



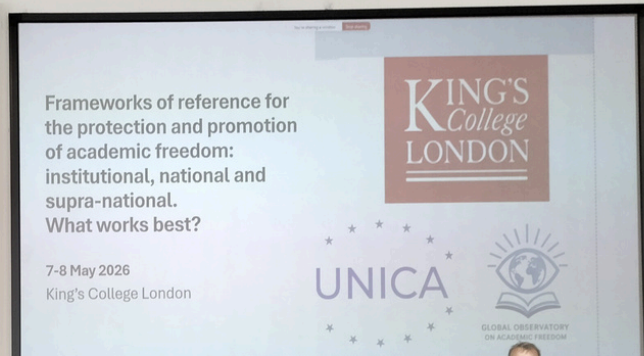
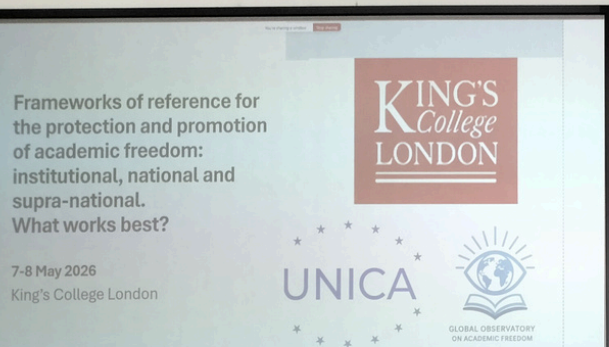
Network of Universities
from the Capitals of Europe



Frameworks of reference for the protection and promotion of academic freedom: institutional, national and supranational. What works best?

*Conference Report from
Higher Education CAPITALs 2026*

May 2026



Co-funded by
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Conference Report from the Higher Education CAPITALs 2026 Conference
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The 2026 edition of Higher Education CAPITALs, entitled “[Frameworks of reference for the protection and promotion of academic freedom: institutional, national and supra-national. What works best?](#)”, took place at **King's College London on 7–8 May 2026**. The event brought together university leaders, researchers, higher education professionals, public authorities, and representatives of academic and civil society organisations from across Europe and also from the US and Canada, to discuss one of the most pressing challenges facing higher education today: the **protection and promotion of academic freedom in increasingly complex political, legal, and societal environments**.

Higher Education CAPITALs is an annual academic event jointly organised by UNICA and the School of Education, Communication and Society at King's College London (this year through the [Global Observatory on Academic Freedom](#)). The initiative aims to create a space for critical reflection and dialogue on difficult, important, and often neglected issues of strategic relevance for universities and the societies they serve.

The 2026 conference took place against a **backdrop of growing concern regarding academic freedom worldwide**. Participants repeatedly noted that threats to academic freedom now emerge from multiple directions and manifest themselves in diverse forms. While many pressures originate outside universities - including from governments, regulatory authorities, political actors, funding structures, and public campaigns - challenges may also arise within higher education institutions themselves, manifested through governance arrangements, institutional cultures, in the relationships between members of the academic community or as self-censorship dynamics.

Over the last decade, universities, governments, and international organisations have increasingly attempted to codify, regulate, and operationalise academic freedom through new legal regulations, governance frameworks, institutional codes of conduct, and policy guidelines. In some contexts, these developments have sought to strengthen protections and clarify responsibilities. In others, however, new frameworks of reference, at different levels, have resulted in restrictions on institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

The conference created a unique space of convergence, with the “framework of reference” approach revealing new ideas and connections that do not usually emerge in discussions on academic freedom.

Building on this lens, the event explored the **concept of “frameworks of reference” developed by researchers at the Global Observatory on Academic Freedom as an analytical and practical tool to understand how academic freedom is defined, implemented, protected, and contested across different contexts.** Discussions examined the role of universities in shaping their own institutional frameworks, and the interplay between institutional, national, European, and global approaches to conceptualising, codifying, and monitoring academic freedom.

Across **four thematic sessions**, participants examined:

- how frameworks of reference at any level translate into practice;
- how universities operationalise academic freedom internally;
- how universities and higher education organisations engage with public authorities and regulatory systems;
- and how supra-national and international frameworks contribute to advocacy, accountability, and protection efforts globally.

