

Academic Freedom and Human Rights: European and International Perspectives

Course Syllabus 2026/2027

Fall Semester:

Location: Department of Sociology, Via Verdi 26 - Room 20 (Aula Andreatta), II Floor

Mondays and Thursdays 18.00 – 19.30.

Start date: Monday 14th September

End date: Monday 30th November

This course was originally funded as a Jean Monnet Module (2022-2024) *European Societies and Academic Freedom* (ESAF). It has been currently reorganised and developed as part of the 2026-2027 StAR Project 101245000 - *Students at Risk* (Erasmus Cooperation Partnership - Partners: ESU, SAIH, GSF, UniTrento and UniPadova) which investigate the role of academic freedom for students and overall of higher education communities and democratic societies. The StAR Project is funded by the European Commission. Information about the Project can be found here: <https://cjm.unitn.it/esaf/overview>. From the Fall 2026 it is also part of the ERASMUS-EDU StAR Project on Students at Risk (2026-2027), funded by the European Commission.

This course develops in parallel with two StAR Events, which upon completion, will assign students additional Credits (CFU):

1. Webinar Series *Student Academic Freedom: Rights, Violations and Mobilisation in Times of Global Crisis* (Dates: Friday 9/10, 23/10, 6/11, 4/12, 11/12 at 12.00 – 1h). Credits: 1CFU. Enrolment is compulsory and must be carried out online at <http://www.sociologia.unitn.it/100/seminari-di-credito> by Friday the 2nd of October (minimum number of enrolled students for activation: 10 – maximum number: 50).
2. Intensive Winter School Student Academic Freedom, Padova 18-22 January 2027. Eight fully funded places for UniTrento students. To apply: see the call uploaded in Moodle, deadline for application 20th October.

Further information on both events will be provided by the course coordinators at the beginning of the course. Kindly note that if registered/selected, attendance is compulsory for both events.



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StAR Erasmus Partnership – Student At Risk

University Course

‘Academic Freedom and Human Rights: European and International Perspectives’ (135923)

a.a: 2026/2027

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AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The course develops through a collaboration between the Department of Sociology and Social Research and the Faculty of Law. It aims at offering students an interdisciplinary knowledge on academic freedom and human rights, with a focus on university students, both in relation to authoritarian and democratic contexts. Academic freedom refers to freedom of research, freedom to teach/learn, university institutional autonomy and liberty to express ideas in the public sphere. It is critical in European top-quality higher education and in democratic societies generally. It is anchored in the [EU Charter of Fundamental Rights](#) and in the Constitution of most member States. The course will map the historical development of this principle in different geopolitical areas and will reflect on the main violations of academic freedom and on the consequences this holds for universities and for society more broadly. One of the main aims of the course is to combine conceptual-theoretical discussion with advocacy research and campaign on current cases of violations of academic freedom.

By the end of the course students will have acquired (gained knowledge):

1. A detailed and critical knowledge about different interpretations of academic freedom in different times and contexts;
2. A background knowledge of how different disciplines have contributed to the understanding of one of the key principles of higher education and democratic societies;
3. The capacity to discuss the connections between academic freedom, freedom of expressions and other human rights;
4. The capacity to discuss and compare different cases of violations of academic freedom, the way they involve students, researchers, administrative staff and higher education communities more broadly, and how violations differ between authoritarian and democratic contexts;
5. Awareness about the relevance of policies aiming at protecting academic freedom de jure and de facto at local, national and supranational levels;
6. The capacity to link theory and practice through advocacy research.

