

Academic freedom in Irish higher education

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Abstract

Academic freedom has been the subject of considerable debate, in terms of the academic practices of academics and students, and the role of democratic principles in higher education. It has been argued that academic freedom is being threatened in several European countries, including those within the EU. To explore how academic freedom is experienced by academics and postgraduate students in one European country, Ireland, that has witnessed significant changes in higher education, we interviewed 15 academics and 10 postgraduate students. Results indicate general satisfaction with the level of academic freedom in Ireland. However, participants also expressed concerns relating to university autonomy, which can also affect academic freedom. The findings also indicate that the transformation of universities into institutions operating under the control of external entities and structures can be problematic. As such, we argue that the use of these institutions as tools for market driven policies poses the risk of limiting academic freedom for both academics and students.

Keywords

Academic freedom, academics, postgraduate students, Irish higher education, Ireland

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Data Availability Statement included at the end of the article

Introduction

The issue of academic freedom has engaged scholars for many decades (Ashby, 1966; Brown, 2006; Karran, 2007; Lynch and Ivancheva, 2015; Marginson, 2014; Marginson and Considine, 2000; Neave and van Vught, 1994; Slaughter and Leslie, 1993; Tight, 1988; Vidovich and Currie, 1998). According to the Lima Declaration, academic freedom is the freedom of individuals or groups within an academic community to acquire, develop, and communicate information through research, analysis, discussion, documentation, production, creation, teaching, narration, and writing (World University Service, 2021). Similarly, we define academic freedom as the right of academics to research, study, teach, and publish without interference. It encompasses the freedom of members of an academic community to acquire, develop, and communicate information individually or collectively through teaching, research and engagement. This includes the right of academics to express their views in disciplines without fear of restrictions.

Academic freedom and university autonomy are closely related concepts (Ashby, 1966; Berdahl, 2006; Karran, 2007; Matei, 2017; Neave and van Vught, 1994). The Yerevan Declaration (2015), which falls under the scope of the Bologna Process, emphasises the importance of university autonomy and academic freedom for individuals. It states that every member of an academic community should have the same rights (Yerevan Declaration, 2015). Although interrelated, there are differences between academic freedom and university autonomy both in terms of their conceptualisation and operation. Matei's (2017) argument suggests that academic freedom, which in this conceptualisation refers to the freedom that individuals in academia have to continue their scientific and educational activities without inappropriate interference from the legal framework, institutional arrangements, or political pressure, depends on the nature and culture of the institution where scholars work. For this reason, Aksoy (2021) suggests that autonomy is crucial for academic freedom. Violations of autonomy can lead to universities being guided by external individuals or institutions, resulting in the loss of academic freedom through direct and indirect processes. Lynch and Ivancheva (2015) argue that university autonomy alone is not sufficient to guarantee academic freedom for academics. However, academic freedom may not exist in universities where university autonomy is ensured. Karran (2007) similarly suggests that an autonomous university may not provide full academic freedom.

The impact of neoliberal policies on education and universities may restrict academic freedom to a considerable extent. In the 1960s, it was deemed appropriate for universities to be financed by the state. However, in the 1980s, changes were made to the service areas of the state and the duties of the state were redefined. In particular, education and health services are now provided by private individuals or organisations, and these activities are encouraged (Karakütük, 2001). Aksoy (2005) asserts that neoliberal policies are designed to reduce public expenditure and that the goal is to privatise public services, including education and health. Similarly, Şimşek (2018) emphasises that neoliberalism views all areas of society as potential sites for hegemonic control and that education is a key instrument for promoting a neoliberal understanding of the world.

In their 2000 study, Slaughter and Rhoades define the impact of neoliberal policies on universities and academics as 'academic capitalism'. They argue that such policies and practices view higher education as a sub-branch of the economy, with universities are expected to operate as institutions that serve neoliberal goals and tendencies. In this context, Yasa (2023) posits that academic capitalism can be understood as the proliferation of private universities, the introduction of student tuition fees, the emergence of paid journals, scientific research aligned with market objectives, and the perception of universities as institutions solely dedicated to training professional personnel.

Similarly, [Slaughter and Leslie \(1993\)](#) emphasise that although universities are funded by the state, academics are increasingly dependant on the private sector and the market, and that they tend to undertake market-oriented studies in order to obtain external financial support due to insufficient state support, and that they have to conform to the goals and expectations of the private sector. Therefore, it is understood that university autonomy and academic freedom include being autonomous and free from neoliberal education policies, and that it implies the existence of universities and free academics who can make their own decisions against neoliberal goals such as commercialisation, competition, efficiency, profit and similar neoliberal goals, and where scientific studies can be carried out not for profit but for social benefit.

In the context of these explanations, the fact that universities are under pressure to find more financial resources under the influence of neoliberal policies may lead some academics to face practices such as questioning or censorship of their research and ideas. In addition, neoliberalism may lead universities and academics to operate in a more competitive environment and focus more on commercial activities. This can lead universities to ignore academic freedom and prioritise financial gain.