The conference also formed part of the [25th anniversary activities of Scholars at Risk \(SAR\)](#), under the anniversary theme “Truth Matters.” As a member of the Scholars at Risk network, UNICA contributed to the broader international reflection on the importance of defending academic freedom, supporting at-risk scholars, and reaffirming the role of universities as spaces of independent inquiry and knowledge production.

The discussions throughout the conference demonstrated **both the growing complexity of academic freedom debates and the increasing urgency of developing coherent, up to date, effective and coordinated approaches to its protection.**

Participants repeatedly stressed that academic freedom cannot be reduced to abstract principles alone: it requires institutional courage, governance mechanisms, legal protections, public legitimacy, and sustained collective engagement across the higher education community.

Key messages

1

Academic freedom is under growing pressure across Europe and beyond, driven by political interference, societal polarisation, economic dependency, and increasing self-censorship.

2

Universities must move beyond rhetorical commitments and embed academic freedom concretely in governance, leadership, institutional policies, and academic culture.

3

Institutional autonomy does not automatically guarantee academic freedom; protecting individual scholars and students requires explicit safeguards and accountability mechanisms.

4

Existing legal and policy protections remain fragmented and uneven, creating a need for stronger institutional, national, European, and international frameworks of reference.

5

Academic freedom is a democratic imperative closely linked to freedom of expression, scientific integrity, public trust in knowledge, and the social role of universities.

6

International cooperation and solidarity networks play a crucial role in supporting at-risk scholars and responding collectively to emerging threats.

7

Protecting academic freedom requires continuous engagement among universities, public authorities, civil society, and international organisations, as well as sustained monitoring and long-term institutional commitment.

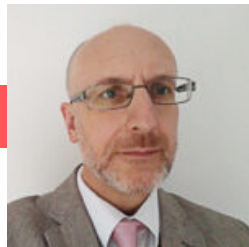


Beyond statements of principle: how frameworks of reference translate into practice

Chair



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The opening session explored **how academic freedom frameworks can move beyond declaratory principles and be translated into institutional practice**. Chaired by **Liviu Matei**, the session brought together perspectives from university governance, political economy, constitutional law, and social epistemology to examine the tensions between academic freedom, institutional autonomy, public accountability, and external influence.

Academic freedom within complex governance environments

Andrew Ginger opened the discussion by stressing the **controversial and highly contextual nature of academic freedom in the current global environment**. He argued that universities cannot rely solely on abstract declarations or value statements but need operational frameworks capable of guiding institutional action in concrete situations.

Drawing on examples including the experience of the University of Cambridge, he highlighted that **universities operate within systems of “limited autonomy”**, where key decisions may be shaped by governments, founders, accreditation and regulatory bodies, funders, and supranational legal authorities such as the European Court of Human Rights through Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The presentation emphasized that **protecting academic freedom requires a combination of qualitatively different measures**, including:

- institutional frameworks and codes,
- procedures and reporting mechanisms,
- guidance and training,
- information and awareness-raising activities.

A recurring theme was the **mutability of external decision-makers** and the importance of political and social context. Academic freedom implementation was presented as a dynamic interaction between external rule-making, external challenges, university interventions, and broader public debate.

Funding, dependency, and institutional autonomy

Susana Peralta examined the relationship between **academic freedom and funding structures**, focusing particularly on the risks associated with donor influence.

Referring to historical examples such as the Edward Ross affair and controversies surrounding university funding in the United States during the 1990s, she argued that **donor intervention can transform academic disagreements into governance crises** when universities fail to preserve institutional control over academic decisions.

Her intervention distinguished between **several dimensions of academic freedom**, including: freedom of research, freedom of teaching, freedom of dissemination, institutional self-governance.

The discussion stressed that the central issue **is not private funding itself, but whether universities retain authority over academic priorities**, hiring, curricula, and research agendas. Both direct and indirect pressures were identified as significant risks. Even in the absence of explicit censorship, **financial dependency may undermine institutional autonomy** and create incentives for self-censorship or strategic alignment with donor interests.