By the end of the course students are expected to have acquired (practical and communication skills):

7. Propose and discuss their opinions within the class;
8. Organise and present work in progress to other students and in the public sphere;
9. Autonomy in managing group work and in developing an research on the subject and/or advocacy campaign, also in collaboration with students working on similar cases in other universities;

10. Writing a country-based academic freedom report on the studied case;
11. Conducting an interview with an expert.

PREREQUISITES

The course does not have specific prerequisites in terms of knowledge but it requires a good spoken and written knowledge of English. At the same, for students who might feel insecure about their English knowledge, we remind that practising in class is a great way to consolidate their language skills - so, just join the class and try! Before the start/during the first weeks, students are invited to attend the MOOC (Free Online Course) *Dangerous Questions: Why Academic Freedom Matters* by registering to the following link:

<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/event/free-online-course-dangerous-questions-why-academic-freedom-matters/>. The MOOC course offers an excellent introduction to the key concepts and problems related to academic freedom in the contemporary world. Students might also find it useful to engage with some preliminary readings (some PDF will be uploaded in the Moodle community of the course at the end of August):

- Marginson, Simon. 2016. *Higher education and the common good*. Melbourne University Press. Part I: Chapter 1 and 2.
- Williams, Joanna. 2016. *Academic freedom in the age of conformity. Confronting the fear of knowledge*. Palgrave MacMillan. Introduction and Part I.
- Ignatieff, Michael and Roch, Stefan. 2018. *Academic freedom: the global challenge*. Budapest: Central European University.
- Gagliardi, Barbara. 2017. *La tutela amministrativa della libertà accademica*. Milano: Cedam. Capitoli I, II e III.

COURSE CONTENTS (see also the weekly program in Moodle)

The 12 weeks of the course are articulated around three units, which will run parallelly: a Theoretical Unit (henceforth TU), which aims at providing students with an interdisciplinary background on concepts, development and interpretations related to academic freedom and on its legal and institutional protection. A Thematic Unit (henceforth THU) where specific aspects of academic freedom are discussed such as forced migration in higher education, censorship, students mobilisation, biolaw and academic freedom. A Laboratory Unit (LAB) where students work in groups under the supervision of the course coordinators to develop their case-study research on academic freedom (see the course syllabus for further information) and, when chosen, advocacy. LAB aims at familiarising students with researching on academic freedom and with the meanings, ethics, values, strategies and limits of advocacy. Students will draw from the background knowledge and inputs gained during Units A and B to choose the case of violation of academic freedom they wish to work on and will work in small groups of 2-3 students (case-study research) or 5-6 (case-study research + advocacy) to conduct research on the case, design which advocacy actions they want to undertake and organise the drafting of the final report (in English). In this Unit, students will be the main actors and organisers and lecturers will mainly act as facilitator in supporting their initiative.

CLASS ACTIVITIES

The course lasts for 12 weeks. Attendance is of fundamental importance: the organisation, contents and aims of the course requires students to be the 'centre' and the main 'agent' of class activities. Constructing, researching on and conducting an advocacy campaign is a delicate task involving ongoing violations of human rights, and this requires students to be committed to collaborative and active participation to weekly tasks. Said otherwise, this is not a course for free riders! The theoretical and thematic units are structured around 45' lecture and 25-30' debate. The laboratory unit is overall self-managed by the students with the teachers' supervision. Students are welcome to continue their advocacy activities after the end of the course and evaluation, as this offers them the opportunity to collaborate with other advocacy groups in Italy and abroad.

TEACHING METHODS

Class activities will be held in presence, and remote connection is not provided. However, most of the classes for the theoretical and thematic units will be recorded and uploaded in the course Moodle community as a support to the learning activity. We will meet twice a week, and each class will last approximately 90'. The teaching method develops around four main axes:

Interdisciplinary: the multi-disciplinarity of the course is maintained in the theoretical, thematic as well as experiential units. ESAF gathers Trento staff and visiting professors from different disciplinary backgrounds and research experiences into the teaching of an innovative and understudied subject within European universities.

Debate and learn-by-doing approach: all the course units allow students to develop critical thinking and practical skills. To this end, they are actively involved in the assessment of the course progress, in debating with academic and civil society experts, and in engaging themselves with respect to ongoing cases of violation involving threatened scholars and/or students.

