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Is Academic Freedom Under Threat?

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Executive Summary

Recent years have seen a global debate about threats to academic freedom, namely the ability of university academics to research, teach and voice ideas without risk of professional disadvantage. Academic freedom has long been central to the search for truth, the development of well-rounded critical thinkers and the spread of prosperity. The freedom of academics to explore a wide range of ideas without fear of negative consequence helps to drive innovation, dynamic societies and viewpoint diversity, which is central to countering rising levels of polarisation.

Yet today it is argued by people from across the political spectrum that academic freedom and freedom of expression more generally are under threat. According to the 2021 Legatum Prosperity Index, freedom of speech has deteriorated across all regions of the world.[1] Meanwhile, within universities a series of recent evidence-led reports suggest that academic freedom is under threat from several factors.

These include but are not limited to: the growing dominance of particular ideological perspectives on campus which, it is argued, are leading to a 'monoculture' that is hostile to alternative views, voices and beliefs; evidence that university academics and students who do not share these perspectives are experiencing a hostile environment on campus and, as a result, are 'self-censoring' their views; a growing tendency to prioritise student satisfaction over academic freedom; and, closely related, to prioritise the emotional or psychological safety of students over the pursuit of truth, reason and objective enquiry, which necessitate exposure to uncomfortable, challenging and/or controversial ideas.[2]

The debate about academic freedom has also tracked a significant number of cases of academics experiencing negative consequences because of their nonconformist views. These academics come from across the ideological spectrum. They include the likes of Kathleen Stock in the United Kingdom who left her position at the University of Sussex after experiencing harassment and intimidation by trans rights activists; Peter Boghossian who resigned from Portland State University while claiming the institution was 'intolerant of divergent beliefs'; Canadian Professor Jordan Peterson, whose offer of a visiting fellowship at the University of Cambridge was rescinded after protests among staff and students; concerns about threats to academic freedom from a loss of tenure in some U.S. states and debates about 'free speech zones'; and the specific role of the Prevent counter-terrorism strategy which some academics in the UK argue is limiting their academic freedom. In late 2021, this debate over threats to academic freedom was also reflected in the arrival of an entirely new institution, the University of Austin, which aims to offer an alternative to what it calls 'illiberalism' on campus.

In this report, we contribute to this global debate by reporting findings from a new and unique survey of academics who are currently working in some of the world's leading universities in four democracies: Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States. Our aim is not to politicise the debate or fuel further polarisation but merely to report our findings and contribute to the ongoing discussion.

Our survey, which includes academics from Harvard to Princeton, Oxford to Cambridge, Toronto to McGill and Australian National University to Melbourne, offers unique insight into the views and values of the world's leading intellectuals. It allows us to probe their ideological beliefs, their support for academic freedom and free expression, the extent to which they tolerate nonconformists and are comfortable with the growing politicisation of higher education.

In summary, we find:

- **Clear evidence of a strong ideological imbalance on campus.** Across all four democracies, the vast majority of academics, 76%, identify as left-wing with 21% of that group identifying as far left. Just 11% self-identify as right-wing, raising questions about the extent to which viewpoint diversity exists on campus.
- **Large numbers of academics, regardless of their ideological orientation, feel the need to 'self-censor' their political beliefs while on campus.** Overall, 41% of *all* academics in our sample say they 'sometimes feel the need to hide or self-censor my political beliefs when I am on campus', while 9% of this group agree *strongly* they feel the need to self-censor.
- **In the UK, 35% of academics feel the need to self-censor compared to 29% in Australia, 44% in Canada and 50% in the United States.** While academics in the UK appear less likely than their counterparts to feel the need to self-censor, still more than one in three feel this way, suggesting somewhere in the region of 50,000 full-time academic staff in the UK are self-censoring their views on campus.

- **While large numbers of all academics are self-censoring, academics who self-identify as right-wing, who comprise a small minority on campus, are considerably more likely to say they self-censor:** 75% of right-wing academics feel the need to self-censor compared to 35% of left-wing academics. Most right-leaning academics in elite universities feel unable to reveal their political beliefs.

- **Encouragingly, despite a strong imbalance on campus, we find significant support for the principle of academic freedom and free expression.** A majority of academics support people being free to express their political views openly in a democracy, for students being exposed to speakers who might offend them and for universities to defend free speech even if students object. These are positive findings and ones that should attract more attention in what is quickly becoming a polarised debate.

- **But, at the same time, we also find that large numbers of academics openly dislike groups who do not conform to the dominant left-wing orthodoxy:** they are far more likely to feel positively toward left-wing voters than right-wing voters. Overall, while 64% of academics feel positively about people who support left-wing parties, only 10% feel the same way about people who support right-wing parties.

- **There is also an asymmetry in how each side views the other;** while 70% of left-wing academics openly dislike right-wing voters, only 36% of right-wing academics feel the same way about left-wing voters. We also find that academics are far more likely to say they feel positively about supporters of specific social movements, such as Black Lives Matter, than supporters of right-wing parties.

- **Worryingly, we also find a sizeable minority of 'activist academics' who prioritise ideological goals over academic freedom.** A sizeable minority of one-quarter of the academics in our sample do not think limits on freedom of speech undermine the principles on which universities were founded, one quarter believe the ideological goal of social justice should always be prioritised *even if it violates academic freedom*, close to one quarter do not support exposing students to speakers who might offend them and close to one in five think people who hold extreme views should not be free to express them openly in a democracy.

- **We also find considerable support for the ongoing politicisation of higher education,** including the use of 'diversity statements', whereby academics applying for jobs are required to voice their commitment to equity and diversity; as well as support for university administrators making political statements on campus. Nearly six in ten academics in our sample, 57%, think requiring job applicants to write diversity statements is a justifiable requirement, rising to 65% among left-wing academics. And while almost 60% of academics feel that university administrators have a duty to be politically neutral in their statements on campus, close to one in four of academics, 24%, are comfortable with administrators making political statements.

- **Left-wing academics are significantly more likely to voice these views than right-wing academics;** whereas 91% of right-wing academics think academic freedom should always be prioritised even if it violates social justice ideology only 45% of left-wing academics feel the same way, suggesting large numbers of academics who lean left are willing to compromise on the principle of academic freedom.

- **Lastly, our more fine-grained statistical analyses suggest that this willingness to curtail academic freedom is especially likely to be found among specific groups in the academy,** namely young scholars, women, sociologists and academics in Australia and Canada. It is less likely to be concentrated among typically older professors who often enjoy greater job security (i.e. tenure), men, academics who work in psychology and who are based in the U.S. Professors are 6.1 points more supportive of academic freedom than Assistant Professors, suggesting the challenge to academic freedom will remain visible if not increase in years ahead.

1. Academic Freedom: Why It Matters

Academic freedom, *namely the ability of scholars to express and explore ideas without risk of professional disadvantage,* has long been considered central to higher education, the search for truth and the spread of prosperity.

