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Far right and academic freedom

# Academic freedom under attack

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**Growing attacks on academic freedom are an aspect of the rise of the far right and authoritarianism that does not always get enough attention outside the university sector. What are the various ways this threat plays out?**

Under-funding and ongoing marketisation of universities have reduced staff time for research and scholarship; they have destroyed collegiality in academic governance and have produced a managerial layer without commitment to academic and educational values. Far-right politicians target universities as sectors of independent, critical thinking. They would prefer a sector which trains students for technocratic jobs, but does not encourage them to think.

Authoritarian regimes endeavour to clamp down on academic freedom both within their own countries and abroad.

In this context it is useful to look at some recent events in the sector, which are indicators of how academic freedom is under threat and how its defence is being addressed within the trade union movement.

## Conference on academic freedom

Academic freedom refers to the right of academics to study, teach and research freely in their academic subject areas. It is more specific than freedom of speech. It is about the role of universities in contributing to the advancement of knowledge. One important component of academic freedom is that university staff should not encounter persecution or lose their jobs because of their academic work. Academic freedom is not simply a privilege of academics; it is a contributor to the creation of free and democratic societies.

On 15 October 2025 there was a conference in London and online about academic freedom. It was organised by UCU (University and College Union) and Education International. UCU is a UK trade union which recruits academic and related staff in post-16 education and has over 120,000 members. Education International is an international trade union federation which represents 33 million education workers in 180 countries and has 375 member institutions. There is a report of the conference on the Education International site.

The first speaker was Haldis Holst, Deputy General Secretary of Education International. She spoke about growing threats to academic freedom. The last World Congress of Education International in 2024 re-affirmed the importance of academic freedom. It is being undermined by erosion of tenure and job security and increasing marketisation. Some subjects in the arts and humanities especially are coming under attack; this is related to attacks by the far-right on diversity, equality and inclusion policies. Moreover, conservative religious groups and right-wing pressure groups are targeting academics. Unions have a vital role to play in defending academic freedom.

Dr Jo Grady, UCU General Secretary, warned of the dangers of a Reform/Tory coalition government in the UK in a few years' time which would shut down some universities. Academic freedom must include freedom from state interference. University managements are exercising growing control over what can be taught and researched. Precarious employment undermines academic freedom. Some university staff have been investigated for organising events about Gaza and there is growing censorship over the question of Palestine.

Robert Quinn, Executive Director of [Scholars at Risk Network](#) spoke about the work of his organisation. Scholars at

Risk supports persecuted academics in many countries, including in conflict zones. He argued there is a need for more training in universities about what academic freedom is and how it can be supported. In some countries there is disparagement of knowledge and truth and research. Some scholars have been harassed by foreign governments who have objected to what they have researched and published about their countries. Defenders of academic freedom need to engage with the public to clarify what academic freedom is and its benefits to society. Academic freedom must be supported by processes around tenure, funding and university governance.

There were questions about sources of threats to academic freedom, what happens when research funding is linked to institutional priorities and how to support free speech on campus, but not hate speech, which can constantly undermine some groups.

Dr Todd Wolfson, President of the American Association of University Professors, made the point that while the recent attacks on academic freedom are obvious, there are longstanding roots to the problem. He talked about how research projects have been axed. For instance, research on Alzheimer's in the USA is being decimated. This means promises to research subjects, who participated because they thought they would help others and find a cure in future, are being broken, and this puts researchers in a difficult ethical position.

Wolfson went on to explain that in the USA there is an alliance between white Christian nationalism and a tech-oligarchy. Trump is using the military to attack his political rivals, who are defined as internal enemies, including the anti-fascist left. The Trump regime is targeting the courts, the press and higher education. Higher education is under attack as an independent force in society, not controlled by government.

These attacks come in a context where higher education has been privatised, with massive tuition fee hikes and precarious employment. In the USA universities are now under pressure to take a loyalty oath to the government. One academic, [Dr Mark Bray](#), who researched anti-fascism had to flee abroad because of death threats. [Forty academics](#) have been among the large numbers of workers sacked for comments after the murder of right-wing US activist Charlie Kirk.

In relation to the UK, researchers from the University of Lincoln reported on [research](#) with UCU members about perceptions of academic freedom. Most thought the situation was getting worse. Increased digital monitoring of work was also experienced as negative and as a threat to academic freedom.

The presentations and discussion at the conference showed that academic freedom is under threat from reactionary governments and political movements, from marketisation of education and from deterioration in working conditions, particularly around job security and workloads.

