

Safeguarding Academic Freedom: A YAT Perspective

1. Introduction

Academic and intellectual freedom emerges from clash of intellectual ideas and requires active commitment from academics, institutions, and society at large. It requires an environment where the members of the academic community feel free to express their thoughts without fear.

For generations, the relationship between universities and government has been governed by mutually beneficial social compact, which, at this time is fraying. As Young Academy of Twente (YAT), we recognize the increasing threats to academic freedom, both in the Netherlands - as highlighted by the [KNAW \(2025\)](#) – and globally, with impacts felt even at elite universities like Caltech. These threats include political interference, intimidation, and internal institutional pressures. As a group of early-career academics, we are particularly affected and feel a responsibility to speak up; this position paper highlights our concerns and thoughts.

2. Why this matters to YAT, but also to society

Importance to YAT:

- Meaningful contribution to society can emerge only through knowledge, which in turn emerges from intellectual and creative ideas. Prerequisites for these are *academic and intellectual freedom*. Universities should aim to create an environment where all members of the community are empowered to speak out about issues that matter to them and support that freedom and ability.
- The journey of early-career researchers is marked by a challenging, yet stimulating, environment of competition and evolving pressures. We're particularly invested in developing sustainable, long-term policies that secure our future and foster an open research culture, free from subtle censorship, gatekeeping, or fear-based self-regulation.
- YAT, with its interdisciplinary and independent position, can help keep this conversation open and constructive.

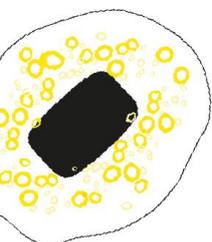
Importance to society:

- Academic freedom ensures that research can challenge assumptions, inform public policy, and address urgent societal challenges without political interference.
- An open academic environment fosters critical thinking and innovation that benefits all citizens, from healthcare advances to technological progress.
- By protecting academic freedom, society ensures diverse perspectives can contribute to a well-functioning democracy and an informed public debate.
- In an era of rapid information dissemination, academic freedom allows scholars to critically evaluate information, separate facts from fiction, and provide reliable analyses to society.

3. YAT's Concerns

The concerns of YAT align with KNAW 2025 and more generally with the global situation, for example in the USA

- **Funding & autonomy:** Navigating the current landscape of theme-driven, externally steered research and budget adjustments requires careful consideration to ensure we continue to cultivate robust environments for **independent thinking**.
- **Intimidation:** Engagement with societal issues (such as climate change, gender equality, or migration) often results in online abuse. For example, women and early-career researchers can be particularly targeted, facing threats via social media, personal emails, and even coordinated harassment campaigns. Support structures are inconsistent across institutions: while some



universities offer counseling and protective measures (like temporary address suppression or relocation of offices), others lack clear policies or fail to respond effectively, leaving researchers feeling unprotected and isolated.

- **International collaboration & screening policies:** Measures regarding knowledge safety should be taken after careful consideration to avoid hindrance to intellectual knowledge.
- **Internal pressures:** Fear of backlash from colleagues, supervisors, or students can lead to self-censorship and avoidance of difficult or controversial topics. A supportive atmosphere is crucial for safeguarding *academic freedom*, ensuring that researchers and educators can bravely explore, publish, and teach even the most complex and *polarizing subjects*, from *climate change* to *colonial history* and *gender issues*. By actively cultivating trust and minimizing concerns about negative reactions or formal complaints, we advocate for an independent *pursuit of knowledge* and the *courageous exchange of ideas*, which are fundamental to a vibrant academic community.

4. YAT's Position

- Academic freedom requires an environment where there is no fear of speaking out about issues that are of matter. In fact, academia must empower individuals to do so. To truly create knowledge, we need to gather remarkable individuals with varied viewpoints, life experiences, and ways of thinking. When these people freely share their ideas and discuss them openly, they sharpen their own understanding of the world and collaboratively refine each other's thoughts.
- Institutional policies must be critically examined to ensure they protect, not perform, freedom and safety.
- The distinction between personal and scholarly voice is important, but the expectation to *neutralize* ourselves is unrealistic and sometimes unfairly applied.
- We are committed to fostering a culture where critical inquiry, dissent, and respectful disagreement are not only allowed but expected.

5. Closing

Academic freedom is not just a professional privilege; it is the very bedrock of a vibrant, informed, and progressive society. Upholding it is not merely an academic concern, but a shared societal imperative for the betterment of all. As YAT, we are committed to sustain academic freedom through actions - collectively and with honesty and dedication. If you, as reader of this position paper, feel like we as YAT can do more to sustain academic freedom, please reach out to us [youngacademy@utwente.nl].