The ability of university academics and their students to interrogate a wide range of questions, ideas and beliefs without fear of negative consequence has long been associated with benefits, from driving prosperity to encouraging the development of well-rounded, critical thinkers who have been exposed to a broad range of ideas.

Academic freedom not only helps to explain the spread of prosperity across advanced democracies such as the United States and the United Kingdom, but also why they are still home to many of the world's leading universities.

Between them, the US and UK still account for all but one of the top twenty universities in the world and all but fifteen in the top fifty.[3] These universities are also a major source of soft power and inward investment, with universities in the UK, for example, currently home to almost 600,000 international students.

The ability of academics from all sides of the spectrum to explore a diverse range of questions, share challenging or controversial opinions and expose the next generation of thinkers and leaders to viewpoint diversity without fear of negative consequence has undoubtedly contributed to this remarkable success story.

Yet in recent years there has emerged growing concern among academics from very different ideological perspectives that this freedom is under threat. While debates about threats to academic freedom are not new, having been visible since at least the 1960s, in recent years it has intensified in response to several factors.

Firstly, there has emerged clear evidence that in recent years universities have drifted increasingly to the left, raising profound questions about the extent to which, if at all, academics and their students are being exposed to genuine viewpoint diversity on campus. Amid this ideological monoculture it can become difficult to expose academics and students to alternative ideas and beliefs while research suggests that where there is not genuine viewpoint diversity these monocultures can become more radical over time, silencing and stigmatising nonconformists.

Secondly, there have emerged parallel concerns about the extent to which universities are increasingly prioritising the satisfaction and 'emotional safety' of students over other goals. This raises important questions about the extent to which the marketisation of higher education is undermining the search for truth and the need for students and staff to be exposed to uncomfortable and challenging ideas.

Thirdly, the growing internationalisation of universities and influx of students from overseas, though especially China, has raised a parallel set of questions over the extent to which higher education and intellectual freedom are now being compromised by a growing reliance upon funding

from authoritarian regimes.

Fourthly, there have emerged specific worries about the impact of things such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK, which encourages academics to prioritise policy-relevant and funded research over free intellectual enquiry.

Against this backdrop, a series of recent empirical studies and prominent individual cases suggest that significant numbers of academics and their students are directly experiencing harassment and intimidation or, indirectly, are choosing to 'self-censor' their views and research so as not to suffer these negative effects.

The same organization found that 66% of college students express at least some support for shouting down speakers while 23% of students consider it acceptable to use violence to stop certain speech, with both figures increasing on 2020. More than 80% of students say they are self-censoring their views at least some of the time while 21%, around four million students, are self-censoring on a regular basis.[4]

Concern about threats to academic freedom in America have also been fuelled by institutions in U.S. states such as Georgia and Iowa which have moved to abolish tenure for academics. Tenure has long been central to university faculty being able to challenge ideas, beliefs, governments and research without suffering negative effects. This concern has also encompassed scholars on the left who argue that in states such as Florida Republican politicians have moved to restrict their academic freedom.

In the United States, in 2021, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) tracked a significant increase in efforts to harass, intimidate and/or dismiss academics, finding that most of these targeting campaigns came from the left. Over the last five years, it uncovered 426 incidents of academics targeted with almost three-quarters experiencing sanctions, including dismissal.

In the United Kingdom, similarly, recent research at King's College London suggests one-quarter of students are self-censoring their views while survey data collected by the University and College Union (UCU), a trade union representing more than 120,000 academics and support staff, suggests one in three academics now self-censor due to fears they will suffer negative consequences if they voice their views or deviate from the dominant orthodoxy. UK academics were also significantly more likely than their counterparts across the European Union to report abuse, bullying and to feel the need to conceal their beliefs.

Yet it is academics and students who comprise the ideological minority who are most likely to self-censor and report harassment. Other comparative surveys provide tentative evidence to suggest that significant numbers of academics in Canada, the United Kingdom and United States would openly discriminate against nonconformist or contrarian scholars who violate the dominant left-wing or liberal progressive orthodoxy, including when hiring, promoting, awarding research grants and reviewing academic publications, all of which are crucial to forging a successful academic career.

Research by Professor Eric Kaufmann, for example, suggests more than 4 in 10 academics in Canada and the U.S. would not hire a known supporter of Donald Trump while one in three academics in the UK would not hire a known Brexit supporter.[5]

Other research suggests close to one in three academics in the UK who self-identify as right-wing are self-censoring their views compared to only one in eight who identify as centrists.[6] Similar findings have emerged regarding students; while 9 in 10 Remain-supporting students feel comfortable voicing their beliefs on campus fewer than 4 in 10 Brexit-supporting students feel the same way. Given these findings it is hard to avoid the conclusion that viewpoint diversity is being stifled in some universities.[7]

Such findings have also been symbolised by a number of prominent individual cases which have attracted global attention. They include but are not limited to: Kathleen Stock who left the University of Sussex after reporting a coordinated campaign of harassment by trans rights activists; Charles Negy who was fired by the University of Central Florida in the United States after staff and students led a Twitter campaign for him to be dismissed after allegedly racist tweets; Neil Thin who was similarly suspended by Edinburgh University after student allegations he

In the United Kingdom

¼ of university students *self-censor their views*

1 in 3 academics *self-censor due to fears they will suffer negative consequences if they voice their views or deviate from dominant orthodoxy*

had sent racist, sexist and transphobic tweets (Thin was later cleared); Noah Carl who had his research fellowship terminated by St. Edmund's College, Cambridge, after student and staff complained about his research; Oxford University's Selina Todd who was assigned security guards after criticising transgender ideology and was disinvited to address a conference at Oxford; Regius Professor Nigel Biggar who was subjected to protests and the disruption of his Ethics and Empire project after challenging the dominant narrative about the legacy of Britain's Empire; Jordan Peterson, who had his invitation of a fellowship from Cambridge withdrawn after protests by staff and students; and Mike Adams, who committed suicide after he was pushed into early retirement after posting allegedly offensive tweets.[8]

While some argue these cases are few and far between, a list of cases in the United Kingdom, compiled by the group Academics for Academic Freedom (AFAF), includes more than 100 cases of contrarian or controversial speakers who have been banned from speaking at universities and/or experienced harassment because of their views.[9] Similar research in the U.S. has tracked a sharp increase in the overall number of academics who have faced harassment, intimidation and student-led protests.

Such findings are now having a clear impact on public and policy debates. In late 2021, reflecting global debate, The Economist spoke out against what it called the 'illiberal left' on campus, warning academic freedom is under threat from a 'stifling orthodoxy'.[10] In the United Kingdom, growing concern about the issue has led to the introduction of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill which seeks to make provision in relation to freedom of speech and academic freedom in universities and student unions. In the United States, similar concerns have been stoked by the recent decision by the University of Florida to deny permission to three faculty members to provide expert testimony in a major voting rights case, as well as by attempts to introduce 'free-speech zones' on university campuses. And in Quebec, Canada, 2021 also saw the formation of a new committee to examine threats to academic freedom.

