'Safe spaces' vs. free spaces: Reconciling student activism with academic freedom in European universities

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Abstract
This article explores the tension captured by the phrase 'safe spaces' vs. free spaces: the growing challenge of reconciling student activism with academic freedom in European universities. While calls for inclusion and protection from harm have prompted important discussions around equality and justice, they have also raised concerns about the erosion of academic freedom through practices such as de-platforming and ideological pressure. These dynamics risk narrowing the scope of academic inquiry and undermining the university's democratic role as a space for open debate. Drawing on recent European policy developments, the article argues for a balanced approach that safeguards academic freedom while responding constructively to student concerns. It concludes with practical recommendations aimed at fostering both pluralism and inclusion across European higher education.

Introduction

In recent years, European universities have increasingly found themselves navigating a difficult balance between protecting academic freedom and responding to growing demands for greater inclusivity. Students and activists have called for the creation of 'safe spaces' to shield individuals from views perceived as harmful or offensive. At the

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same time, concerns have emerged about the erosion of academic freedom through practices such as disinvitations, de-platforming and ideological pressures—a phenomenon often described as 'cancel culture'.

While these debates are often framed as a conflict between freedom and equality, the reality is more complex. At stake is not only the character of academic life, but also the health of democratic society more broadly. Academic freedom enables critical inquiry and informed public debate—both essential to democratic resilience. When this freedom is compromised, the university's role as a space for reasoned disagreement and intellectual pluralism is at risk.

This article explores the challenges posed by cancel culture and safe-space activism in European higher education and proposes a set of policy recommendations aimed at safeguarding academic freedom without dismissing legitimate concerns around inclusion and justice.

What is cancel culture?

In recent decades, disputes over academic freedom have not just threatened academic institutions: they have arisen at the individual level, too. In some cases, scholars have been silenced by university communities or excluded from academic platforms (i.e. de-platformed) due to their perceived objectionable minority moral or political views—a phenomenon often referred to as 'cancel culture' (Kovács and Spannagel 2025, 19). At the same time, some students have called for the creation of 'safe spaces' within universities, advocating for restrictions on academic expression as a means of shielding themselves from unsettling or controversial ideas (Kovács and Spannagel 2025, 19).

As Moody-Adams explains, the safe-space movement can be seen as a modern articulation of the enduring belief that liberal democracies remain incomplete in their pursuit of justice until they successfully reconcile the tension between liberty and equality. At its core, the movement prompts a fundamental question: can strong protections for academic freedom coexist with, or even contribute to, such a reconciliation? (Moody-Adams 2018, 38). This question becomes particularly pressing in the context of so-called cancel culture, where efforts to promote equality or protect against harm sometimes result in the marginalisation or suppression of unpopular academic voices, thereby testing the boundaries of what a just balance between liberty and equality should entail within the university.

This advocacy for safe spaces often presents an additional challenge to academic freedom when the political moral norms it invokes become entangled with cultural attitudes and normative frameworks that are unrelated to, or even in tension with, core academic values. Calls for protection from harmful expression are sometimes linked to (1) market-oriented norms that frame students as consumers entitled to shape the educational 'products' they receive; (2) anti-intellectual tendencies that devalue scholarly inquiry and foster scepticism towards the epistemic authority of academic expertise; and (3) mental health discourses that draw uncritically on what some have termed the 'master

narrative' of late modernity, which defines individuals primarily through their susceptibility to psychological harm and trauma, rather than also acknowledging their resilience and capacity for recovery. This conflation—of justice-based concerns with consumerism, anti-intellectualism and the elevation of trauma—risks not only undermining academic freedom, but ultimately weakening the very efforts of safe-space advocates to advance justice within the university setting (Moody-Adams 2018, 38).

The creation of safe spaces has also led students in many European universities to adopt no-platforming policies. Cram and Fenwick explain that the term 'no platforming' encompasses a variety of measures aimed at restricting external speakers from participating in university events. It has been used to describe cases where invitations are rescinded due to a speaker's views, where speakers are disinvited following pressure from students who object to their presence or where speakers are subjected to burdensome conditions (Cram and Fenwick 2018, 849).

A notable incident occurred in the UK in 2016, when efforts were made to exclude Peter Tatchell from a debate titled 'Re-Radicalising Queers' at Canterbury Christ Church University. The event's organisers received communications from the National Union of Students' LGBT+ representative, who refused to participate if Tatchell was included. Her objection was based on his endorsement of a 2015 open letter in the *Observer* that defended free speech and criticised the growing trend of no-platforming figures such as Germaine Greer. She alleged that the letter amounted to support for the incitement of violence against transgender individuals. Ultimately, the attempt to exclude Tatchell was unsuccessful, and the representative chose to withdraw from the event instead (Cram and Fenwick 2018, 849–50). Such examples confirm Moody-Adams's suggestion that while the movement aspires to reconcile liberty and equality within liberal democracies, in practice, efforts to protect against perceived harm may suppress dissenting academic voices and compromise the values of intellectual openness and debate that are central to academic freedom.