Students-centred teaching method: class activities will foster *inquiry-based learning*, mainly through the combination of theoretically and thematically informed advocacy research. Further, *cooperative learning* will be enhanced by the participation of undergraduate and graduate students of different academic maturity and experience, including working-students who can better combine university study with an awareness of the labour market and expectations.

Outreaching skills: The structure and content of the course develops in close collaboration with experts from national/international organisations and civil society organisations. During the design/implementation of the advocacy campaign students will present their work-in-progress to communication and policy experts, who will comment on and orient further students' skills.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA FOR STUDENTS ATTENDING THE COURSE

For students who regularly attend the course the evaluation will be based on

- 1) Written exam (40%)
- 2) Country case-report (50%)
- 3) Attendance and active participation (10%)

Compulsory texts for the written exam (for students attending the course):

Karran, T. 2009. 'Academic Freedom: In Defence of a Universal Ideal' *Studies in Higher Education* 34(2)

Plus, one text chosen from the following:

Ivo di Gennaro et alii. 2022. *Academic Freedom in the European Context*. London: Palgrave.

Fish, S. 2014. *Versions of Academic Freedom*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Gerstmann, E. and Streb, M. (eds) *Academic Freedom at the Dawn of the Century*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Macfarlane, Bruce. 2017. *Freedom to learn*. London: Routledge.

Connelly, J. and Grüttner, M. (eds), *Universities under Dictatorship*, State College, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005.

Group Work: country-case report; student at-risk activism research (StAR); Advocacy Group.

Students will divide themselves into groups (3-5) and each group will work on an assigned task (among the one above). The Report must be submitted 7 days before the chosen date for the written exam, by uploading it in Moodle. Further instruction will be given in class.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA FOR STUDENTS WHO DO NOT ATTEND THE COURSE

Students who cannot commit to regularly attend the course and to actively participate to the laboratory activities are welcome to classes BUT are advised to take the exam as non-attending students. They will select three readings from the list below. The exam will consist of 3 compulsory open questions and one bonus question. For each of the open questions students will receive a score ranging from 0 to 10, whereas for the bonus question a score between 0 and 3.

Choose three article/books among the following list:

For a perspective from politics-sociology and philosophy:

Gerstmann, E. and Streb, M. (eds). 2006. *Academic Freedom at the Dawn of the Century*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Lackey, J. (ed) 2018. *Academic Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

De Gennaro et alii. 2022 (eds). *Academic Freedom in the European Context*. London: Palgrave.

Studies in Higher Education:

Karran, T. 2009. 'Academic Freedom: In Defence of a Universal Ideal' *Studies in Higher Education* 34(2).

Macfarlane, Bruce. 2017. *Freedom to learn*. London: Routledge.

From a law perspective:

Fish, S. 2014. *Versions of Academic Freedom. From Professionalism to Revolution*. Chicago: Chicago University Press

From a historical perspective:

Connelly, J. and Grüttner, M. (eds), *Universities under Dictatorship*, State College, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005.

ERASMUS STUDENTS who take the exam as regularly attending students can submit the country-case report via email. The first possible exam date is January 2026, exact date to be confirmed.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR CURIOUS STUDENTS

AAUP 1915 Declaration on Academic Freedom: <https://www.aaup.org/NR/rdonlyres/A6520A9D-0A9A-47B3-B550-C006B5B224E7/0/1915Declaration.pdf>

AAUP Journal of Academic Freedom: <https://www.aaup.org/reports-publications/journal-academic-freedom>

Scholars at Risk: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/>

Scholars at Risk Media review: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/academic-freedom-media-review/>

Journal of Interrupted Studies: <https://brill.com/view/journals/tjis/tjis-overview.xml#:~:text=The%20Journal%20of%20Interrupted%20Studies%20publishes%20complete%20and%20incomplete%20articles,political%2C%20humanitarian%20and%20environmental%20situations.>

Human Rights Watch: <https://www.hrw.org/>

CEU Observatory on Academic Freedom: <https://elkanacenter.ceu.edu/global-observatory-academic-freedom>

New University in Exile Consortium: <https://newuniversityinexileconsortium.org/>.