Those who warn academic freedom is under threat also point to evidence of a sharp decline in public trust in universities and higher education, especially in the United States. In 2021, the impartial and rigorous Pew Research Center reported a significant decline in public confidence in universities, especially among those who are least likely of all to be represented among faculty: Republicans.

While 76% of Democrats said 'colleges and universities are having a positive effect on the way things are going in America', only 34% of Republicans felt the same way, a drop from 59% in 2015. Almost two-thirds of Republicans, 64%, now feel colleges and universities are having a negative effect on the way things are going in America.

The gap between these groups has continued to grow over time. Whereas in 2019, Democrats and Republicans were separated by 33 points, by 2021 this gap had grown to 42 points. This growing polarization in public attitudes toward the education system also extends to schools; while 77% of Democrats feel positively about schools in America, only 42% of Republicans feel the same way, a divide that clearly found its way into the recent election campaign in Virginia, where Republicans argued that schools are 'indoctrinating' children with radical left-wing beliefs on issues such as race and gender (though in reply Democrats argue that evidence on the prominence and influence of 'critical race theory' remains unclear).[11]

On the other side of this debate are those who argue that threats to academic freedom are either non-existent, have been identified on the basis of research which is methodologically flawed or are exaggerated by right-wing political actors. Specifically, we can organise these criticisms into three relatively distinctive approaches.

A first criticism is that the number of university events which have been postponed or cancelled due to student and/or staff protests appears to be low. In 2018, BBC Reality Check submitted Freedom of Information requests to UK universities and found that, since 2010, there had only been six occasions on which universities cancelled speakers in response to student complaints.[12] Some academics also point to specific cases as undermining the argument there is a widespread problem, such as Germaine Greer, who despite protests was eventually permitted to speak at Cardiff University.

Yet it is also true that a narrow focus on the 'no-platforming' of speakers or cancellation of events ignores many of the issues discussed above, namely how social norms and political pressures within universities can work to discourage academics from inviting controversial and/or contrarian speakers to begin with, long before any event has or has not taken place.

Seen from this perspective, the disinvitation of speakers or cancellation of events only represents the 'tip of the iceberg', with the much larger iceberg beneath the surface representing the social norms, ideological pressures and self-censoring, which are ignored in debates that focus narrowly on individual events which do take place. Seen through this lens, the question is not how many events are cancelled or how many speakers are disinvited but rather how many never take place to begin with because they violate the dominant left-wing ideological orthodoxy on campus.

A second criticism is methodological in nature, namely that existing studies which have suggested academic freedom is under threat have suffered from limitations. Often, survey-based approaches have relied upon small numbers of undergraduate students, large numbers of retired academics who are no longer working in universities or significant numbers of PhD and/or postdoctoral students who may hold more radical views but also wield much less influence over university and departmental culture and decision-making. In 2020, a Policy Exchange report on academic freedom was criticised by some academics for relying on a large number of retired academics, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the views of actual academics.[13] We address this criticism in our own survey below.

A third criticism is that existing findings have been exaggerated and that while there might be a few cases of individual academics being harassed, intimidated or simply sacked the majority of academics neither oppose the principle of academic freedom nor back any negative treatment of nonconformist academics. For example, while recent studies suggest significant numbers of academics are self-censoring, they also suggest that a majority (including those on the left) do *not* discriminate against those who hold alternative views. While significant numbers of conservative and gender critical scholars do report discrimination on campus the proportion of academics who say they would oppose a campaign to oust academics who violate the dominant orthodoxy outnumbers the small minority, of between 7% and 18%, who support it.

Nonetheless, it is also true that an ideologically radical, organised and small minority of activist scholars can wield considerable influence over university culture, leaving moderate academics feeling unable or unwilling to speak out against campaigns of harassment, ideological measures and policies which do violate academic freedom. Where is an organised and ideologically radical minority of activist academics, so it is argued, this can often lead to ideological or political goals such as 'social justice' or 'equity and diversity', being prioritised at the expense of academic freedom.

To address these criticisms of existing research and explore these debates more fully, we analyse and present findings of a new and unique global survey of academics who are *currently* teaching and conducting research in the world's most elite universities.

Our sample is comprised of academics in the social sciences who are currently working in top ranked institutions in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and United States, who are teaching and researching fields such as political science, law, history, sociology and psychology. By zooming in on actual academics, including the most senior academics at the most elite institutions, our survey provides unique insight into their backgrounds, beliefs and views of academic freedom and viewpoint diversity.

2. About the Survey

Our survey, which was overseen by Professor Matthew Goodwin and received ethics approval from the University of Kent, was sent to academics who are currently working at the top twelve institutions in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and United States, as defined by the Shanghai 2020 Annual Ranking of World Universities.[14]

Academics in our sample are based at some of the world's leading universities, from Harvard, Stanford, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Princeton and Columbia through to Yale, Cornell, Oxford, Cambridge, University College London, Toronto, McGill and Australian National University.

Overall, our sample includes academics from 48 universities around the world who received the survey through Qualtrics, an online programme used to administer and analyse surveys. Their contact information was collected via publicly available departmental websites.[15] In the few cases where no contact information was available, no further attempts were made to find it. The survey was distributed during the summer of 2021 (from May 20th to June 29th) and produced 650 responses, representing a response rate of 8%. The completion rate was 85%.

Who completed the survey? Overall, 46% are professors, 31% are associate professors/senior lecturers and 23% are assistant professors/lecturers. Accordingly, our sample is slightly biased towards more senior academics at the top universities, though it should also be noted that professors also wield greater influence over their departments and universities. They are evenly distributed across the social sciences, with 27% from Political Science, 22% from Law, 20% from Sociology, 18% from Psychology and 13% from Economics. Before distributing the full survey, we conducted a pilot study with a small number of academics, some of whom provided feedback via e-mail and social media for which we are grateful.

Rigorous and reliable research projects should always acknowledge their limitations. Our study has four such limitations. Firstly, to ensure consistency in the universities we rely on to find relevant departments/schools, our study does not take account of universities that have strong departments, but which are not ranked among the 'top 12' universities. For example, in the United Kingdom, the London School of Economics is not included because, in 2020, it was not listed among the top 12 leading universities in the Shanghai rankings (it was listed 17th).

Secondly, while we could easily get the top institutions in the United States, the rankings are not granular enough to provide a detailed ranking in all countries. For example, in Canada, only the top four universities have a unique ranking and the next five are part of the top group rankings. In Australia, this is the case for universities outside the top seven. In the United Kingdom, it is relevant for universities outside the top eight. In order to still have 12 universities from each country, we selected the first on the list (alphabetically ordered) within the category of the best universities. An alternative approach would be to select randomly within the remaining universities. In our analysis of the data, we found no systematic evidence that universities at the bottom of the list (within the top universities), differ significantly.