The presentation concluded with a reflection on **institutional safeguards and best practices** capable of ensuring transparency, accountability, and clear separation between funding interests and academic decision-making.

Legal and constitutional dimensions of academic freedom

Robert Post provided a **United States perspective** on academic freedom, focusing on its **constitutional and epistemological foundations**.

He argued that academic freedom cannot be understood solely as an individual's right to free speech but must also be linked to the university's societal function of producing and certifying knowledge. In this context, disciplines themselves play a significant role in determining standards of truth and scholarly authority.

The presentation revisited **key milestones in the development of the American higher education system**, including:

- the 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure,
- the post-war expansion of federally funded research,
- the emergence of universities as major knowledge-producing institutions.

A crucial point of the intervention was that **formal statutes and declarations alone are insufficient to guarantee academic freedom**. In the United States, constitutional protections under the First Amendment remain essential, although these protections coexist with broader legal limitations and competing governmental interests.

The discussion also addressed contemporary debates, including recent higher education legislation and international reference documents such as the **Rome Ministerial Communiqué (2020)**, highlighting the growing importance of **defining academic freedom within evolving political and legal environments**.

Governance, neutrality, and intellectual diversity

In his concluding reflections, **Liviu Matei** emphasized the importance of **considering “regimes” of academic freedom with overlapping rather than isolated individual frameworks**. Moreover, he argued that academic freedom should not be treated separately from related principles and values such as institutional autonomy, academic integrity, participation in governance and democracy.

A recurring theme was that **universities cannot be fully neutral institutions**. Participants noted that neutrality becomes problematic when it discourages engagement with controversial topics or places established scientific knowledge and democratic principles on the same level as disinformation or politically motivated contestation.

The discussion also revisited the issue of **intellectual diversity**. It was noted that diversity within universities should not be reduced exclusively to political representation but must also reflect disciplinary plurality and scholarly standards.

It starts from within: institutional frameworks of reference for academic freedom

Chair



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The second session shifted the focus from external frameworks and legal principles to the **internal institutional mechanisms through which academic freedom is conceptualized, codified and operationalised in universities.**

Chaired by **Ksenija Vidmar Horvat**, the session explored how universities translate commitments to academic freedom into governance structures, institutional cultures, labour protections, and everyday academic practice.

A central theme across the session was that **academic freedom cannot be protected solely through internal formal policies and regulations.** These are needed, but also needed are institutional leadership, operational procedures, concrete shared responsibilities, and continuous tangible engagement with tensions emerging inside universities themselves.

Institutional responsibility and operational frameworks

Rachel Mills presented the experience of King's College London in developing an institutional framework for academic freedom and freedom of expression.

Her presentation traced the **historical evolution of academic freedom in the United Kingdom and at King's specifically.**

While universities traditionally relied on institutional autonomy, tenure, and academic custom, the legal framework changed significantly with the Education Reform Act 1988, which formally **protected academics' right to challenge received wisdom and advance controversial ideas without jeopardising their employment.**

More recently, the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, which entered into force in August 2025, introduced **new statutory duties and regulatory expectations for universities.** Against this background, **King's developed a comprehensive institutional framework intended to move "from principles to practice."** The approach was described not as a compliance exercise alone, but as an attempt to translate institutional values into operational mechanisms capable of guiding real-time decision-making.

The presentation emphasized **several key components of the framework:**

- a clearer institutional definition of academic freedom and freedom of expression;
- a formal Code of Practice for Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression;
- operational guidance for events, protests, teaching activities, and complaints procedures;
- governance structures and advisory groups with clear accountability mechanisms.

A recurring argument throughout the intervention was that **a single high-level statement is insufficient when universities face concrete controversies** involving protests, teaching disputes, safety concerns, or political pressure. Instead, institutions require what Mills described as an **"architecture" of academic freedom:** procedures, committees, responsibilities, and decision-making routes capable of managing tensions transparently and consistently.

Using examples linked to protests and classroom tensions surrounding discussions on Israel and Gaza, she illustrated how **universities increasingly need to balance overlapping rights and obligations,** including: freedom of expression, academic freedom, lawful protest, protection from harassment and discrimination, health and safety obligations.