Academic freedom in Irish higher education

Academic freedom is well protected in Ireland's public higher education sector. The broader institutional and political context for academic freedom does not involve a repressive government seeking to limit or punish those who engage in teaching and research that goes against national policies or addresses politically sensitive issues ([Roberts Lyer and Potapova, 2020](#)). However, institutional autonomy is highly centralised and 'top-down', which places significant restrictions on financial autonomy, including budget, procedures, procurement, recruitment, and salaries, as well as governance ([Roberts Lyer and Potapova, 2020](#)). [Roberts Lyer and Potapova \(2020\)](#) further argue that the higher education sector is at risk of being undermined by the state due to reduced funding, increased student-to-staff ratios, precarious employment, tenure reduction, and increased regulatory oversight. They suggest that these factors pose a threat to academic freedom. The positioning of higher education as a net contributor to the economy, rather than a public service, was accelerated by the austerity plans imposed by the International Monetary Fund, European Central Bank, and European Commission after the financial crisis in Ireland in 2008 ([Lynch and Ivancheva, 2015](#)). According to the European University Association (EUA) report ([Pruvot and Estermann, 2017](#)), since 2008, Irish higher education institutions have been forced to deliver more with less. According to [O'Shea and O'Hara \(2019: 340\)](#), the Higher Education Authority (HEA) Higher Education Systems Performance Framework (HESPF) for 2018–2020 set Ireland's goal to 'become the best higher education system in Europe', placing a significant burden on a system that is widely regarded as underfunded.

Concerns have been raised within Irish higher education due to the tight control exerted by the state. Government documents consistently emphasise market-based considerations ([Roberst Lyer and Potapova, 2020](#)). More funding is allocated to particular areas of education and research, with STEM fields being prioritised, resulting in a reduction in funding available for other disciplines such as Arts and Humanities. The financial crisis has also led to an increase in the commercialisation and privatisation of higher education. Additionally, the number of permanent, tenured academic positions has gradually decreased, replaced by temporary, low-paid, and non-tenured positions ([Mercille and Murphy, 2017](#)).

[Lynch and Ivancheva \(2015\)](#) argue that state funding for public universities in Ireland is increasingly conditional on meeting government targets and requirements, including prioritising

certain types of student education and providing grants for highly selective areas and market-led research. The funding of research is particularly influenced by commercial interests. The Research Prioritisation report for Ireland in 2011 (Lynch and Ivancheva, 2015) did not list any subjects in the Arts and Humanities or Social Sciences as priority funding areas. This remains the case in the 2018–2023 report, in which manufacturing and materials, as well as innovation in services and business processes in the science, technology, and innovation fields, are prioritised. According to the report, the primary criterion for prioritisation was market relevance.

According to Walsh (2012), Irish universities are being encouraged to view graduates as human capital and to engage in a process wrongly labelled as education. This process follows an entrepreneurial market model, in which the humanities are often seen as an indulgence that is disconnected from productivity. Lynch (2006) argues that market-oriented universities weaken the position of the Arts, Humanities, and Critical Social Sciences. This is because most research and teaching in these fields do not directly serve the for-profit sector. Instead, their purpose is to educate for the public sphere and civil society rather than for profit. Van Kampen (2012) argues that the focus on profit-oriented research has negatively affected academia, suggesting that universities should prioritise the transmission of knowledge over financial gain. Waters (2009) similarly critiques the emphasis on publication quantity over quality in academic studies. In this regard, according to Rhoades and Slaughter (1997: 25), what was once referred to as basic and then fundamental research is now often referred to in reports as curiosity-driven research, and academic curiosity, which is the driving force behind scientific growth, is now considered a luxury.

The report titled ‘University Autonomy in Europe’ (Pruvot et al., 2023) provides key data across various metrics to facilitate system-level comparisons of higher education systems in 35 European countries. According to the report, Ireland ranks 12th in organisational autonomy, 18th in financial autonomy, 24th in staffing autonomy, and 3rd in academic autonomy. It is notable that Ireland ranks highly in academic autonomy while having one of the lowest rates of staffing autonomy among the countries surveyed. Ireland’s score is influenced by the impact of the Employment Control Framework and moratorium on recruitment and promotions, as well as collective agreements on salaries and dismissal procedures (Pruvot et al., 2023). The EUA report (Pruvot et al., 2023) suggests that staffing issues in some countries may be linked to the various dimensions of autonomy. Ireland is an example of this, where financial constraints have led to tighter regulations in staffing that have persisted over time.

The 2023 Academic Freedom Report reveals that Ireland has one of the highest academic freedom scores, with a score of 0.9 on the academic freedom index, which ranges from 0 to 1 (Kinzelbach et al., 2023). The top 5 countries with the highest academic freedom scores are Czechia, Estonia, Belgium, Italy, and Germany, while the 5 countries with the lowest scores are Cuba, Rwanda, Egypt, Turkey, and Iran (Kinzelbach et al., 2023). Ireland ranks highly in terms of academic freedom and autonomy (Kinzelbach et al., 2023; Pruvot et al., 2023). However, the EUA report by Pruvot et al. (2023) highlights some significant constraints. Universities have the freedom to design curricula, select students, and elect or dismiss the executive. However, they must include external members on their governing bodies, have restrictions on how they use parts of the state funding (such as money earmarked for access programmes), and adhere to collective agreements regarding salaries and dismissals established by the government and certain trade unions (Pruvot et al. (2023)).

Academic freedom in Ireland is typically discussed in relation to institutional autonomy in higher education establishments. In recent years, the Irish government has been exerting more control over higher education institutions by requiring greater accountability for public spending. The 2022 Higher Education Authority Act was signed in October of that year (HEA, 2022), resulting in

changes to the functions and governance of higher education institutions. The recent intervention by the HEA in the governance of the University of Limerick and the Technical University, Dublin, demonstrates how the increasing oversight powers allocated to this arm of the government can have a direct impact on the operation of HEIs (RTE, 2024). In addition, the prioritisation of market-based research areas has led to these institutions' increased dependence on the market and economic purposes.