Thirdly, while we are looking at the most prestigious universities, the top universities in the United States are better ranked globally than top universities in, say, Canada and Australia. For example, of the 2020 rankings the United States is home to no less than 30 of the top 50 universities in the world. This means one should be cautious when making strong country comparisons between institutions. American universities are more likely to be among the top universities in the world, whereas this is not the case for their counterparts in Australia.

And, fourthly, as for all survey research, we cannot rule out potential selection biases. That is, academics who are more willing to participate in surveys might differ from academics who are less willing to participate in surveys. Accordingly, below, we pay extra attention to how our sample might differ from that of the population of academics and potential caveats of the findings.

For each university, we collected contact information on full-time academic staff from departments in the social sciences, namely politics/political science, sociology, law, economics and psychology. Some of our questions were also included on nationally representative surveys that a member of our team was running simultaneously in the United States, allowing us to draw some comparisons with the general public. We did not collect contact details for academics on temporary contracts (e.g., postdocs) as we wanted to focus on permanent faculty.

3. Findings: Who are They?

We begin our exploration by looking at the political orientation of academics. Those who voice concern about threats to academic freedom argue they arise from a strong ideological imbalance in universities, specifically the way in which growing numbers of scholars lean left, which it is argued has three effects.

Firstly, shaped by this bias it is argued academics become more willing to discriminate against nonconformists who self-identify as right-wing, challenge left-wing progressive values or conduct research which challenges this orthodoxy, such as rising ethnic, sexual and gender diversity, support for the European Union or critical interpretations of history, such as the negative legacy of Britain's Empire.

Secondly, a strong left-wing bias is also thought to encourage nonconformists to self-censor their views on campus, to hide their real beliefs and avoid particular research questions because of fear they will suffer negative consequences for doing so. When there is a strong monoculture this can encourage the premature foreclosure of research questions and debates, whereby findings that conform to the dominant ideological orthodoxy, however tentative, are accepted while those which do not are either never produced, downplayed or simply ignored.

And, thirdly, it is argued that a strong ideological bias in one direction undermines the quality of higher education for the rapidly rising number of students who are entering universities each year and who, as a result, are less likely to be exposed to alternative viewpoints on campus.

To what extent do we find evidence for these claims?

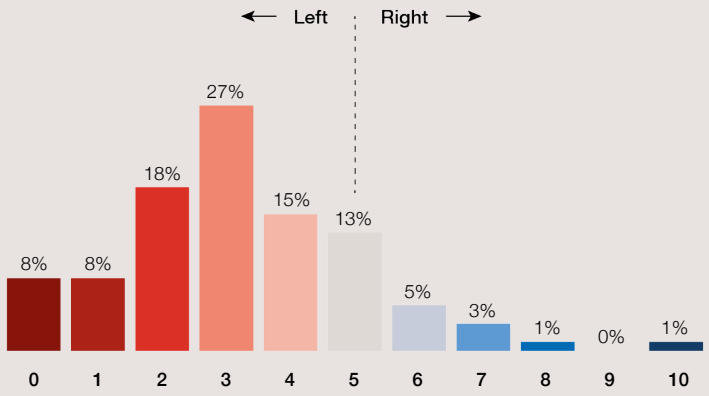
We find that a large majority of academics in the world's most elite universities self-identity as left-wing. When we asked academics to place themselves on the 'left-right scale', where 0 is far-left, 5 is the middle point and 10 is far-right, the average placement was 3.26, meaning most academics self-identified as clearly left-wing.

Overall, in our full sample, 76 per cent identified as left-wing and, within that group, 21 per cent identified as far-left. In sharp contrast, just 11 per cent identified as right-wing and, within that group, only 14 per cent identified on the radical-right.

Right-wing academics comprise only a very small share of scholars who are currently teaching and researching in the world's leading universities. In turn, it suggests university students might not be exposed to genuine viewpoint diversity.

Figure 1

Academic Left-Right Placement



While cross-country comparisons should be treated with caution, academics in the United States were most likely to identify as left-wing on a 0 (leftmost) to 10 (rightmost) scale at 2.89 followed by Australia (3.06), Canada (3.34) and the United Kingdom (3.47). This echoes the findings of another recent report.[16]

Sociologists were most likely to identify as left-wing (2.56), followed by Psychologists (3.05), Political Scientists (3.46), Law scholars (3.49) and, lastly, Economists (3.86). In no discipline did right-wing academics outnumber or come close to balancing their left-wing counterparts. Far-leftists were most visibly represented in Sociology and in Australia while conservative academics were most strongly

represented in Economics and in the United Kingdom, although they remained in a clear minority.

Turning to age, some analysts argue this strong left-wing slant is growing over time as more recent and more socially liberal generations self-select into academia while right-wing scholars are leaving academia or no longer see it as a viable, attractive or enjoyable career. In the U.S. research suggests the ratio of left-wing scholars to right-wing scholars has sharply increased from around 1.5 to 1 in the 1960s to close to 6 to 1 by the late 2000s, though in some fields it has spiralled much higher, to 13 to 1 or more. Work by Sam Abrams suggests between the mid-1990s and early 2010s the proportion of left-wing academics jumped by 20 points to reach 60% while the share who identified as either moderates or conservatives declined sharply.[17]

In the UK, studies suggest that whereas in the 1960s 35% of academics voted Conservative and 47% Labour, by the mid-2010s support for left-wing parties among academics had surged to 82% while support for conservative parties had more than halved to around 15%.[18] In short, academics are far more likely than the average voter to support liberal or radical left parties and much less likely to support right-wing ones. Other work finds that only 1 in 8 academics in the UK supported the Conservative or Brexit parties at the 2019 election whereas almost 1 in every 2 citizens did.[19]