The framework developed at King's was presented as a **way to structure these complex decisions without relying exclusively on ad hoc judgments under public and political pressure.** Importantly, the presentation stressed that controversial events should not automatically be prevented or discouraged because of reputational concerns. Rather, institutions should focus on enabling lawful academic activities while managing risks proportionately.

Another critical issue raised concerned self-censorship in teaching and classroom discussions. Mills noted that some **staff increasingly avoid difficult or controversial topics because of fears of complaints,** public backlash, or institutional uncertainty. Addressing these forms of self-censorship was identified as an emerging institutional priority.

Academic freedom, labour protections, and institutional trust

David Robinson examined academic freedom from the **perspective of labour law and collective protections**, which are the dominant forms of codification in the Canadian context.

His presentation highlighted the **importance of employment protections**, collective bargaining agreements, and faculty governance structures in safeguarding academic freedom. In Canada, academic freedom is codified not as an abstract normative principle but also as a **workplace right that depends on secure institutional conditions** and enforceable protections.

The intervention also reflected on **broader societal trends affecting universities, including declining trust in public institutions**, and increasing political polarisation. These developments were described as contributing to greater scrutiny of universities and heightened pressures on academic staff, particularly when engaging with contentious public debates.

Institutional culture and academic leadership

Kirsten Busch Nielsen focused on the **importance of institutional culture in shaping how academic freedom is experienced and protected** in everyday university life.

Drawing on the experience of the **University of Copenhagen**, she argued that legal protections and institutional declarations are not sufficient on their own if they are not accompanied by **cultures of collegiality, trust, and shared academic responsibility**. Academic freedom, she noted, depends not only on formal rights but also on whether academic communities feel supported when engaging with difficult, controversial, or politically sensitive topics.

Her intervention highlighted the **growing concern around self-censorship within universities**, particularly in teaching contexts where academics may avoid certain subjects because of fears of public backlash, student complaints, or uncertainty about institutional support. Nielsen stressed that leadership plays a crucial role in **creating environments where open debate and intellectual disagreement remain possible**.

She also observed that national traditions, governance models, and disciplinary cultures influence how academic freedom is interpreted and implemented, **making international and comparative dialogue increasingly valuable for universities** facing similar challenges across different contexts.

Governance, autonomy, and public engagement

David Smith explored the **relationship between academic freedom, institutional governance, and university leadership**, drawing on the experience of the **University of Edinburgh**. He emphasized that academic freedom cannot be safeguarded solely through statements of principle, but must be embedded in governance structures, institutional procedures, and leadership practices capable of protecting academic autonomy during periods of controversy or external pressure.

His intervention addressed **concerns regarding governance reforms** and the increasing perception that external oversight or **changes to institutional decision-making structures may weaken collegial self-governance and institutional independence**. Smith also reflected on the evolving role of academics as public intellectuals, noting that tensions may emerge when public interventions by academics do not fully align with disciplinary consensus or institutional positions. In this context, universities face the challenge of **balancing institutional responsibility with the protection of individual academic expression**.

Particular attention was given to the issue of self-censorship, especially in teaching environments where academics may feel reluctant to engage openly with politically or socially contentious topics.

Academic freedom, disagreement, and democratic university culture

In her concluding reflections, **Ksenija Vidmar Horvat** noted that the session demonstrated a **shift in focus from academic freedom in research towards academic freedom in classrooms**, teaching environments, and everyday university interactions.

She emphasized the increasing pressures universities face from regulators, political actors, media environments, and public opinion, while also stressing the need for courageous institutional leadership capable of defending academic values in practice.

The discussion referred to the European Commission's work on guiding principles for protecting fundamental academic values and highlighted the **importance of understanding academic freedom together with** institutional autonomy, democratic governance, and freedom of expression.

Several interventions stressed that universities should remain places where difficult conversations and intellectual contestation can occur within lawful and respectful institutional environments. Concluding the session, **Ksenija Vidmar Horvat** stressed that institutional trust and visible leadership support are essential in enabling **universities to remain spaces of “intellectual diversity, and organised skepticism”**.