These issues also have significant impacts on postgraduate students in Ireland in terms of academic freedom. Complaints regarding funding and PhD grants in Ireland have recently increased. In July 2022, the PhDs' Collective Action Union submitted an open letter to Irish universities, funding agencies, and the Department of Education and Skills, requesting appropriate compensation for PhD researchers in Ireland. Nearly a thousand PhD researchers from across the country have signed a statement requesting appropriate compensation to pursue their academic interests, which directly relates to their academic freedom. Although there has been some movement in this area with an increase in the basic stipend (Government of Ireland, 2023), the challenges that arose during the COVID 19 pandemic remain in the system for doctoral students across all disciplines (del Pulgar Cinque et al., 2023).

This study aims to examine the current situation in Ireland with regard to academic freedom. The study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. What does academic freedom mean to academics and postgraduate students in Ireland?
2. What are their positive and negative views and experiences regarding academic freedom in Ireland?
3. What are the current and potential problems related to academic freedom in Ireland according to the views of academics and postgraduate students?
4. According to the views of academics and postgraduate students, how can academic freedom be improved and protected in policy and practice, and how can any perceived current and potential future problems be resolved or prevented?

Table 1. Participants (academics).

Grade name	Gender	Field	Code
Full Professor	Female	Social Sciences	A1
Full Professor	Male	Social Sciences	A2
Full Professor	Female	Social Sciences	A3
Full Professor	Male	Social Sciences	A4
Full Professor	Male	Social Sciences	A5
Assistant Professor	Female	Social Sciences	A6
Associate Professor	Male	Natural Sciences	A7
Full Professor	Male	Social Sciences	A8
Full Professor	Female	Social Sciences	A9
Full Professor	Female	Social Sciences	A10
Full Professor	Female	Social Sciences	A11
Associate Professor	Female	Natural Sciences	A12
Associate Professor	Male	Natural Sciences	A13
Associate Professor	Female	Natural Sciences	A14
Full Professor	Female	Social Sciences	A15

Table 2. Participants (postgraduate students).

Mode of study	Gender	Field	Code
Part time	Female	Social Sciences	P2
Part time	Female	Social Sciences	P3
Part time	Male	Social Sciences	P4
Full time	Female	Natural Sciences	P5
Part time	Male	Natural Sciences	P6
Part time	Female	Social Sciences	P7
Full time	Female	Natural Sciences	P8
Full time	Female	Social Sciences	P9
Part time	Female	Social Sciences	P10

Methods

This research used a diversity sampling method (Glesne, 2015) and comprised of 15 academics and 10 postgraduates from 5 HE institutions across Ireland who had various academic tenures, and disciplinary fields.

The researchers developed two semi-structured interviews for academics and postgraduate student's that consisted of 11 questions. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning that additional questions were asked during some interviews, depending on the flow of the conversation. For example, questions such as 'How do you relate accountability to academic freedom?', 'What does university autonomy mean to you?', and 'Why would you choose to remain silent even when you disagree with your supervisor?' were asked. The answers to the additive questions were correlated with the research objectives and discussed alongside the responses to the other interview questions. The interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes each, and the participants provided their consent for the interviews to be recorded. Following on from this, interview data was coded according to the type of participant. For example, when referring to the code A1, it identifies the person as an Academic and the number indicates the interviewer's interview order. When referring to the code P2, the first letter identifies the person as a Postgraduate Student and the number indicates the interview order. (Tables 1 and 2).

Following on from this, data were analysed using inductive analysis which allowed for the identification of emerging themes, categories, and patterns (Patton, 2014) of which, the data was categorised into 8 interlinked themes (Table 3), the results of which are presented in the proceeding sections of the paper. In Table 3 below, identified themes and questions on the nature of academic freedom are given and a detailed description is presented with the definitions and questions related to the themes.

Results

Freedom to teach and research

Based on the data collected from the interviews, the academics interviewed considered academic freedom to be a crucial right that enables them to teach and research freely, pursue areas of knowledge of their choosing, and exercise authority and autonomy in their research and teaching without interference from institutions or governments. Similarly, postgraduate students also

Table 3. Identified themes and questions on the nature of Academic Freedom.

Theme	Description	Questions
Freedom to teach and research	[With tenure] academics have the freedom to teach and research with the security, knowing they will only be sacked for good cause, a threshold essentially requiring gross misconduct (Sinclair, 2023: 2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does academic freedom in higher education mean to academic staff and postgraduate students? • Do they feel free to decide what they want to work on? • Do the academics feel free to specify and plan the courses they want to carry out and the content of these courses? • Do the academics feel free to organise and participate in scientific events such as workshops, symposiums, and conferences? • Do the academics feel free to establish or join professional organisations?
Freedom to write and speak	The freedom to discuss any issue without fear of reprisal, and the freedom to write and speak as citizens (Tierney and Lechuga, 2010: 122)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do the academics and postgraduate students feel free to express their opinion on academic, social, environmental or political issues, etc.? • Have the academics and postgraduate students ever felt that they cannot speak freely? If so, in what situation did it happen? • Is it possible to object if they think something in their institution or in HE system is not fair or is biased?
Support and hierarchies	The support that graduate students need from their supervisors in order to be able to conduct their research freely and their supervisors' adoption of a hierarchical approach that restricts students' academic freedom (Rönkkönen et al., 2023: 2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do the postgraduate students think they receive enough supervisor support? In which aspects do they receive/not receive support? Do they think that their academic freedom is restricted due to the hierarchical structure?
Funding and stipends	One of the primary obstacles to academic freedom is insufficient funding resources. Without adequate funding, researchers are unable to conduct their research processes in an effective and scientific manner (Rea, 2021: 28)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do the academics and postgraduate students receive financial support for projects, research, conferences, symposiums, workshops, etc.? Are the postgraduate student scholarships/stipends sufficient? Do they feel restricted in this regard? If yes, how and to what extent does this situation affect their academic freedom?
Contracts of employment	In Ireland, Contracts of employment fall under the following categories: Permanent: - Full-time; Permanent Part Time; Temporary: Full-time; Temporary: Part-time; Hourly Paid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do academics think that contracts of employment have an impact on their academic freedom? If yes, how and in which cases?

