repressive political acts against pro-democracy movements with a strong base among students and faculty.” Saliba also added that “digital forms of instruction facilitate surveillance and very likely incentivize self-censorship in repressive settings.”

Digging into the data, Janika Spannagel pointed out that, “scholars’ freedom to express themselves on politically salient issues is under great strain – the global average score for this indicator has been dropping steadily since 2013. We believe this can be partly attributed to increasing political polarization in societies around the world.” Furthermore, the data also shows clear deteriorations in campus integrity in individual countries. “This indicator assesses the extent to which campuses are free from surveillance or security infringements. For example, between 2019 and 2020, campus integrity dropped sharply in Belarus and also in Poland.” The Gambia, on the other hand, is a country on a positive trajectory. “The AFI indicator with the highest score for the Gambia is scholars’ freedom to collaborate and to disseminate their findings – this is a very encouraging development,” said Spannagel.

The detailed data that makes up the aggregate Academic Freedom Index is available online after 10 March and can also be accessed using online visualization tools. The data can be used by scholars for further studies on academic freedom, but also by university leaders, research funders and policymakers to inform science and higher education policy, as well as for risk management strategies and daily operational decisions on where to take extra safeguarding measures against infringements.

Background
The AFi was jointly developed by researchers from Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, the V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg and the Global Public Policy Institute, working in close cooperation with the Scholars at Risk Network. The Academic Freedom Index provides global time-series data (1900–2020) on national levels of academic freedom. It is compiled from five indicators, each measuring a different dimension of academic freedom: (1) freedom to research and teach, (2) freedom of academic exchange and dissemination, (3) institutional autonomy, (4) campus integrity, and (5) freedom of academic and cultural expression.

Date for Press Briefing
On Thursday, 11.03.2021 at 14:00-15:00 CET / 09:00-10:00 EST there will be an online press briefing featuring a short presentation of the key findings in English. Subsequently, researchers from the three institutions involved will answer questions from participants. A presentation and discussion in German will follow at 15:30 CET. If you are interested in attending the press briefing, please follow the links below to register in advance:

English: https://fau.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJIkcO2tpzgtEtZEAsJ0WQPQ88BWtk6foALG

German: https://fau.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJ0qceGurDGkpG9G6fpuJtg2Ax4Fratl-rtb

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URL zur Pressemitteilung: http://www.v-dem.net/en/data/data/v-dem-dataset-v11/ The detailed data that makes up the aggregate Academic Freedom Index
URL zur Pressemitteilung: https://www.v-dem.net/en/online-graphing/ Online visualization tools