Advocating with public authorities for better regulations for academic freedom

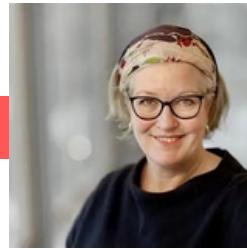
Chair



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The third session examined the **relationship between universities, governments, and supranational institutions in shaping legal and regulatory protections for academic freedom**. Chaired by **Luciano Saso**, the discussion focused on the European policy landscape, national governance models, and the growing political and cultural pressures affecting higher education systems across Europe and beyond.

A central theme throughout the session was the **complexity of regulating academic freedom within multi-level governance systems** where responsibilities are divided between universities, national governments, courts, and European institutions. Speakers repeatedly emphasized that legal protections alone are insufficient without broader political and societal support for the values underpinning academic freedom.

Academic freedom and the European Union

Jan Palmowski explored the evolving role of the European Union in protecting academic freedom across member states.

His presentation highlighted the **growing visibility of academic freedom violations in Europe**, stressing that **concerns are no longer limited to a few “usual suspect” countries**. Participants discussed how pressures on universities can emerge in a wide variety of political contexts, including through legislative reforms, funding mechanisms, governance restructuring, or indirect political influence.

A recurring issue concerned the **limitations of the European Union's competences in higher education**. Since **education policy remains primarily a national responsibility**, the EU faces significant constraints in developing binding legal instruments capable of directly enforcing academic freedom protections across member states.

At the same time, participants noted that **European institutions** may, at times, **play a protective role vis-à-vis national governments**, particularly through conditionality mechanisms, rule-of-law instruments, and references to fundamental rights frameworks. However, the discussion also revealed concerns about institutional fragmentation and inconsistent language between different European bodies, including the European Parliament and the European Commission, which may weaken policy coherence.

The **methodological challenge of assessing violations of academic freedom across countries** was also discussed. Participants noted the difficulty of developing comparable indicators and evaluation tools capable of capturing both formal legal changes and broader institutional or cultural pressures.

Governance structures and institutional autonomy

Jane Reichel addressed the **relationship between academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and legal governance structures** within European university systems.

Her intervention stressed that supranational institutions cannot automatically be assumed to provide stronger protections than national governments. If political majorities across Europe become less supportive of academic freedom, European-level frameworks themselves may also become vulnerable.

The presentation highlighted **how institutional governance arrangements can affect university autonomy in practice**. Her discussions focused on legal personality, ownership structures, and the capacity of universities to govern themselves independently from state interference. Particular attention was paid to governance reforms involving university boards and leadership structures, which in some contexts have been perceived as encroachments on institutional autonomy and academic self-governance.

The presentation also explored **tensions between academic freedom and ethical or professional standards**. Participants reflected on the need for universities to clarify their own institutional positions and governance principles when navigating conflicts between academic expression, professional competence, and institutional responsibilities.

The Swedish context was discussed as an example demonstrating that even systems often perceived as highly autonomous are not immune to political pressure, governance disputes, or broader democratic tensions.

Political culture, free speech, and the meaning of academic freedom

Naomi Waltham-Smith focused on recent developments in the English higher education context and the broader political-cultural environment surrounding academic freedom debates.

Her presentation identified **several interconnected challenges affecting universities:**

- declining trust in democratic and public institutions;
- increasing political polarisation and electoral volatility;
- the influence of “culture war” dynamics and anti-intellectual discourse;
- anti-immigrant sentiment and broader attacks on expertise;
- political debates surrounding the European Convention on Human Rights following Brexit.

She examined the development of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 and the **growing role of the Office for Students (OfS) in regulating freedom of speech and academic freedom in England.**

A key argument of the presentation was that **contemporary legal and political debates often reduce academic freedom to a simplified conception of freedom of speech.** She warned that such reduction risks overlooking the distinctive role of universities in producing, evaluating, and validating knowledge according to scholarly standards.

The discussion highlighted the **danger of blurring distinctions between: expertise and opinion, scientific and non-scientific claims, disciplinary standards and unrestricted expression.** She argued that universities must preserve the ability to distinguish between legitimate academic debate and claims that fail to meet scholarly or professional standards. Examples raised during the discussion included concerns that an overly speech-based approach could undermine universities’ capacity to uphold disciplinary competence in teaching and research.