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

Theme	Description	Questions
Marketisation and Neoliberal Policies	In the field of education: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neoliberalism can be characterised by policies that promote privatisation, competition, and accountability (Ball, 2003; Burch, 2009; Lipman, 2011) • Marketisation can be described as the application of market principles to the educational sector such as Competition (Whitty, 1997), Commercialisation (Ball, 2003), Performance Metrics (Ozga, 2009), Funding (Lubienski, 2006) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the effects of marketisation policies and neoliberalism on academic freedom? How, in which situations and to what extent are academics and students affected by these policies in their academic practices?
Gender inequality	Inequality relates to lack of access to rights, assets and decision-making; and to lack of control over various facets of one's life (European Commission, 2004: 10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do women academics and women postgraduate students experience restrictions in their academic freedom due to gender inequality? If yes, what are these restrictions and their reasons? How and to what extent does gender inequality restrict women's academic freedom?
Improving and maintaining academic freedom	Academic Freedom in Ireland is enshrined in legislation, that is: A member of the academic staff of a university shall have the freedom, within the law, in his or her teaching, research and any other activities, either in or outside the university, to question and test received wisdom, to put forward new ideas and to state controversial or unpopular opinions and shall not be disadvantaged or subject to less favourable treatment by the university for the exercise of that freedom (Irish Universities Act, 1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they think is there anything that can be done to ensure/improve academic freedom in Irish HE system? If yes, what can be done? What are your suggestions?

emphasised the importance of conducting research without any external interference or pressure. They valued the freedom to develop their own ideas within the framework of sound methodological principles and ethical considerations. It was also crucial for them to pursue their research interests without any political or business influence. The following sample comments from postgraduate students illustrate this point:

I suppose it means, within the framework of good methodological approaches and ethical considerations, to be able to pursue your own research interests without any kind of external influence, like political influence or business influence. –P3

It means having the freedom and the power to explore, analyse, and research any particular area that is of interest without having any restrictions on that. –P1

It means having the ability to conduct research on topics that I'm interested in, to not be prevented from pursuing topics that might be a little bit difficult or a little bit complicated, and to be encouraged by my supervisor and by the university. –P9

Academics reiterated the high value placed on academic freedom in Ireland, allowing them to choose their research topics, participate in scientific events, and establish professional organisations. They also stated the freedom to teach as they saw fit. However, it is important to note that the field is highly regulated, and there are specific graduate outcomes that must be met by all courses. As one academic explained:

We don't have complete freedom there, but I think it is a good thing; because it is not like a syllabus, it is more like a framework that shows you have to meet the outcomes. –A1

Some academics viewed this situation as an interference or restriction of their freedom to teach. However, another perspective considered this 'framework' to be a positive influence rather than a restriction on their freedom.

Postgraduate students reported that they felt free in their choice of research topic and methodology, choice of courses, participation in scientific events, and have not experienced any restrictions. However, some academics argued that their academic practices are not entirely free from limitations. For instance, some academics in the field of education claimed that the Teaching Council of Ireland's requirements had defined what they must teach, which could be quite restrictive. They stressed that there was little room for flexibility in this regard. A number of participating academics viewed the Bologna Process as a restriction on their academic freedom. They argued that it limited their autonomy. For example, A8 commented on this issue as follows:

At times, with the defined set of parameters around how we teach, the Bologna Process can limit the extent to which you can be flexible in your teaching because we are required to meet these outcome measurements, and I think it is a limit on the absolute freedom that I have experienced. –A8

Although theoretically free, postgraduate researchers reported that they faced practical constraints on their scientific practice. They expressed concerns about their ability to choose their own supervisors and research topics, as these were often predetermined by their supervisors or funders. Some postgraduates were advised to be cautious when selecting their research topic, even when they had the freedom to choose. They perceived this as a limitation. One postgraduate student explained:

I don't really feel free to choose my supervisor and my research topic. I applied for this opportunity for the funds and staff for the scholarship, and at that time, the research and the supervisor were kind of defined beforehand. To be honest, at first my supervisor said that I could work on whatever I wanted. I mean, the direction of the research would be my way, but then it turned out to be something else. So, I felt restricted in terms of freedom to choose my own research topic and techniques. –P4

Freedom to write and speak

The academics emphasised the importance of the freedom to express their opinions, whether on television or social media. They viewed their contributions as evidence-based and critical. Academic freedom, in terms of freedom of speech, allowed them to express their thoughts within

reasonable boundaries. For instance, they could be critical without endangering or offending individuals through hate speech. As one academic explained:

To me, it means two things. One is freedom of speech. As an academic, within reasonable boundaries (for example, hate speech or expressions that can endanger people), I can say what I think. The second aspect is that I should be free to pursue whatever research I want to pursue. –A2

The postgraduates emphasised the importance of being able to speak freely without any pressure from their supervisors or other authorities, to engage with the problems they faced within academia and society, and to give critical feedback and suggestions on the issues they were experiencing. They valued the freedom to write and speak objectively, without any subjective evaluations, unless clearly marked as such. Furthermore, the respondents asserted that they were able to express their opinions freely without any external pressure or constraints. A postgraduate participant provided the following explanation:

As a postgraduate student in Ireland, what I have observed so far is that our ideas are not constrained; we are even encouraged to share them with others. –P7

The academics asserted that they were able to freely express their views, both in person and on social media. They also stated that it was possible to object to things that they find unfair or biased, and that there were no institutional or collegial restrictions on speaking freely. However, they considered it important to be sensitive when expressing opinions. An academic provided an example from her experience:

I chaired a taskforce at the university about gender-based violence and sexual harassment in higher education institutions, and I found statistics about the experience of women in HE quite disturbing. For example, the chance of a female undergraduate student being subjected to sexual harassment was so much higher than that of a male student. And I spoke out about that, chaired the taskforce, and we actually affected the government's policy about it. –A1

In this example, the academic highlighted the freedom to speak up against unfair, biased, or incorrect actions. They also stressed the importance of avoiding offence when discussing sensitive topics. This responsibility and respect towards society and others was not seen as a restriction but rather as a duty. One academic shared their perspective:

I can speak freely and express my opinions. But I need to be careful with sensitive subjects, such as abortion, especially in my lectures and in conversations with colleagues, to not be offensive for some others. –A2

Some academics felt restricted in expressing their views on academic, social, environmental, or political issues due to cultural limitations in academic life. They also did not engage in certain conversations to avoid being labelled or having their promotions blocked. The influence of 'cancel culture' was evident in their speech, thoughts, and social media interactions. One academic shared her personal experience with this issue:

I have had promotions blocked, and I have had funding repelled because I am opposed to the managing structures. –A10

Some academics felt free to express their opinions, but they were aware that there might be consequences if their views did not align with those of the leading management structures. They were also concerned about the potential negative impact on their promotion, career, or opportunities if they voiced objections. One academic used the term ‘speaking truth to power’, which she later explained as follows:

Speaking truth to people who are powerful to say this is not working or this is not going in the right direction or something like that is not always easy. –A9

Similarly, another academic presented her perspective as follows:

There is absolutely the opportunity to express views, but I think the only thing is probably self-censorship. So sometimes I may choose ‘I don’t agree with that’, but actually I don’t feel strongly enough to win the debate, so I don’t engage. –A2

In the context of freedom of expression, an academic shared her experience at her university as follows:

Two years ago, my university moved to abolish academic freedom. There was a proposal that was put together by the academic council and was circulated as a proposal to all academics in the university, and it purported to find that our academic freedom policy needed to be amended in such a way as to reflect the fact that a lot of our business partners in dictatorships didn’t recognise academic freedom. Therefore, we needed to adapt. There was a petition with about 500 signatures, and this move on academic freedom was stopped after this petition. However, there are still some managing structures that still question academic freedom. Just because the attempt was foiled does not mean that there was a change of heart. –A10

Similarly, the postgraduate students reported that they refrained from expressing their criticism due to discomfort. They noted that if they perceived any bias, unfairness, or wrongdoing, they preferred to remain silent to avoid jeopardising their relationship with their academic supervisors, the university, and their funding. This poses a significant challenge to academic freedom. As one postgraduate student explained:

I remember bringing up an issue with my head of school; the issue was about another centre in our institution. Because of her relationship with that centre, she couldn’t say anything. She couldn’t agree with me. And she was already in a comfortable position. So, there are certain things we are not allowed to talk about. –P4

Support and hierarchies

Some of the postgraduates believed that academic freedom depended on the support of their supervisors and universities to pursue their academic goals. They perceived that their supervisors should provide them with the necessary support to be academically free, and that institutions should encourage them to pursue their academic interests. Additionally, the participants reported that their supervisors were supportive and helpful. They felt comfortable expressing their opinions to their supervisors and trusted that their academic goals were supported. The participants also felt free to express their views without any pressure or constraints on their ideas. They were encouraged to share their ideas.

However, some postgraduates reported difficulties communicating with their supervisors. They perceived that some supervisors were hierarchical and intimidating, which discouraged open communication. They considered it important for supervisors to create a supportive and approachable environment for effective communication with their students. Some postgraduates avoided disagreeing with their supervisors due to the power dynamic, which can be intimidating. This is exemplified by the experiences of a friend of one postgraduate student:

I know some people's supervisors who have threatened them to pull the plug on their funding. Horrible things are going on behind closed doors. Many students can't work what they want to work on and can't be critical when they want to be critical because they are afraid of their supervisors pulling the plug. –P8

The postgraduate students believed that supervisors should provide more support and create an environment where they could express their views freely. They stressed the importance of students being able to choose their own supervisors and work collaboratively with them. The students hoped for an academic environment where they could communicate openly with their supervisors without fear of losing funding, stipends, or harming their career prospects.