More worryingly, even some governments have made attempts to 'cancel' certain academics by excluding them from public dialogue. Following the tragic murder of history teacher Samuel Paty, who was beheaded in a religiously motivated attack, the then French Minister of Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, gave an interview in which he drew a connection between the incident and the perceived 'devastation' caused by 'Islamo-leftism' within universities (Perroud 2020). He went so far as to suggest that some academics were guilty of 'intellectual complicity with terrorism', both in a radio interview and during remarks in Parliament. These statements were made in support of a legislative amendment that made the exercise of academic freedom conditional upon adherence to the values of the French Republic. On Twitter, far-right politician Marion Maréchal Le Pen welcomed the minister's stance, claiming it validated her concerns about the influence of leftist intersectional ideologies in higher education (Perroud 2020).

These cancel-culture phenomena can therefore originate from both the left and the (often far-) right. Even if the right seldom uses the term 'safe spaces',

conservative objections still exist (Moody-Adams 2018, 39). These typically arise in response to curricular efforts aimed at promoting dialogue around cultural or religious diversity (see Ballentine 2015). What is crucial here is that, on both ends of the political spectrum, these offence-based reactions often reflect a broader climate of intolerance. This intolerance frequently stems from an anti-intellectual resistance to the idea that deeply held disagreements can be addressed through civil and respectful discourse. As such, anti-intellectualism emerges as a central driver of the safe-space phenomenon (Moody-Adams 2018, 39).

It is evident from the above that such phenomena may undermine free academic discourse, a core element of academic freedom. When open debate is restricted in the name of shielding individuals from offence, the university's function as a forum for critical inquiry and the exchange of divergent ideas is compromised. The consequences of this extend well beyond the academic sphere: by eroding the norms of reasoned disagreement and intellectual pluralism, these developments threaten the deliberative foundations upon which liberal democracies rest. In this respect, the dynamics within universities both reflect and shape the broader democratic culture, prompting the need for urgent reflection on how societies can uphold inclusivity without sacrificing the principles of open inquiry.

In the following section, I examine the role and significance of academic freedom in contemporary democracies, before turning to potential pathways to address the challenges outlined above.

Academic freedom and cancel culture

Although it may seem self-evident, one of the primary benefits of free academic dialogue lies in its capacity to generate new knowledge. However, knowledge for its own sake is insufficient to justify the enhanced speech protections that academic freedom entails. What gives academic knowledge broader societal significance is its capacity to inform the public and contribute to a well-functioning democracy. The pursuit of truth through scholarly inquiry equips citizens with the information and analytical tools necessary for meaningful participation in public life. Informed and engaged public discourse is, by near-universal agreement, a cornerstone of democratic health.

As Robert Post (2012, 95)—one of the most influential voices on academic freedom—has argued: 'A people without knowledge is a people without power or sovereignty. To preserve the self-government of the people, we must preserve their access to knowledge'.

This view is echoed by Peonides (2022, 142), who convincingly asserts that at least a basic level of scientific literacy is essential to enable citizens to effectively engage with the complexities of modern democratic governance. In a similar spirit, Cram and Fenwick (2018, 859) emphasise that citizens cannot fully participate in democracy without a well-informed understanding of political matters, making open and inclusive public debate essential. De George (2003, 16) adds:

> A democratic society benefits from having citizens who can think critically and imaginatively.
> . . . Hence a democratic society should value, treasure and support education that produces
> citizens who can engage in intelligent debate about social and political issues, critically evaluate
> and take part in their governance and government, and resist demagogues, refusing to follow
> blindly political or other ideologies posing as knowledge.

These perspectives highlight the democratic imperative of safeguarding academic freedom, particularly the kind of freedom that permits scholars to express controversial or minority views. However, as shown in the preceding discussion of cancel culture and safe spaces, this freedom is increasingly being challenged—often in the name of inclusivity, equality or harm prevention. While such motivations may be legitimate in certain cases, the suppression of dissenting academic voices through de-platforming or ideological policing risks undermining the very function that academic freedom serves in democratic society: the promotion of informed, critical and pluralistic public discourse.

In my view, education can only foster such discourse when it takes place under conditions that safeguard academic freedom—including the freedom of expression. Fuchs has rightly observed that there exists a reciprocal relationship between academic freedom and democratic vitality, with each reinforcing the other (Fuchs 1963, 435).