At the same time, some **participants cautioned against relying exclusively on disciplinary communities to regulate academic standards,** noting that scholarly communities themselves may reproduce exclusions or marginalise minority perspectives. This generated an important debate about the balance between disciplinary self-governance, institutional leadership, and external regulation.

Supra-national frameworks of reference for academic freedom

Chair



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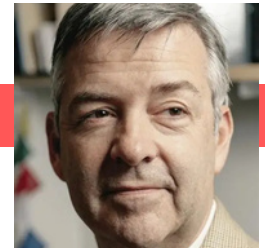
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President,
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Founding Executive
Director, Scholars at
Risk Network

The final session focused on **supra-national and international frameworks for the protection of academic freedom**, examining how global standards, monitoring systems, and transnational cooperation can support universities and scholars in increasingly contested political environments. Chaired by **Naomi Waltham-Smith**, the session brought together perspectives from international organisations, university networks, student representation bodies, and academic freedom advocacy initiatives.

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was that **supra-national frameworks should not be understood as purely symbolic declarations**, but as instruments capable of supporting implementation, accountability, solidarity, and institutional resilience across national contexts.

Measuring and institutionalising academic freedom

Terrence Karran examined **comparative models of academic freedom protection**, focusing particularly on the United States and the role of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP).

Drawing on previous work developed for the Council of Europe and subsequent comparative research, he presented a **conceptual model in which substantive academic freedom depends on the interaction between several mutually reinforcing elements**, including: institutional autonomy, academic self-governance, tenure and employment protections, freedom in teaching and research, participation in institutional governance. He argued that these dimensions must function together to sustain meaningful academic freedom, and that weakening one element often undermines the broader system.

The presentation compared the UNESCO 1997 Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel with the AAUP's 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure, highlighting substantial similarities between the two frameworks despite their different institutional origins.

Karran also presented **findings from a large-scale study assessing the alignment of American universities with AAUP principles**. The analysis covered public and private research-intensive universities across the United States and revealed significant variation in institutional compliance with core academic freedom standards.

The results suggested that:

- fewer than one-third of sampled universities demonstrated full alignment across all key dimensions of academic freedom;
- protections for teaching and research were often incomplete or inconsistently formulated;
- significant differences existed between public and private institutions, particularly regarding governance and tenure protections.

The presentation concluded by expressing **concern over declining institutional commitment to academic freedom principles in the United States**, alongside growing political hostility towards universities and expertise.

The Magna Charta Universitatum and universities' societal role

David Lock reflected on the **development and evolution of the Magna Charta Universitatum as a global reference framework for universities**.

He recalled that the original Magna Charta, signed in Bologna in 1988, emerged in response to concerns about pressures on European universities and aimed to reaffirm the fundamental principles of university autonomy, academic freedom, and the inseparability of teaching and research.

The revised 2020 Magna Charta was presented as an **attempt to respond to new global realities**, including:

- changing relationships between universities and society,
- declining trust in expertise,
- political and social polarisation,
- growing public expectations towards universities.

The **revised framework places stronger emphasis on:**

- universities' social responsibilities,
- sustainability,
- engagement with democratic values,
- inclusivity and human rights,
- global cooperation and knowledge exchange.

At the same time, the presentation reaffirmed that **academic freedom remains the “lifeblood” of universities**, and that institutional autonomy is essential for enabling independent inquiry and public trust.

A particularly key point concerned the **concept of a “reliable social contract” between universities and society**. Universities were encouraged not only to defend academic freedom internally, but also to communicate more effectively with broader publics about the societal value of higher education and scientific knowledge.

Student perspectives, freedom to learn and collective responsibility

Lana Par brought a **student perspective to the discussion**, focusing on the **concept of “freedom to learn” as a core dimension of academic freedom**.

Drawing on the experience of the European Students' Union, she emphasised that **students are not only recipients of education but active members of academic communities with a legitimate role in shaping democratic and inclusive university environments**.

Her intervention highlighted that **students across Europe are increasingly engaged in defending academic freedom and resisting pressures that may limit open discussion, critical inquiry, or inclusive participation in higher education**. However, she stressed that students cannot be expected to bear this responsibility alone. Effective protection of academic freedom requires collective responsibility and sustained solidarity from academic staff, university leadership, and institutional governance structures.