Funding and stipend

The academics often expressed dissatisfaction with funding, citing it as a major constraint on academic freedom. According to the academics, funding institutions tend to favour popular research topics, which can limit the scope of research. This can lead to the shaping of research activities. The academics emphasised that researchers were expected to report and discuss their findings objectively to secure continued funding. Some social science academics argued that their field was underfunded compared to the natural sciences. According to the academics, the reason for this situation may be short-term economic goals, which pose a threat to academic freedom in the social sciences. An academic's statement on the matter is provided below:

A funding structure may require us to publish our results in a way that they prefer. So this is big a problem for academics. –A8

The postgraduate students' statements revealed that the most problematic issue regarding funding and stipends was the inadequacy of their financial support. They stressed that participating in conferences and workshops was too expensive and that they needed sufficient funding to travel for such events. The students also expressed that insufficient funding demotivated them in their research. The postgraduates emphasised that academic pursuits were impossible without sufficient funding. One of them explained the issue as follows:

Postgraduates can't afford to live and feed themselves. If you're not going to get a night's sleep and you're not going to get enough food, you're not going to function well at university, especially at the postgraduate level. –P7

Additionally, the students asserted that this situation had a negative impact on their education and restricted their academic freedom. They highlighted that their stipend was insufficient to cover the high rental prices in many key cities in Ireland and that there was a lack of accessible student accommodation. They stressed that this issue was discouraging to many students and called for an increase in their funding and stipend. One postgraduate student expressed a desire to pursue their education without financial constraints. They also highlighted the issue of inadequate funding for the social sciences and recommended prompt action to address this problem.

The academics highlighted the need to discuss the funding problem and stated that the distribution of funds should be fair among all disciplines. They recommended that universities and the government work cooperatively in this area. Additionally, they noted that research in the social sciences is underfunded compared to the natural sciences, which is problematic. To address this issue, the academics recommended that the government and universities provide more funding for social science research to encourage academic work in this field. Some postgraduate students in the social sciences suggested that there were inequalities in funding between the natural sciences and the social sciences. One student shared the following view:

I think 90% of the funding that is available at the moment is for the natural sciences, and maybe 10% of this is for the social sciences. That's a huge discrepancy. Of the 90% of the funding available for the natural sciences, most is funded by the private sector. That's a fundamental flaw in the system because I think that's actually a real challenge to academic freedom. –P3

Contracts of employment

Some academics noted that early-career researchers face disadvantages, such as having insecure contracts. They also expressed concern about their position within the institution. This sentiment was shared by an early-career academic:

I am an early-career academic, so I can say that I have some concerns about my contract with the institution. –A7

The postgraduates in Ireland called for the country to align with the rest of Europe by providing proper working insurance and contracts with workers' rights, sufficient funding, and clear stipulations for when funding can be retracted.

Marketisation and neoliberal policies

Another issue related to academic freedom is the influence of neoliberal policies in higher education. The academics were critical of this situation, which some referred to as 'utilitarianism in academia', highlighting it as a significant threat to academic freedom. Utilitarianism refers to the perception of universities as an extension of the economy, with their purpose primarily linked to wider economic needs. This view undermines the traditional role of the academy. The academics argued that the emphasis on metrics and data has made universities more focused on quantity over quality, with students being treated as clients. These changes were attributed to neoliberal educational policies. They also expressed concerns about the limitations with publication opportunities, citing their dependence on the economic goals and prestige of the journals in which they publish their research. One academic staff member explained this issue as follows:

Systems of research of assessment mean that all faculties are increasingly encouraged to publish in certain outlets, such as academic journals that have a high status. This has become stronger than it was at the beginning of my career. I mean, 35 years ago, we had greater freedom in terms of research and publication. Now, the constraints are stronger in publication opportunities. This is because of concerns about the prestige of particular journals. –A9

Gender inequality

The female academics were critical of gender inequality problems in academia. They suggested that female students, academics, and postdocs were likely to be subjected to gender-based violence. This situation was considered a constraint for women in academia. We noted that the female academics often had greater family commitments, which may limit their ability to travel for academic events compared to their male colleagues. The participants stated that women academics faced disproportionate constraints in academia due to domestic responsibilities and highlighted issues with patriarchy in universities. Two female academics provided an explanation for this situation:

In an academic meeting, a woman says something; it is not really taken up and then later a man might say something similar and then it becomes part of the discussion. –A11

There are still elements of patriarchy in universities; female voices are not necessarily heard. –A15

Regarding gender inequality, female postgraduate students also raised concerns about unequal treatment between male and female students. They suggested that being a woman can be a disadvantage when expressing opinions, while men are often taken more seriously.

Improvement and protection of academic freedom

The academics recommended implementing a democratic accountability system, reducing bureaucracy in universities, and prioritising academic freedom. They suggested that academic and university cultures encourage respect and diversity. People should be allowed to disagree, hold dissenting views, and engage in arguments with each other. For these reasons, they argued that universities should not be viewed as industrial institutions and should not be solely dependent on the economy. Some statements on the subject are as follows:

People should be allowed to disagree and have dissenting views and arguments with each other in universities. –A6

A culture of respect and a culture of diversity need to be encouraged in academy and universities. –A12

We all need to be vigilant in terms of our academic freedom and freedom of speech. –A9

