

# Academic freedom

## 1. Declaration on academic freedom and freedom of expression at KU Leuven

A fundamental distinction should be made between academic freedom and freedom of expression . Academic freedom applies to members of the community who speak as scholars, whether that be in a classroom, in their research or when providing services to the wider community. Freedom of expression applies to non-academics using University premises and also to members of the University community in a non-academic context.

**Academic freedom** enables members of the University community to explore facts, hypotheses and beliefs without restriction . This freedom is a necessary condition for achieving the University's core purpose: acquiring and disseminating knowledge. Prevailing opinions, existing dogmas and prejudices must always be open to critical questioning and may need to give way to new paradigms. University staff members, therefore, enjoy the intellectual privilege to freely develop new research ideas, create teaching content, and share their insights with students and society. The search for truth depends on the advancement of a wide range of ideas. This presupposes a spirit of openness to different methods and scientific approaches whilst maintaining an eye for detail and context. Students not only enjoy the fruits of academic freedom through knowledge acquisition but are also introduced to a 'democratic' culture, one where they learn to develop their own position and to show respect for those who hold different views

Respecting academic freedom is important but is not easy in practice. Contrasting perspectives can cause confusion. Being confronted with hypotheses and with the results of biomedical, technological or humanities research can offend people. However, this cannot be a reason to make concessions in the search for truth, as detecting and revealing uncomfortable truths is part of the University's mission. This guarantee of the free acquisition of knowledge does not mean that the University agrees with or recognises the legitimacy of any statement of opinion or fact; rather, the University takes no position at all on the proclaimed findings.

Such a far-reaching freedom must be handled responsibly. It implies two duties. Firstly, as academic freedom serves the collective search for truth, it is important that teachers, researchers and students combine this freedom with an ethos of truth-seeking, even when they are firmly convinced of their own views. Preliminary research results should be exposed to the processes of scientific review. Academics should take into account the existing scientific evidence, and they should be open to further changes in understanding of what is considered true at any given time.

The second duty associated with academic freedom is the creation of a stimulating learning environment, one where all students can effectively participate in the learning process and the search for truth in a setting that respects their diverse backgrounds. Academic freedom requires a context of welcoming, open and inclusive knowledge acquisition and dissemination.

These two duties entail that researchers and teachers exercise care. When researchers or teachers proclaim scientific findings, the expectation is that they have been thoroughly informed and have considered the existing evidence. When unusual propositions are defended or controversial speakers are invited to campus, it is important that the lecturer or organiser shapes any debates and lectures in a way that accommodates reasonable dissenting voices and respectfully welcomes every participant to partake in the learning process. This requires no concessions on the content of defended propositions: inconvenient and unusual propositions can be presented, as well as insights that may be perceived as offensive. However, this should always be done in an academic spirit of truth-seeking and in an atmosphere of respectful openness toward all members of our community.

Outside of this academic context, all members of the academic community enjoy the **freedom of expression** granted to all citizens. However, they remain subject to any restrictions imposed by law (e.g. on non-discrimination). This also applies to members of the University and others who use University premises and infrastructure for non-curricular events, e.g. lectures by student organisations or political parties. At no time can the content of declarations made in these contexts be attributed to the University, nor may it be implied that the University legitimises any statements made therein.

Furthermore, disciplinary and staff regulations remain applicable to members of the academic community, and staff members are expected to express their opinions with responsibility and integrity, even in non-curricular settings.

## 2. Practical guide

The above framework on academic freedom is applicable whenever the University's premises are used for *academic* purposes. Any non-compliance with the aforementioned duties will be determined by the relevant academic authority (e.g. the study programme level).

Freedom of expression is the applicable standard when reserving KU Leuven premises for *non-academic* purposes. In such circumstances, several basic principles must be observed:

1. Anyone reserving a room agrees to the following rules:

- › it must be clear who the responsible organiser is;
- › the organiser must be available for contact;
- › in no way may the impression be created that what is being organised is a KU Leuven event;
- › the physical safety of all participants must be guaranteed at all times;
- › violence or prevention of normal campus activities is prohibited;
- › the event must proceed respectfully;

- › all laws must be followed, including laws that prohibit speech crimes such as threats, sexism, racism, and the denial of genocides as defined by law. As such, organisers are to be informed of the content of the relevant laws upon booking. An organiser who violates these basic rules may be denied the ability to reserve KU Leuven venues in the future; those who break the law are subject to prosecution.

2. Anyone reserving KU Leuven premises is to be informed of the University's values as contained in the mission statement and the Charter for Respect, Safety and Inclusion. This is in accordance with KU Leuven's pursuit of an active diversity policy. We encourage organisers to consider fair access to speaker positions, the inclusion of vulnerable and marginalised groups, and the importance of open, respectful and contradictory debate. KU Leuven expects all participants to act with integrity and respect within a culture of open and free communication.

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