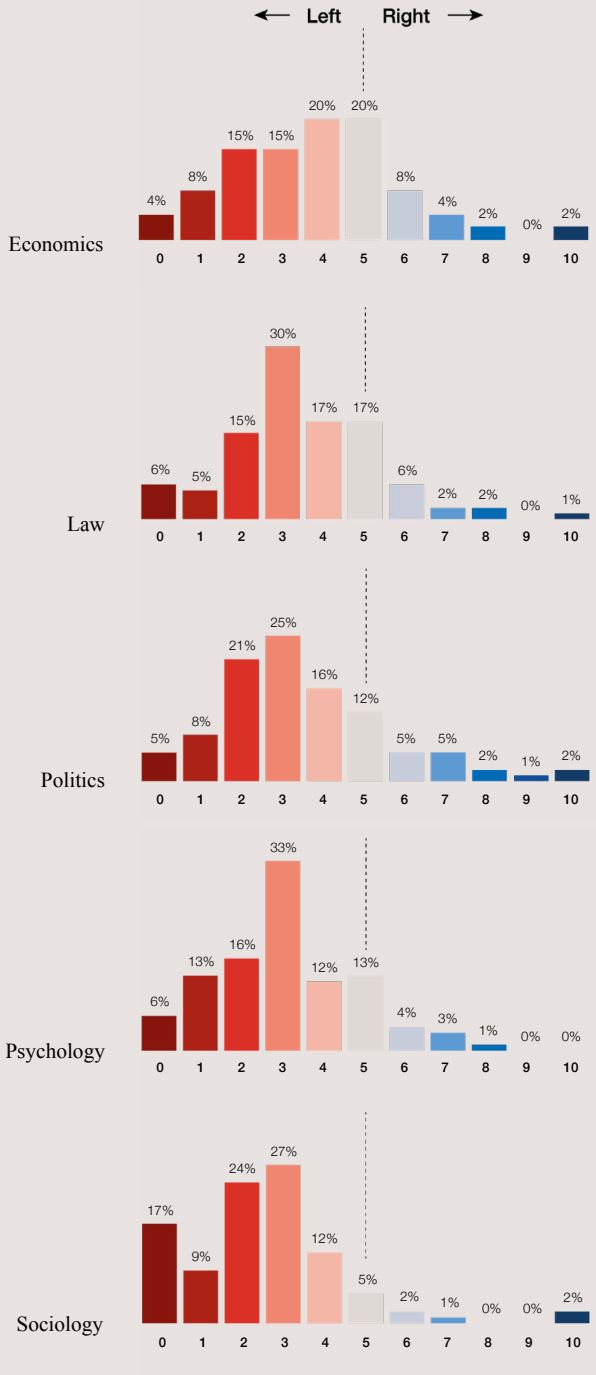
To what extent do we also find evidence for this? While we have already documented the strong ideological imbalance today, we do find evidence that left-wing academics are better represented at junior levels, i.e., Lecturer/Assistant Professors (3.08), whereas Professors are, relatively speaking, more right-wing (3.53), although the difference is marginal. Among junior Assistant Professors or Lecturers, 14 per cent identified as far left compared to 11 per cent among Professors.

This strong left-wing skew is also reflected in the views of academics toward a range of social and cultural issues. When asked to name the three most important issues facing their country, academics selected (1) inequality in income and wealth, (2) coronavirus, (3) the environment and (4) racism. And when asked to select the single most important issue, they selected inequality in income and wealth, putting this above the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

The vast majority (83%) agreed that systemic/institutional racism is a problem in their respective country, with 44% agreeing strongly and 39% agreeing. Among the large majority of academics who lean left, 91% agreed that systemic/institutional

Figure 2

Left-Right Placement by Discipline



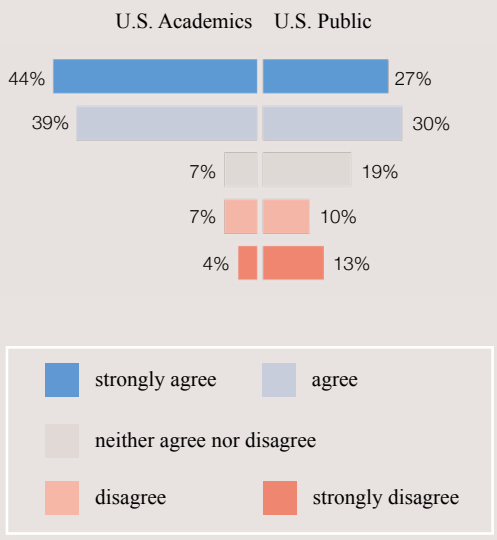
racism is a major problem compared to 39% who identified on the right. We make no judgement about the validity of these claims, we are merely interested in exploring the differences among these different groups.

We also probed generational differences though did not find significant differences. Among younger academics born after 1985, 84 per cent felt racism is a major problem and 82 per cent see white privilege as a major problem, compared to 82 and 73 per cent of older academics respectively. Given our sample leans a little more toward older academics it may be we are unable to paint a complete picture of younger scholars.

When we are able to compare the responses of academics with those of the general public we find sharp differences in how academics think about these issues. Whereas 82% of academics in the United States think 'systemic racism is a problem in my country', only 57% of the American public feel the same way. Academics are also far more likely to strongly agree, with 44% doing so versus only 27% of the public. While large numbers of citizens feel this is a major problem academics are far more strongly committed to this view.

Figure 3

Systemic/institutional racism is a problem in society



4. Are Academics Intolerant of Others?

Clearly, the dominance of particular views does not necessarily mean academics are intolerant of those who hold contrarian or unorthodox views. To explore this, we turn to consider the extent to which, if at all, academics express positive or negative views toward different groups in society.

We find considerable variation. As Figure 4 shows, when academics were asked how they felt about various groups on a scale running from 0 to 10, where 0 means 'strongly dislike' and 10 means 'strongly like', the mean rating for left-wing voters was 6.5 yet for right-wing voters it was just 3.5. Most academics are willing to state openly they dislike people who vote for right-wing parties at elections.

There is also considerable asymmetry; whereas 70% of self-identified left-wing academics dislike right-wing voters (i.e., rate them below 5) only 36% of right-wing academics dislike left-wing voters.

Interestingly, we also asked them how they feel about supporters of Black Lives Matter (BLM), which was in the news at the time of the survey and is a very specific social movement with specific social goals. We found that academics feel far more positively about this group than they do about left-wing voters and right-wing voters. They give BLM a mean rating of 7.5 compared to 3.5 for right-wing voters.

We also find considerable evidence that academics who do *not* identify on the left are far more likely to feel the need to hide or self-censor their political beliefs on campus. Overall, in our full sample, and as shown in Figure 5, a striking 41% of *all* academics agree with the statement: 'I sometimes feel the need to hide or self-censor my political beliefs when I am on campus', with 9% of that group agreeing *strongly*.

Remarkably, only a minority of academics, just 46%, *disagree* they feel the need to self-censor their political beliefs while 13% neither agree nor disagree. This suggests large numbers of academics who are currently working in some of the world's most elite universities in the world are actively self-censoring their beliefs on campus.

Clearly, however, this question might not just be tapping into a fear of revealing one's political beliefs on campus but a desire to conceal one's views while seeking to teach and research in an impartial and objective manner.