Regarding institutional freedom and accountability and their relation to academic freedom, the academics suggested that the state should guide rather than directly instruct. They also recommended that stakeholders collaborate to discuss these issues objectively. They suggested that Irish higher education institutions should address academic freedom concerns, such as gender inequalities and discrimination in academia, before they escalate into crises. Additionally, the responsibilities of universities should be brought to the table for discussion. With regard to these suggestions, some academics presented their suggestions as follows:

Irish higher education needs to discuss academic freedom issues more. We haven't really had good discussions about how we will manage these situations, such as gender inequalities and discrimination in academy and what our responsibilities are as universities. –A10

To solve the funding issue, universities and the government should work cooperatively. –A1

I think we need to start discussing those things before they become crises. –A15

Regarding the suggestions from postgraduates, they emphasised that PhDs and postdocs should be recognised as employees with appropriate protection and given the right to join unions. They stressed that they should have access to a sufficient number of study grants and the importance of arrangements in this regard. They also suggested that postgraduate students and postdocs should have stable contracts and a democratic environment at the institutional and governmental levels. For example, two of the postgraduate students expressed their suggestions as follows:

Definitely, Ireland should step up like the rest of Europe and offer their PhD students proper working insurance and proper contracts with workers' rights. They should have enough funding, and the contract should clearly spell out when their funding can be retracted and what sort of stipulations are for that funding. That is the number one thing that needs to be changed quickly. –P8

To preserve academic freedom, we should have stable contracts that are clear. –P1

Additionally, the postgraduates emphasised that they should be continuously encouraged to engage with each other, support each other, and collaborate across different universities. They also stressed the importance of providing intercultural training for academic staff, administrators, and fellow students, and that this training should address the challenges faced by international students when navigating the complex cultural realities of Irish higher education. For instance, in relation to the issue, P4 stated the following:

There needs to be more intercultural training to make people more open to each other. And that openness is super important, and then that openness can be transferred, we will become open academically as well with each other. Right now, I just feel like everything is just so heavy, and you don't know where you stand with your work, with your contract. It's just so hush-hush. So, I think that would be a good step for that. –P4

The students also highlighted the issue of social sciences receiving less financial support than natural sciences. They believed that fair distribution of the budget is crucial to ensure academic freedom for those working in the social sciences. P3's opinion on the issue is given below as an example:

I think 90% of the funding that is available at the moment is for the natural sciences, and maybe 10% of this is for the social sciences. That's a huge discrepancy. Of the 90% of the funding available for the natural sciences, most is funded by the private sector. That's a fundamental flaw in the system because I think that's actually a real challenge to academic freedom. This problem needs to be solved as soon as possible. –P3

Another issue frequently emphasised by postgraduate students was the need to improve student-supervisor communication. The students suggested that supervisors should provide more support, help them with their research, and improve communication. They also emphasised that students should have the freedom to choose the supervisor they want to work with. They considered it essential for their academic freedom. For example, P7 and P5 expressed this issue as follows:

If students have problems with their supervisors, they should be able to go to the advisors in students' affairs and talk to them. After the discussion process, they should be able to change their supervisors with someone else or solve problems with their supervisors. Unfortunately, however, there is no real process for this. –P7

Supervisors should be more supportive, and we should be provided with an environment where we can freely express our views and objections. –P5

Conclusion and discussion

This research analyses the perspectives of academics and postgraduate students in Ireland on academic freedom and university autonomy. The aim is to understand, interpret, and provide recommendations on factors that may impact academic freedom. The analysis was conducted concurrently for both groups. While both groups seemed to have positive perceptions and experiences of academic freedom in Ireland, they also criticised some negative aspects and provided examples from their experiences. This section examines the key themes that emerged from the study and links them to the wider scholarly debate in the field. This study examines the opinions and recommendations of academics and postgraduate students regarding academic freedom in the context of:

- Neoliberal higher education policies
- Academic capitalism
- University autonomy
- Strict control over universities and academics
- Gender inequality

According to the academics and postgraduates, academic freedom is highly valued and exists at a good level in Ireland, which allows for free and open discussion of new ideas. It is important to note that this statement is based on subjective evaluations and should be clearly marked as such. The majority of the participants felt free to choose research topics and methods, participate in professional organisations, and express their opinions in a democratic environment. However, despite these positive situations and experiences, academic freedom issues still exist in the country. Most of the participants identified funding issues and the corporatisation of universities as major problems. Additionally, they noted that popular topics received greater funding than the social sciences, which was not adequately funded. They pointed out that short-term economic goals were prioritised, and that precarious employment and increasingly tight state control were making individuals feel restricted. These issues are also related to university autonomy, which is the institutional form of academic freedom. Both groups shared the view that higher education institutions are increasingly reliant on neoliberal economic interests and on prioritising the needs of private institutions, which can impede scholars' scientific practices. In this regard, similar to the results of this study, Steven Jones (2022) highlighted the challenge of securing financial support for studies within the UK higher education system, particularly in the humanities, arts, and social sciences. He criticises the precarity of academic working conditions, which Judith Butler (2009) defines as 'politically induced precarity'. Steven Jones (2022) argues that the higher education system has become market-oriented, treating students and academics as customers and employees of a company, and he criticises that those who resist this system are often labelled as politicised and headstrong.

Echoing the results of this study, [Roberts-Lyer and Potapova \(2020\)](#) find that academic freedom in Ireland is positive in terms of research and teaching, allowing Irish scholars to design their curricula and teach their courses without state interference. However, they also find that universities may favour certain agendas, such as encouraging research in STEM fields, which is consistent with the findings of this study. Similarly, a 2015 study ([Lynch and Ivancheva, 2015](#)) suggests that major issues regarding academic freedom and university autonomy in Ireland include self-censorship, prioritised funding areas, the neoliberalisation of higher education, the rise of precarious employment, and increasing state control.