Par also underlined the **importance of ensuring that universities remain spaces where students can safely engage in debate**, express disagreement, and participate in knowledge production without fear of exclusion or marginalisation. In this sense, academic freedom was framed not only as an institutional or faculty concern, but as a shared condition for meaningful participation in higher education and democratic life.

From principles to implementation and accountability

Robert Quinn concluded the session with a **broad reflection on the global defence of academic freedom** and the role of international frameworks in protecting scholars and universities.

Speaking from the perspective of Scholars at Risk, he argued that **academic freedom protection must ultimately be understood as a question of implementation, accountability, and institutional practice** rather than only normative definition.

A central argument of the presentation was that **universities and academic communities are currently facing a moment in which threats to academic freedom are becoming increasingly plausible even in democratic societies** traditionally considered stable. Examples from the United States illustrated growing fears among academics concerning self-censorship, political interference, and direct attacks on higher education institutions.

Quinn argued that **supra-national frameworks play several essential functions**:

- legitimising academic freedom claims internationally;
- articulating shared standards and responsibilities;
- supporting advocacy and accountability efforts;
- enabling solidarity and transnational cooperation.

At the same time, he stressed that **frameworks alone are insufficient without implementation mechanisms and sustained institutional commitment**.

Particular attention was given to the UNESCO 1997 Recommendation, which was presented as the most universal existing international framework on academic freedom.

Quinn argued that future revisions of the Recommendation should:

- **recognise academic freedom explicitly as a human right;**
- **clarify both positive and negative obligations of states and institutions;**
- **strengthen implementation and monitoring mechanisms;**
- **reinforce universities' responsibilities to defend democratic and human rights conditions necessary for academic inquiry.**

The presentation also explored the **relationship between academic freedom, freedom of expression, and institutional autonomy**. Quinn warned against reducing academic freedom to general free speech protections alone, arguing that academic freedom has a distinctive function connected to knowledge production, scholarly standards, and public responsibility.

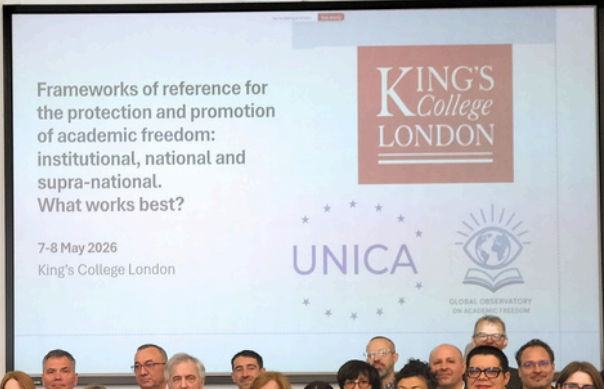
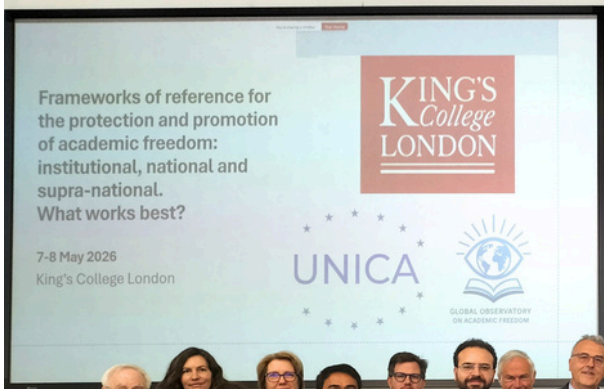
The intervention concluded with a **call to move from reactive defence towards a broader international movement capable not only of resisting attacks on academic freedom, but also of reimagining and strengthening higher education's democratic role globally**.

The discussion that followed addressed several recurring themes from across the conference, including:

- the relationship between academic freedom and student protest;
- the distinction between academic freedom and general freedom of expression;
- the legitimacy of disciplinary standards and scholarly expertise;
- implementation challenges for international frameworks;
- the importance of institutional autonomy and academic self-governance.