Yet we find that academics who self-identify as right-wing are significantly more likely than those who self-identify as left-wing to feel the need to self-censor. Overall, as shown on Figure 6, 75% per cent of academics who self-identify as right-wing feel the need to hide or self-censor their beliefs when on campus compared to only 35% of academics who

Figure 4

How Academics Feel about Different Groups in Society

Strongly dislike *to* Strongly like	Right-wing voters	Left-wing voters
0	13%	1%
1	5%	1%
2	11%	1%
3	19%	3%
4	14%	5%
5	28%	24%
6	4%	12%
7	4%	23%
8	2%	16%
9	0%	6%
10	1%	9%

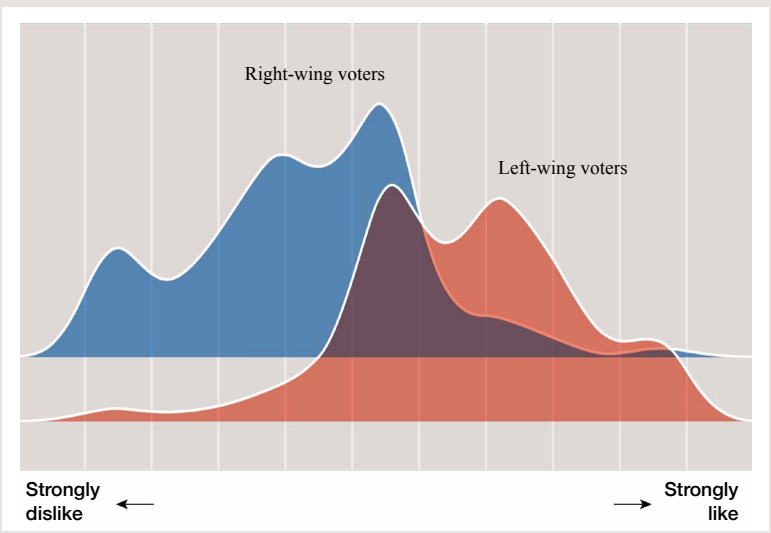
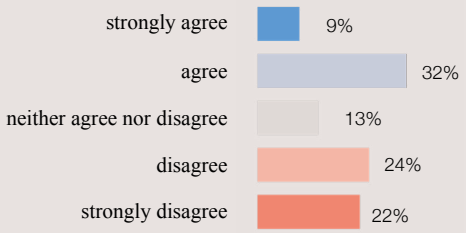


Figure 5

'I sometimes feel the need to hide or self-censor my political beliefs when I am on university campus.'



self-identify on the left.

This provides clear evidence that academics in the political minority are far more likely to feel the need to self-censor their beliefs. It is also consistent with recent work in specific disciplines within the social sciences, such as political science.

For example, one recent study finds that while 72% of political scientists identify as left-wing (with 14% of them identifying as far left), just 27% identify on the right. Furthermore, those who did identify as right-wing were far more likely to say they had experienced 'chilling effects' on campus, namely a more hostile environment.[20]

We also find some interesting cross-national variation, albeit variation that should be treated with caution. Specifically, in the UK, 35% of academics feel the need to hide or self-censor their beliefs when on campus, whereas 50% of academics in the United States feel the need to hide or self-censor their beliefs when on campus. The numbers are 44% and 39% in Canada and Australia, respectively.

While academics in the UK appear less likely than their counterparts to feel the need to self-censor, it is still the case that more than one in three are feeling this way, which is broadly consistent with recent research.

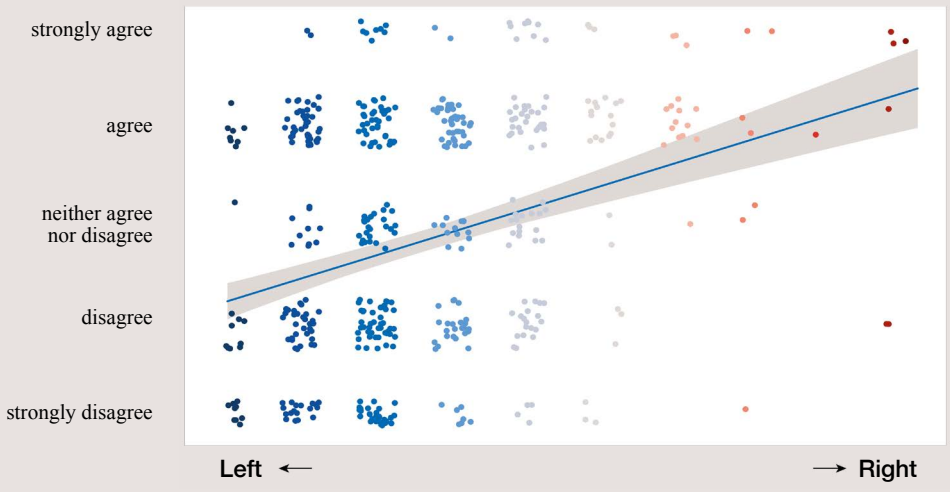
This finding corroborates a picture of university life whereby academics who do not identify or align with the dominant ideological orthodoxy are significantly more likely to report negative experiences while working on campus.

It is important to point out that this picture is supported in other recent research. For example, another recent study found that while 86% of Remain-voting academics felt that a Remainer would feel comfortable expressing their pro-Remain views to one of their colleagues just 39% of Remainers and 28% of pro-Brexit academics felt a Brexit-supporting academic would feel comfortable sharing their views on campus.[21]

Our study generally supports this picture: right-leaning academics are far more likely than their left-wing counterparts to self-censor their political beliefs on campus.

Figure 6

Self-censoring by Left-Right Placement



Overall, 75% of academics who lean right feel the need to hide or self-censor their beliefs when on campus while only 35% of academics who lean left feel the same way.

5. Views of Academic Freedom

To explore the extent to which academics support the principle of academic freedom, we then asked them a series of questions about freedom of expression, academic freedom, the extent to which, if at all, students should be exposed to uncomfortable or offensive ideas on campus and the influence of ideological claims on campus.

The general story is mixed. The good news is that most academics voice support for academic freedom, viewpoint diversity and oppose the idea of discriminating against those who hold nonconformist or contrarian views, even if academics who self-identify as left-wing are more likely to voice their dislike of right-wing voters than vice versa.

The bad news is that we also identify a sizeable and radical minority of 'activist academics' who hold the opposite view: who support restricting academic freedom, who back the removal of speakers who risk offending the emotional safety of students, who prioritise the ideological goals of 'social justice' over academic freedom, who are openly intolerant of those who hold alternative ideological views and who say they have no problem with university administrators making political statements.

For example, 16 per cent of academics, who work at the world's leading institutions, disagree that limits on freedom of speech undermine the core principles of which universities are founded. This group represents a threat to academic freedom and reflects the 'soft totalitarianism' that has been identified in other research.

We will examine each of these issues in turn. At a broad level, contrary to tropes that most academics are secretive authoritarians who oppose academic freedom and yearn to remove nonconformists, the picture is actually more complex.

We began by asking academics a broad question about society in general, namely the extent to which people should be free to express their political views openly in a democracy. We asked them to place themselves on a scale of 0-10, where 0 is 'people should be free to express their political views openly, even if those views are extreme' and 10 is 'people who hold extreme political views should not be free to express them openly'. We rescaled the variable so greater values (e.g. 10) indicate the view that people should be free to express their views openly, even if those views are extreme.

