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## Academic Freedom

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**Academic freedom**

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24 These are dangerous times for universities. Latest data shows, “Only about 20% of  
25 the world’s population lives in countries where academic freedom is well protected”  
26 (Bothwell, 2021). Faculty are regularly ‘deplatformed’, researchers and scientists are  
27 pilloried and censored, not for violence or fraud, but because they expressed a  
28 particular view, stated an accepted truth of their discipline, researched and published  
29 on a sensitive issue from a perspective deemed ‘wrong’, or even ‘liked’ or ‘retweeted’  
30 something anointed by the perpetually outraged as an affront (Suissa & Sullivan,  
31 2021).

32

33 The UK University and College Union (UCU) notes that academic freedom is under  
34 increasing threat, where a quarter of UK academics report being bullied by  
35 colleagues because of their views (Karran & Mallinson, 2017). What has happened  
36 to academic freedom, critical inquiry, respectful debate and reasoned thinking?  
37 Rather than academia welcoming and facilitating the expression, exchange and  
38 testing of ideas, these are now suppressed by lurking fear, corporate diktat or policy  
39 capture (Stock, 2019). Some disciplines seem more blighted than others, for  
40 example women’s studies, philosophy and even biology. Nursing seems to have  
41 stayed under the radar of the new censoriousness but we cannot be complacent.  
42 Nursing’s academic community must restate its support for academic freedom to  
43 research, think, discuss and write without fear or intimidation from politicians, funding  
44 agencies or pressure groups.

45

46 Academic freedom as a cornerstone of the academy is being eroded (Stock, 2019;  
47 Suissa & Sullivan, 2021) by sustained activist campaigns intended to silence and

48 discredit scholars who challenge their particular views (Dreger, 2016). This is no  
49 'party political' complaint as the 'woke left' are now as censorious and authoritarian  
50 as the established right. The vitriol and oppression are the same but the  
51 perpetrators have changed. Once corporate power brokers, media moguls and  
52 unscrupulous governments tried to control academia, now it is pressure groups and  
53 social media 'pile-ons'. What is at stake here is not ideas or discussion *per se*, but  
54 whether one group can effectively be allowed to silence and ostracize others. The  
55 core of academic freedom is that staff and students raise, discuss, debate, engage  
56 with and evaluate ideas without the constant threat of orchestrated social media  
57 mobbing, doxxing and shaming in the digital stocks of today's virtual village square.  
58 Authors of this editorial would fundamentally disagree on numerous political and  
59 social issues but we all agree that such differences of opinion should lead to thought-  
60 provoking discussion, not bullying, silencing or sacking.

61

62 Nursing schools often fail to explicitly promote academic freedom, not because they  
63 disagree with its tenets, but due to fear of possible threats to tenure or reputation,  
64 they prefer to keep quiet rather than risk confected outrage or organized  
65 harassment. This corrosive compliance undermines academic freedom and hampers  
66 nurses' development as articulate, critical thinkers. So, where are the academy's  
67 leaders – the vice-chancellors and deans when courage and leadership are so  
68 urgently needed? Unfortunately, they have a declining record of defending staff and  
69 protecting the academic freedom that is of far greater importance than the latest  
70 social media indignation, 'diversity champion award', or spurious notion of 'reputation  
71 management'. With notable exceptions, many nursing deans seem 'missing in  
72 action' rather than visibly upholding principles of freedom of speech and thought.

73

74 Nurses need to discuss complex arguments, theories and biopsychosocial issues  
75 however unpalatable or controversial they seem. Silently surrendering to the latest  
76 fugacious fad is not 'doing better'. Rigorous debate and discussion help students  
77 navigate the myriad people and situations they will face as nurses that will tax their  
78 abilities and skills. There are no 'safe spaces' in practice devoid of racists, anti-  
79 vaxxers, misogynists, science deniers, Facebook experts and more. Nurses cannot  
80 simply walk away, complain to management that they 'feel unsafe', or demand that  
81 this patient be de-platformed. Nursing schools can engender and model productive  
82 disagreement, helping students and faculty to be intellectually curious, critically  
83 aware of personal and professional biases and assumptions and willing to change  
84 views due to new understanding or evidence. Faculty and staff will hold a range of  
85 diverse views that they should be able to express and discuss collegially without fear  
86 of retribution or concerted shaming from any outraged minority who may disagree  
87 with them.

88

89 Deans and Heads of School must support academic freedom to flourish in a civil,  
90 robust, constructive atmosphere. Diverse ideas and rebel thinking should be  
91 welcomed. Denunciatory, suppressive, virtue-signalling censorship should not.  
92 How can we ensure that academic freedom is encouraged and upheld in Schools of  
93 Nursing? At a minimum, schools should:

- 94       · Challenge standardised, rigid, approaches to teaching and learning
- 95       · Place routine critical inquiry and dialogue among students and faculty at
- 96       the heart of teaching and learning

- 97           · Resist pressures to ‘don’t go there’, where issues are deemed
- 98           controversial, sensitive or allegedly ‘not up for discussion’.
- 99           · Engage students in the importance of scholarly academic citizenship
- 100          · Organize debates, seminars and conferences with students and faculty
- 101          around major issues

102

103 Universities and schools of nursing should be bastions of academic freedom, not  
104 cravenly complicit in its destruction.

105

106 As we finished writing this editorial, Essex University in the UK, following an  
107 absolutely damning external review  
108 ([https://www.essex.ac.uk/information/event/review-of-two-events-involving-external-](https://www.essex.ac.uk/information/event/review-of-two-events-involving-external-speakers)  
109 [speakers](https://www.essex.ac.uk/information/event/review-of-two-events-involving-external-speakers)) has issued fulsome apologies to two prominent academics who were  
110 ‘disinvited’ from seminar presentations for allegedly being “transphobes” who  
111 promoted “hate speech”. Their subsequent ‘blacklisting and exclusion’ was deemed  
112 “unlawful” [https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/05/21/british-university-](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/05/21/british-university-apologizes-disinviting-academics-over-views-gender)  
113 [apologizes-disinviting-academics-over-views-gender](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/05/21/british-university-apologizes-disinviting-academics-over-views-gender) . The Vice Chancellor was  
114 “deeply concerned to read the input into the review from some staff and students  
115 who said that they felt constrained to self-censor their speech and activity”  
116 [https://www.essex.ac.uk/blog/posts/2021/05/17/review-of-two-events-with-external-](https://www.essex.ac.uk/blog/posts/2021/05/17/review-of-two-events-with-external-speakers)  
117 [speakers](https://www.essex.ac.uk/blog/posts/2021/05/17/review-of-two-events-with-external-speakers). Many other VCs should be similarly concerned. The University has now  
118 re-confirmed its commitment to academic free speech and to the idea of a university  
119 being a place where “difficult and sometimes uncomfortable conversations” can take  
120 place and where “ideas that some may find challenging or unpopular can be

121 expressed and debated” <https://www.essex.ac.uk/blog/posts/2021/05/17/review-of->  
122 [two-events-with-external-speakers](https://www.essex.ac.uk/blog/posts/2021/05/17/review-of-two-events-with-external-speakers). That this needs to be re-stated indicates the  
123 parlous condition of academic freedom in many Universities. The Essex Report  
124 does provide a glimmer of light and many universities are now urgently examining  
125 their policies and practices in its light. Nurses and nursing schools should learn the  
126 lessons of Essex University’s failures always be free to speak truth to power  
127 regardless of who happens to be wielding it.

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