Quinn and Levine (2014, 901–2) build on this insight, arguing that academic communities 'model and pass into society the skills and knowledge necessary for democratic value systems to function properly, most notably a democratic "knowledge-over-force" principle that rejects violence and force as determinants of outcomes, in favour of process, evidence, reasoned discourse and quality'.

These observations reflect a broad consensus: academic freedom—especially freedom of academic expression—is vital to sustaining democratic societies. It enriches public debate, sharpens citizens' critical faculties and fosters the competences required for active democratic engagement (see also Tierney and Lechuga 2010, 120). One can reasonably conclude that academic freedom of expression plays a key role in empowering the demos and enabling democratic processes. When this freedom is restricted—whether by government interference, student-led activism or institutional policies aimed at avoiding giving offence—democratic values are placed at risk. It logically follows that in illiberal settings—such as those found in some 'safe space' environments where dissent is discouraged—academic expression is stifled, making it far more difficult to cultivate democratic values.

This brings us to a particularly challenging question: should academic speech that openly challenges or even contradicts democratic principles fall within the protective scope of academic freedom? The instinctive reaction may be to answer in the negative. Indeed, this assumption often fuels cancel-culture dynamics, where academics are silenced or de-platformed not for inciting violence, but for voicing unpopular, provocative or politically incorrect views. When academic speech is perceived by a majority as offensive or as conflicting with the dominant interpretation of democratic norms, the typical response is to suppress it in order to maintain a 'safe' environment.

However, Cram and Fenwick offer a more nuanced and principled counterpoint. They note:

> Speakers in universities advocating anti-democratic positions, such as that Islam is incompatible with democracy, or that Muslims should not vote since candidates are usually unbelievers, could be defended in stable democracies such as the UK, as Heinze has argued, in principle, as the communication of a minority opinion (and thus as a contribution to self-government) where it does not carry an actual or implicit threat of violence against others. (Cram and Fenwick 2018, 861)

In principle, even anti-democratic speech can contribute to the pluralism that defines healthy democratic debate. Pre-emptively excluding such views would conflict with the very democratic rationale used to justify academic freedom. This is especially important in an era when accusations of harm are increasingly invoked to disqualify academic speech, even in the absence of incitement or intent to cause real danger. Crucially, however, these views must remain subject to open contestation—something that does not always occur, particularly in emotionally charged or ideologically polarised contexts. The university, with its norms of structured debate and intellectual rigour, may be one of the few spaces where such views can be critically examined. Academic freedom ensures not only the right to express controversial opinions, but also the right of others to challenge them. On this basis, the expression of even anti-democratic views within academia may deserve protection, as the exposure of such views to critique ultimately serves democratic robustness.

A final issue arises concerning whether the conferral of special expressive protections on academics is compatible with democratic equality. Why should scholars enjoy greater freedom of speech than other members of society? Does this not undermine the democratic ideal of treating all voices equally? While this may appear undemocratic at first glance, the issue requires deeper analysis.

A compelling insight is offered by Isaac Asimov, who wrote in 1980, 'There is a cult of ignorance in the United States, and there always has been. The strain of anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means "my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge"' (Asimov 1980, 19).

This critique highlights the danger of conflating democratic equality with epistemic equivalence. If we adopt the view that uninformed opinion carries the same weight as scientifically grounded knowledge, we not only undermine academic freedom but negate the very purpose of academia. Years of rigorous research and expertise would lose their significance if all views were treated as equally valid regardless of their basis in evidence. Such a position would carry serious consequences for democratic governance. A functioning democracy requires that decisions be informed by expert knowledge. For experts to contribute meaningfully to public debate, they must be granted a distinct expressive space—protected and valued. Without such protection, the marketplace of

ideas risks being governed not by quality, but by popularity, emotional appeal or ideological orthodoxy—precisely the dynamics we see in cancel-culture environments. Providing such protection is precisely the function that academic freedom of expression fulfils.

How to fix this?

If academic freedom is a prerequisite for democratic participation, critical thinking and knowledge-based policymaking—as this article has argued—then its erosion through cancel culture, politicisation and anti-intellectualism must be actively addressed. This is not just a cultural or institutional concern; it is a matter of democratic resilience. The European People's Party (EPP) has already taken an important step in this direction. In April 2025 the EPP adopted a resolution that the author was personally involved in drafting, which calls for coordinated EU action to safeguard academic freedom across the Union (EPP 2025). Building on this momentum, several targeted reforms should be considered.