[Levidow \(2007\)](#) argued that the neoliberal project is undoing the collective gains of the past. It is privatising public goods, allocating government spending to subsidise profits, weakening national regulations, and removing trade barriers, thereby intensifying global market competition. Arguably, neoliberal policies have paved the way for the establishment of a new type of private school and private universities, which can almost be called corporates, with the aim of making educational institutions responsible for serving the goals of the capitalist market and policies. In this regard, universities are increasingly acting like businesses and are perceived as being similar to any other corporate business environment ([Dholakia et al., 2020](#); [Levidow, 2007](#)). [Gallagher \(2012\)](#) identifies flaws with the model of higher education at the time in the US and UK:

- The erosion of academic experience as a developmental and transformative public good, and its replacement by the credentialism that treats education as a commercial or business transaction;
- The promotion of a corporate culture of conformity that undermines independent, critical, and creative thinking;
- The counterproductive managerialist stranglehold both on academic work and on fully transparent and participative university governance.

[Gallagher \(2012\)](#) highlights the situation in the US and UK higher education systems, where academic capitalism has led to education and academia being viewed as commercial goods. This can limit independent and critical thinking, as well as transparent and participatory management, potentially resulting in violations of academic freedom and university autonomy. Some respondents in this study may agree with these points. It is uncertain whether the implementation of a new governance model, as outlined in the 2022 Higher Education Authority Act, will push Irish higher education further into this policy space. [Mercille and Murphy \(2017\)](#) state that the bureaucratisation of higher education has increased the number of managerial positions at a faster rate than academic ones. This has resulted in increased control over academics by management.

Upon examining related studies, it is evident that academic freedom is becoming increasingly restricted in modern universities worldwide, even in countries with the highest academic freedom index ([Aarveaara, 2010](#); [Kinzelbach et al., 2023](#)). [Aarveaara \(2010\)](#) states that Finland has one of the highest academic freedom indices. However, diversified funding sources and high levels of fixed-term employment have been shown to have a negative impact on academic freedom. According to [Aarveaara's \(2010\)](#) findings, academics may face difficulties even in countries where academic freedom is legally protected. These difficulties may be related to university autonomy in terms of financing and employment, as exemplified by Ireland. Such restrictions on academic freedom can negatively impact the quality of public debate and pluralistic democracy ([Melody, 1997](#)). It is widely acknowledged that academic freedom and university autonomy face challenges worldwide. These challenges can hinder the realisation of higher education's goals and functions.

Gender inequality is another problem that affects academic freedom in Irish higher education. Female academics and students often have less voice than their male counterparts, and domestic responsibilities

can cause women to lag behind their male colleagues in academic pursuits. As evidenced by the scholars' statements presented in the findings, both male and female academics and students do not work under fair conditions. Similarly, in their study on gender inequality in Irish higher education, [Ruggi and Duvvury \(2023\)](#) emphasise that policies based on gender inequality have made women's academic achievements invisible, hindering their ability to attain managerial positions.

Academic freedom in Ireland is generally considered to be at a good level. However, financial, administrative, and academic issues related to university autonomy may also restrict academic freedom in some aspects. Our findings indicate that academics and postgraduate students are worried about the transformation of universities into institutions controlled by external and sometimes private entities. This situation is potentially problematic. The potential for academic institutions to become tools for neoliberal policies poses significant challenges regarding the meaning, purpose, type, and funding of teaching and research. This dependence on institutions can limit academic freedom for both academics and postgraduates, as these institutions may shape research and teaching activities to comply with profit targets. Therefore, it is important to maintain academic independence and avoid such limitations.

Similarly, the government's pressure for accountability and tight control over universities has turned academics, students, and universities into instruments responsible for meeting economic demands. Therefore, it is necessary to consider making changes to the government's practices in this area. There is a need to adopt an attitude that does not allow for the violation of university autonomy and academic freedom, as these are rights inherent to universities and academia. PhDs and postdocs should be provided with a secure working environment and stable contracts, allowing them to freely express their thoughts and carry out their scientific activities without fear of contract or scholarship cancellation. Funding should be distributed fairly, without bias towards fields with higher financial returns. It is important to avoid keeping social sciences in the background and to pave the way for progress in these areas.

The findings of the research demonstrate that neoliberalism has had a profound impact on academics and students within the Irish HE system, affecting them in a multitude of ways. The neoliberal transformation of universities has been identified as a significant threat to academic freedom, with detrimental effects on the Irish HE system. The prioritisation of fields of study aligned with the market objectives and offering high profit returns has led to a situation where academics and universities are compelled to seek external financial resources due to budgetary constraints. Additionally, concerns have been raised about the impact of paid journals, censorship, gender inequality in academia, inadequate budgets, and the unequal distribution of resources which have been perceived as undermining the primacy of academic goals.

In conclusion, although there are many reasons to celebrate academic freedom in Ireland, the realities experienced by academics and postgraduate students should remove any sense of complacency at the individual, institutional, or state level. The challenges faced in Ireland are similar to those experienced in many countries. However, the specific cultural, institutional and political context means that they play out in a unique manner that depends on the extent to which governments and other stakeholding groups value the themes identified in this study.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author (Yasa, R.). The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

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