Since the conference two cases have come to public notice: in one case the sacking of an academic for being a socialist, and in the other the temporary silencing of academic research because of the objection of the Chinese government. In both cases we see the influence of reactionary pressures outside the university and the failure of university leaderships to stand up for academic freedom.

## Tom Alter victimised

The case of Dr Tom Alter is a blatant example of political victimisation of an academic for being a socialist. Tom Alter, a labour historian and a socialist, was dismissed on 13 October 2025 from his tenured post at Texas State University in the USA for political activism. He attended and spoke at a socialist conference where he was filmed by a right-wing

activist, who contacted the university and demanded his dismissal, using selective and edited film evidence of what he said at the conference.

Alter attended this conference in his own time, outside working hours, and so the dismissal also constitutes an attack on the right of university staff to have any time where their activities are not potentially controlled by their employer.

The case is important in several ways. By sacking someone just for speaking at a socialist conference Texas State University is saying that people who hold left-of-centre views have no right to teach and research at a university. The decision also attacks the right of university staff to engage in any political activities as citizens unless their political views coincide with the view of the current US government.

This case shows the spinelessness of university leaders when faced with complaints from far-right agitators from outside the university. It shows their complete disregard for academic freedom and for the rights of university staff as citizens.

There is a strong labour movement [campaign](#) for Tom Alter's reinstatement, supported by the Texas State Employees Union and the American Association of University Professors and various learned societies. There has been a petition and formation of a defence committee. All trade unionists should defend Tom Alter.

## Research silenced

Sheffield Hallam University is a post-92 university in the UK. It was seen as one of the more successful former polytechnics, which were granted university status in 1992. Recent events have damaged the university's reputation.

Since 2012 many universities in the UK are dependent for funding principally on tuition fees paid by students, following the removal of government funding for tuition. This has particularly hit teaching-focused universities, which have less research income than research-intensive universities.

Overseas students, since they pay significantly higher rates of tuition fees, are particularly valued by university managements as customers. UK tuition fees for home-based students are currently capped at £9,535 per year, but international students pay significantly more per year, on a range between £11,000 and £38,000 for undergraduate degrees and £9,000 to £30,000 for postgraduate degrees.

Within the UK higher education sector, there have been significant job losses, including over 15,000 job losses in 2025, and industrial action by unions to defend jobs and educational provision. Sheffield Hallam University has shed around 1000 academic and administrative jobs in the last two years. At the Trade Union Congress – the annual conference of UK trade unions affiliated to the single federation here – in September 2025 the UCU President, Dr Maria Chondrogianni, spoke about a 'jobs massacre' in the sector.

While the post-92 university sector is less well-funded to support research some research does take place there. At Sheffield Hallam University Professor Laura Murphy was researching supply chains and exploitation and ill-treatment of the Uyghurs in China. Forced labour is a major problem in the world today and an entirely valid subject for academic research. Anti-Slavery International estimates that around [50 million people](#) in the world today are trapped in various forms of forced labour.

In February 2025 Professor Murphy was [forced to halt her research for eight months](#) after the university came under pressure from the Chinese government, which objected to this research and threatened to halt recruitment of Chinese students by the university. The research has now resumed, but questions are being asked about the university's complicity in silencing research because a government objected. Again, this is a case where a university leadership failed to stand up for academic freedom.

# Struggles

Universities and university staff trade unions are involved in the struggles against the far-right and against authoritarianism and fascism in a number of ways: defending free speech on Palestine on university campuses; standing up for academic freedom and science; defending the right to research and teach in areas such as the climate emergency, diversity and equality, the politics of the Middle East, the crimes of the powerful, and human rights.

In fascist and other authoritarian regimes academic freedom is removed. Research and teaching are warped to suit government interests. Sometimes authoritarian politicians simply have no time for Philosophy and Sociology and other subjects which encourage students to think critically. Sometimes the far-right agenda is to reduce the overall student population and restrict education for the masses to a narrow technical set of skills related directly to employment. At other times far-right politicians take an active interest in how subjects such as Archaeology and History are taught, using them to create and spread national origin myths. The absence of independent trade unions and lack of free speech under such regimes provides the context in which academic freedom can be removed and universities turned into narrow propaganda and training outfits.

What has happened in the cases of Dr Tom Alter and Professor Laura Murphy indicates the need for strong unions in the university sector and vigorous campaigns to defend academic freedom.

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Source: [Anti\\*capitalist Resistance](#).

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