Participants stressed that **protecting academic freedom requires not only legal safeguards but also stronger public narratives explaining why universities matter as independent spaces of critical inquiry and knowledge production**.

The session concluded with a shared recognition that international frameworks, networks, and solidarity mechanisms are becoming increasingly important in a context where pressures on universities are global, interconnected, and evolving rapidly.



Conclusion and way forward

The 2026 Higher Education CAPITALs conference demonstrated **both the urgency and the complexity of current debates surrounding academic freedom.**

The conference created a unique space of convergence, **with the “framework of reference” approach revealing new ideas and connections that do not usually emerge in discussions on academic freedom.**

Across institutional, national, and supra-national perspectives, academic freedom was consistently framed as a central condition for university governance, democratic resilience, knowledge production, and public trust in expertise.

“Reimagining academic freedom”: new and forms of codification of academic freedom, better adapted to current realities and developments in higher education and in society are needed. They are an important part of a framework reference for academic freedom, reflected in legal documents at the national or supranational level, official non-legal commitments, institutional or inter-institutional statements. In addition, what is also needed are mechanisms and guidelines for implementation and monitoring.

The discussions also highlighted the **increasingly complex and multidimensional nature of current threats.** Universities are operating under pressures linked to political polarisation, regulatory constraints, funding dependencies, public distrust, and wider cultural conflicts. These dynamics are not confined to specific regions or systems, but are increasingly visible across diverse higher education contexts, including long-established democracies.

Participants underlined the **importance of distinguishing academic freedom from general freedom of expression.** While partially related, academic freedom was consistently linked to the specific role of universities in producing, validating and transmitting knowledge according to disciplinary standards.

The **role of supra-national frameworks can be extreme productive**, as in the case of the Fundamental Values of Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area, or the ERA Act in the EU, or the Magna Charta Universitatum. In other cases, they are promising but not as yet that impactful, such as the the UNESCO 1997 Recommendation.

Across all sessions, **collective responsibility emerged as a key theme**. The protection and promotion of academic freedom was described as a shared responsibility involving not only academics and leadership, but also students, institutional networks, and international partners.

The conference reaffirmed the **broader societal role of universities as institutions of critical inquiry, evidence-based knowledge, and democratic engagement**.

In a context marked by polarisation and declining trust in expertise, **universities were consistently described as spaces that must sustain intellectual diversity and organised skepticism**.

Overall, the conference concluded that **academic freedom is not a fixed achievement but an ongoing institutional and societal process**.

Strengthening it requires continuous effort, coordination across governance levels, and sustained commitment to both protection and implementation across the higher education sector.



Beyond the report

Higher Education CAPITALS is an annual event held at the end of May, in London. It brings together higher education leaders, researchers, public authorities and media representatives from Europe and beyond, to identify and discuss difficult, important and often neglected contemporary issues that are of key relevance for universities and the communities they serve.

It is organized jointly by UNICA and the School of Education, Communication and Society of King's College London, through GOAF – the [Global Observatory on Academic Freedom](#).

Previous editions:

- 2025 - [“How models of Higher Education travel internationally”](#)
- 2024 - [“The End of the Massification of Higher Education?”](#)

Learn more about this initiative and more:

- [About the UNICA EduLab](#)



52 UNIVERSITIES | 38 EUROPEAN CAPITALS

Founded in 1990, UNICA is an institutional network of universities from the capitals of Europe committed to acting as a catalyst in the advancement, integration and cooperation of its member universities throughout Europe. Its vision is to be a driving force in the development of the European Higher Education and Research areas, and to empower its member universities to unlock their full potential, putting knowledge, Research, and Innovation at the service of the needs of society and of the coming generations.

The cultural diversity and “living lab” aspects of Capital cities, the proximity to governing bodies, their technological, cultural and innovative capacity, and the opportunities they provide as powerful economic and commercial centers, create a special environment for UNICA Members. Building on the diverse profiles of its members, UNICA aims to widen and strengthen international collaborations, engage academic leadership, and facilitate networking among academic communities. Activities are prepared by relevant seven UNICA working groups in cooperation with the UNICA Steering Committee and the UNICA Secretariat in Brussels.

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