

Academic freedom in the age of artificial intelligence: from formal rights to the exercise of discernment

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The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in its 1997 Recommendation, defines academic freedom as the right (without restriction by any prescribed doctrine) to freedom of teaching and discussion, to carry out research and disseminate its results, to freely express one's opinion about the institution in which one works, to be free from institutional censorship, and to participate in representative academic bodies [1]. It is a generous definition. And yet, it contrasts with an observation that is evident in the daily work of the academic community (that convergence of students and faculty who share the same educational purpose): the capacity to question reality has become increasingly uncommon.

Within that community, the pattern repeats itself in both directions. People ask, "How would you like it done?" instead of "How should it be done?" And those who should respond with a rationale instead reply that "the department head requests it," without inquiring why it is being requested or on what guidelines it is based. The problem does not lie with one group or another. It lies with an entire community that, at some point, stopped asking questions.

When academic freedom is invoked, it is almost always reduced to a slogan: that research or publication should not be prohibited. Yet UNESCO's definition, when read carefully, does not merely protect the ability to act. Above all, it protects the possibility of discussing, questioning, and participating with independent judgment. If that possibility is not exercised, academic freedom remains formally intact while simultaneously being emptied of its substance.

To speak of freedom usually presupposes a prior form of oppression. Academic freedom, however, is not currently threatened by any identifiable opposing force, but rather

by complacency, a faceless force that steers the academic community in any direction without holding it to any accountability. This same observation has been documented in other health disciplines. A recent editorial on dental education warns that its deepest erosion stems not from external pressures but from institutional risk aversion and self-censorship [2]. This is the question that this essay seeks to raise: Why, despite having this right formally guaranteed, does the academic community increasingly fail to exercise the capacity that this right presupposes?

To express an opinion is to state a position on something; to discern is to consider a proposition, examine it, and, based on that examination, propose a new one, making explicit the process that leads from one to the other. This distinction is not a personal intuition. It is the central argument of much specialized literature. Legal scholar Robert Post argues that academic freedom is not equivalent to freedom of expression in the general sense (where every opinion is assumed to carry equal weight) but rather rests on disciplinary standards that distinguish competent work from that which is not [3]. The university cannot function under the premise that all opinions are equally valid, because its mission—research, teaching, and generating knowledge—requires precisely the opposite: to prioritize, evaluate, and discern.

This same tension—whether to redefine the concept or to demand its proper exercise—has been debated in the healthcare professions. An academic debate in pharmaceutical education concluded, by majority, that academic freedom does not need a new definition but rather a clearer articulation of its original meaning [4].

This same idea, expressed in different terms, was already implicit in the spirit of UNESCO: academic freedom entails the responsibility to exercise it in a manner consistent with the obligation to ground research in an honest pursuit of truth [1]. When truth is the objective, the opponent becomes irrelevant. Dialogue rises to the realm of ideas. It is precisely this shift—from opinion to an examined proposition—that constitutes the true exercise of academic freedom. Not the right to say anything whatsoever, but the discipline of discerning before asserting.

What remains of academic freedom when the community that exercises it delegates to an external tool the very

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MAIN MESSAGES:

- Academic freedom is formally guaranteed, but its essential practice—discernment—is becoming increasingly rare, and the rise of generative artificial intelligence is intensifying this complacency.
- This essay makes a conceptual distinction between expressing an opinion and exercising discernment, drawing on recent evidence regarding cognitive offloading to examine discernment, not just critical thinking in general.
- We argue that academic freedom has never been so well protected by regulations, yet so rarely exercised in practice; upholding it requires examining before asserting, without delegating judgment to hierarchies or algorithms.
- This is a reflective essay without primary data. Empirical evidence on artificial intelligence and cognition is still in its early stages and includes a study that has not been validated by a full peer review, cited with that caveat.

discernment that such freedom presupposes? This is not a rhetorical question. Recent evidence allows us to answer it with some precision.