The mean was 7.1, suggesting most academics who are currently working in the world's most elite universities lean toward allowing people to freely express their views openly, even if their views are extreme. Overall, 76% of academics voiced support for this free expression of views, which should be applauded.

However, at the same time we also find a sizeable minority of 17% of academics, close to one in five, who feel that people who hold extreme views should not be free to express them openly. This points to a significant number of academics who view freedom of expression and speech in a more limited way.

Academics who leaned left were slightly less likely to support this. On a 0 to 10 scale, the mean of left-wing academics is 7.0, compared to 7.8 for academics who leaned right, a finding that is mirrored in other findings below.

We then asked academics whether some people should be prevented from speaking to university students if their views were likely to offend students.

In recent years, it has been suggested by scholars such as Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff, among others, that universities are being weakened by a new 'culture of safetyism', whereby the emotional and psychological desire for safety from 'harmful' speakers is prioritised above the need to expose students to viewpoint diversity.

Overall, we found the majority of academics, 76%, *disagreed* with the suggestion that some people should be prevented from speaking to student audiences if their views are likely to offend students, with one-third disagreeing strongly. This is another

positive finding, which points to widespread support for exposing students to a wide range of perspectives, opinions and beliefs. This should be encouraged.

However, once again we find a sizeable minority, close to one-quarter of our sample, who support preventing speakers who might offend student audiences from speaking on campus (10%) or who do not take a view either way (14%).

Once again, we find that academics who lean left are statistically more likely than their right-wing counterparts to want to prevent speakers who might offend students. Overall, while 55% of right-leaning academics strongly *disagreed* with the suggestion that some people should be prevented from speaking to student audiences if their views are likely to offend students, this fell to 32% among left-wing academics.

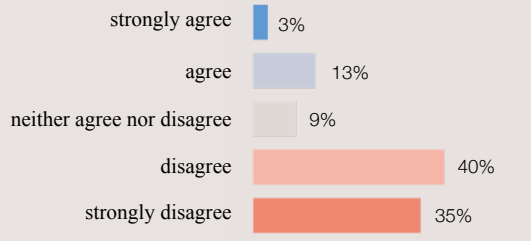
Keeping students in mind, we also asked academics the extent to which they agree or disagree with the suggestion that universities should defend free speech even if some students object. Overall, 88% of academics feel that universities should defend free speech even if students object, although once again we find a visible 12% who either disagree with this suggestion or who neither agree nor disagree.

To what extent, if at all, do academics feel limits on freedom of speech undermine the core principles on which universities are founded? Freedom of speech has long been central to academic freedom, to the ability of academics to voice opinions and findings.

Encouragingly, we find a large majority, 75%, agree with this idea, pointing to a large reservoir of opposition to campaigns to limit freedom of speech on campus. However, at the same time we find that one in eight academics, 16%, *disagree* with the suggestion that limits on freedom on speech undermine the core principles on which universities are founded.

Figure 7

'Limits on freedom of speech undermine the core principles on which universities are founded.'



When we explore these views by ideological orientation, we once again find that academics who lean left are more likely to support this. 74% agree that limits on freedom of speech undermine the core principles on which universities are founded, whereas 81% of academics on the right feel that these limits undermine the core principles on which universities are founded.

Activist academics, it is argued, routinely prioritise ideological concerns over 'social justice' over the principle of academic freedom. Specifically, it is often argued by those who feel concerned about threats to academic freedom that academics committed to social justice ideology prioritise their political beliefs — for example their commitment to rising ethnic, sexual and gender diversity — over the need to uphold academic freedom. The imposition of these ideological goals, it is argued, risks undermining academic freedom, such as by curtailing what an academic can or cannot say, write or research.

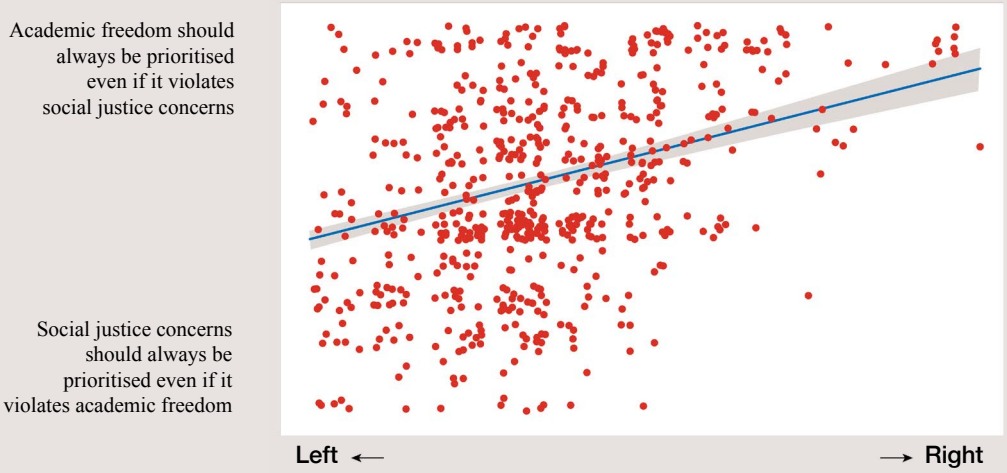
To what extent do we find evidence for this? We asked respondents to place themselves on a 0-10 scale, where 0 is 'social justice concerns should always be prioritised even if it violates academic freedom' and 10 is 'academic freedom should always be prioritised even if it violates social justice concerns'.

Overall, we find that only 54% of academics feel that academic freedom should always be prioritised even if it violates social justice concerns. This is concerning as it suggests a large number of academics would be willing to compromise on the principle of academic freedom in order to pursue social justice concerns.

Once again, we find a sizeable minority of activist academics, 25%, who think the goal of social justice should always be prioritised *even if it violates academic freedom*. We also find significant differences on the ideological landscape; whereas 91% of right-leaning academics think academic freedom should always be prioritised even if it violates social justice ideology, only 45% of left-wing academics feel the same way. This suggests a large number of academics are willing to compromise on academic freedom as

Figure 8

Social Justice Concerns versus Support for Academic Freedom



Whereas 91% of right-leaning academics think academic freedom should always be prioritised even if it violates social justice ideology, only 45% of left-wing academics feel the same way.

and when it is seen to undermine the ideological project of social justice.

We also find other manifestations of this willingness to prioritise ideological goals over academic freedom on campus. Increasingly, across universities in Western states, academics who apply for jobs are asked to submit statements demonstrating their commitment to equity and diversity before they are considered for a job.