Embed academic freedom in the EU rule of law framework

The EPP resolution rightly calls for academic freedom to be recognised as a core component of the EU's democratic governance architecture. Article 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union already provide a legal foundation, but enforcement remains inconsistent. The European Commission should integrate academic freedom indicators into its annual rule of law reports, establishing a structured monitoring mechanism to assess violations and support member states in upholding standards. This would align the EU's internal governance with its external commitments to freedom of thought and inquiry.

Equip universities to resist ideological and political pressures

Cancel-culture pressures—from both student activism and government interference—can only be resisted if universities enjoy meaningful institutional autonomy. Member states must guarantee that scholars and institutions can operate free from arbitrary ideological, political or economic coercion. The EU should incentivise member states to adopt national academic freedom strategies—including legal protections, clear definitions and internal grievance procedures—while reaffirming the importance of diverse perspectives and open debate in higher education.

Reorient safe spaces towards pluralism, not censorship

While the safe-space movement stems from legitimate concerns about equality and inclusion, its conflation with intellectual fragility or censorship must be avoided. Academic institutions should distinguish clearly between emotional safety and epistemic openness. 'Safe spaces' must not become closed spaces. EU funding frameworks (e.g. Erasmus+, Horizon Europe) could be leveraged to support programmes that foster

intellectual resilience, reasoned disagreement and dialogue across difference, especially on campuses facing rising polarisation.

Strengthen support for scholars at risk and academic mobility

The EPP has rightly highlighted the importance of Europe as a safe haven for scholars at risk. The EU should expand existing support schemes (such as MSCA4Ukraine) and embed guarantees of academic freedom in all cross-border cooperation and mobility projects. Funding for international partnerships, including with non-European institutions, should be contingent on upholding core values such as freedom of thought, institutional independence and pluralism.

At the same time, safeguarding academic freedom is not only a necessary defensive measure—it is also a strategic asset for Europe's innovation and competitiveness. The 2024 Draghi report on *The Future of European Competitiveness* explicitly highlights Europe's struggle to both attract and retain top research talent. To remedy this, Draghi suggests creating an 'EU Chair' programme 'to attract and retain the best academic scholars' (Draghi 2024, Part A, 33). Moreover, the report emphasises that bolstering research and innovation spending—advocating a spending commitment of 3% of GDP on research and development (Draghi 2024, Part B, 234)—requires open academic systems that welcome and protect diverse viewpoints. By positioning Europe as a place where scholars operate with full intellectual autonomy and civic respect, the EU will not only be honouring its democratic principles but also enhancing its ability to compete globally for talent and ideas.

Promote a pro-knowledge culture in civic and political life

Finally, reversing the tide of anti-intellectualism requires more than regulatory tools—it demands a cultural shift. Policymakers, educators and civil society leaders must promote a public ethos that values evidence, expertise and open inquiry. As the EPP resolution affirms, universities are essential pillars of democratic competence, providing citizens with the tools to resist disinformation, engage critically in politics and uphold liberal democratic values. The EU should support public awareness campaigns, civic education programmes and science communication platforms that re-establish the link between democratic self-government and the freedom to think, question and know.

In an era of political volatility and ideological rigidity, academic freedom is not a luxury—it is a democratic necessity. The EU has the legal instruments, institutional mechanisms and political will to act. What is needed is the resolve to translate these into coordinated, values-based action. As the EPP has recognised, defending academic freedom is not only about protecting scholars—it is about fortifying democracy itself.

Conclusion

The tension between 'safe spaces' and free academic spaces is emblematic of a deeper struggle within contemporary democracies: how to reconcile the values of inclusion and

equality with those of open inquiry and dissent. As this article has argued, academic freedom—especially the freedom of academic expression—is not merely a privilege of scholars, but a cornerstone of democratic life. It enables the critical thinking, informed debate and pluralism upon which liberal democracy depends. Yet, in the name of protecting individuals from harm, both institutional actors and political forces have increasingly engaged in practices—such as de-platforming, ideological policing and legislative constraints—that threaten to erode this essential freedom.

This erosion is not confined to fringe cases or specific ideological camps. From student-led no-platforming to ministerial attempts at academic disciplining, the drivers of cancel culture and anti-intellectualism are both diffuse and systemic. In response, universities must reclaim their role as spaces where controversial ideas can be aired, challenged and debated in good faith. But this cannot be left to individual institutions alone. It requires a coordinated policy response at the European level—one that embeds academic freedom in the EU's rule of law framework, strengthens institutional autonomy and counters cultural trends that equate intellectual discomfort with injustice.

Defending academic freedom is not a matter of protecting elites; it is a matter of safeguarding the democratic process itself. If Europe is to remain both a global centre for knowledge and a beacon of democratic values, it must treat academic freedom not as an optional principle, but as a strategic and civic imperative.

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