In the classroom, it has become increasingly rare to observe the independent development of an idea. Artificial intelligence (AI) is no longer simply optimizing time, but is beginning to serve as a substitute for thinking itself. Rather than presenting it with an idea to refine, users ask it to generate the idea in the first place. This is consistent with the findings reported by Gerlich [5] in a study involving 666 participants. Frequent AI use was associated with lower critical thinking scores, mediated by “cognitive offloading”, an effect that was more pronounced among younger participants [5]. This pattern is not exclusive to generative AI. A meta-analytic review of the “Google effect” had already documented similar impairments in memory associated with intensive use of search engines [6]. This suggests that cognitive offloading is a broader phenomenon, of which AI is merely the most recent manifestation.

It is worth asking whether what is being lost is critical thinking in general, or something more specific: the exercise of discernment as previously defined (examining one proposition before asserting another). Research conducted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), using electroencephalography, provides a troubling nuance. Participants who wrote with the aid of a language model exhibited lower brain connectivity and severe difficulties recalling what they themselves had written only minutes earlier [7]. If discernment requires recognizing one’s own reasoning in order to examine it, these findings suggest that cognitive offloading not only reduces critical thinking but also erodes the very raw material upon which discernment is exercised. It should be noted that this latest study is a preprint that has not yet been validated through a full peer-review process and has already been criticized for methodological flaws. It is cited with this caveat, as an exercise in the very discernment that this essay calls for.

Of the two risks documented by this evidence—losing memory of one’s own ideas or losing the habit of questioning them—the latter is, in light of the foregoing, the most serious for university life. If academic freedom is the discipline of discernment, then losing the habit of questioning constitutes a renunciation of the very function that academic freedom is intended to protect. Losing memory of what has

been produced, by contrast, means delegating responsibility for one’s own thinking to someone else. Read alongside Post’s argument, this weakens the disciplinary judgment upon which the academic community itself depends [3].

Artificial intelligence is not the problem. To assign it that responsibility would once again amount to an opinion without sufficient evidence. What makes it potentially harmful to academic freedom is the academic community’s willingness to entrust it with the discernment that it is itself responsible for exercising. In the face of emerging technologies, an active stance is required: to use them without abdicating what it means to exercise discernment.

From this emerges the paradox that defines academic freedom in our time. Never has it been so widely recognized on paper (protected by international standards and constitutions), nor so abundant in the means to exercise it. Access to information, sources, research opportunities, and debate has never been greater. And yet, the exercise of the discernment that this freedom presupposes is becoming increasingly rare. Information is consumed without the necessary analysis to transform it into one’s own knowledge. It accumulates, but it is not critically evaluated.

The paradox, then, is not one of access but of use. Having the freedom to conduct research, teach, and to engage in discussion formally guaranteed does not necessarily mean exercising that freedom in its most demanding sense. A freedom that is not actively exercised (one that is possessed but not practiced) runs the risk of becoming an empty legal category: protected by regulations, yet absent from everyday academic life.

For this reason, the responsibility for sustaining academic freedom cannot be delegated to any external actor (not governments, nor politics), but rests with the academic community itself. Evidence from health professions education supports this view. Exposing students to divergent viewpoints, rather than shielding them from them, promotes greater cognitive development and a stronger willingness to seek the truth even when it is uncomfortable [8]. If universities do not foster the practice of discernment—as a habit rather than an exception—academic freedom, however generous it may be, will not be able to sustain itself on its own.

It is difficult to offer a single formula for reversing this complacency. Rather than regaining a lost habit, it seems

necessary to let go of the fear that prevents us from practicing it. This is the fear of questioning the meaning of what is being asked of us, of defending our own position rather than taking the easy way out by accepting what is already given—whether dictated by a hierarchical authority or by an algorithm.

It is worth concluding with precision: questioning is merely the first step. The full exercise that academic freedom demands is discernment (distinguishing between the answer accepted without scrutiny and the one constructed methodically). To discern is to create; it is to innovate. It is, ultimately, the only exercise capable of transforming academic freedom from a formal guarantee into a living practice, in an era when answers can be delegated to an algorithm, but discernment must not cease to be exercised.

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Libertad académica en tiempos de inteligencia artificial: del derecho formal al ejercicio del discernimiento



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