While some argue these 'diversity statements' are appropriate and harmless, others see them as an ideological litmus test which essentially forces academics to sign up to left-wing or socially progressive ideological commitments in order to be considered for an academic position. In short, academics who might challenge, criticise or merely question progressive goals or 'sacred values' could easily find themselves penalised during the recruitment process. This thereby constitutes political discrimination, a violation of UK and European law which protects against discrimination on the grounds of philosophical belief.[22]

To explore this, we presented academics with the following statement. 'Some universities ask applicants for faculty positions to submit statements demonstrating their commitment to equity and diversity before they can be considered for a job'.

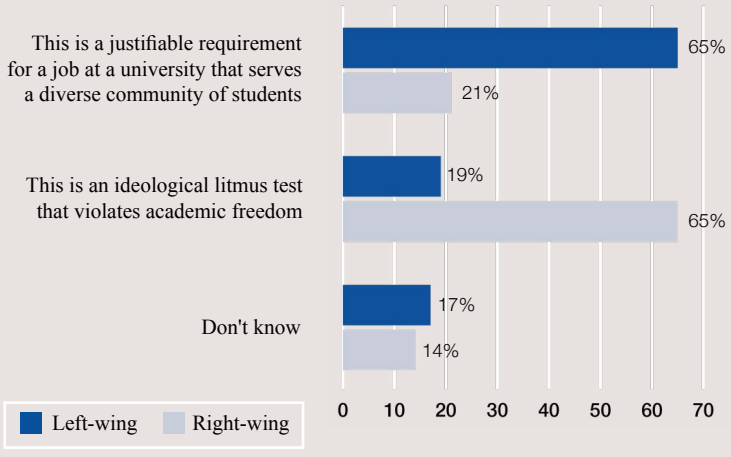
Overall, a majority of academics support the use of these statements, with 57% saying they are 'a justifiable requirement for a job at a university that serves a diverse community of students'. In contrast, just over one-quarter, 27%, felt that these statements are 'an ideological litmus test that violates academic freedom'.

There are significant ideological differences in attitudes. Specifically, 65% of academics who lean left feel these statements are a justifiable requirement for a job at a university that serves a diverse community of students, whereas 65% of academics who lean right see them as an ideological litmus tests that violates their academic freedom.

Political initiatives such as diversity statements are often promoted on campus not by academics but by

Figure 9

Academic Views of Equity and Diversity Statements



the growing number of university administrators who, it is argued, wield significant and growing ideological influence over the direction of universities. This is fuelling widespread concern, especially among nonconformists, about the extent to which university bureaucracy has become openly politicised, advancing ideological goals that may threaten academic freedom.

To explore views about this issue we asked academics the following: 'Thinking about university administrators, which of the following comes closest to your view?' They were then asked to choose between: 'University administrators have a duty to be politically neutral in their statements in order to create a welcoming atmosphere for political minorities on campus', or, alternatively, 'university administrators should be free to make political statements, even if some students and faculty disagree'.

Overall, most of the academics surveyed, 59%, feel that university administrators have a duty to be politically neutral in their statements. However, once again we find a sizeable minority, 24%, who feel that administrators who do not conduct research and teach students should be free to make political statements on campus. This again points to a sizeable minority of academics who feel broadly comfortable with university bureaucrats adopting and making political statements on campus.

6. The Academic Freedom Index

Our statistical analyses of the data find that many of these attitudes are closely related. For this reason, we throw further light on the issue by constructing an Academic Freedom Index. The aim is to identify the groups and areas where support for limiting academic freedom is most pronounced.

To get a score for how supportive each academic is towards the core principle of academic freedom, we rely on a statistical technique known as confirmatory factor analysis.[23] The Index is scaled to run from 0 to 100, where 0 indicates the least support for academic freedom and 100 indicates the most support. This allows us to build a more sophisticated picture of which groups are most likely to support or oppose academic freedom. We report these findings not to make a judgement about individual groups but to invite further debate and research.

Firstly, academics who lean right are the least likely of all to want to restrict academic freedom on campus. For each point on a 0-to-10 point scale that an academic is more right-wing, support on our Academic Freedom Index increases by 1.5 points.

Secondly, disliking people who support right-wing politics significantly predicts opposition to the principle of academic freedom. For each point on a 0-to-10 point scale that an academic is more likely to feel negatively towards right-wing party voters, support on our Academic Freedom Index *decreases* by 1.1 points.

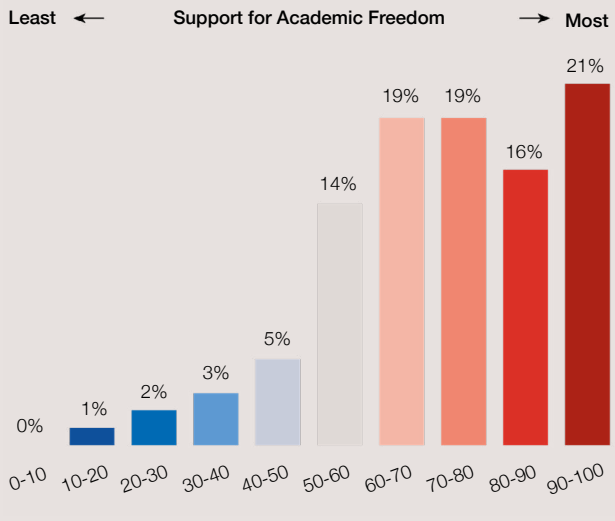
Thirdly, we do find significant differences between male and female academics; men are 6.3 percentage points *more* likely to support academic freedom than women. Fourthly, Australian, Canadian and British academics are *less* likely than their American counterparts to favour academic freedom, suggesting the current threat to academic freedom extends well beyond current debates in America. We find the biggest difference between academics in the U.S. and Canada, where the difference in support for academic freedom is 9.03. This means academics in the U.S. are around 9 points more in favour of academic freedom compared to those in Canada.

Fifth, we find that Professors, who often enjoy greater job security, are most strongly supportive of academic freedom, even when adjusting for age differences. Professors are 6.1 percentage points more supportive of academic freedom than Lecturers and/or Assistant Professors. This may indicate that more senior members of staff, who tend to have greater job security, are more willing to express their support whereas early career researchers feel the need to self-censor their views about this issue.

It might also indicate some generational differences in views about this issue, although more research is needed before we can draw any conclusions. Either way, it appears that the debate about academic freedom looks set to remain on the landscape for many years, if not decades, to come. Overall, we find that support for limiting academic freedom is most likely to be concentrated among young, female sociologists who feel negatively toward the supporters of right-wing parties while support is likely to be strongest among typically tenured professors, in psychology, in America and who feel more positively toward people who support right-wing parties.

Figure 10

Distribution of Academic Freedom Index



7. Summary and Discussion

In this briefing we have reported findings from a new and unique survey of academics who are currently working in some of the world's most elite universities, exploring their backgrounds, political orientation and views of issues relating to academic freedom. Our aim was to contribute to a rapidly growing international evidence base on the state of academic freedom in advanced Western democracies.

Our study both confirms and expands upon existing findings in the literature. We find a strong ideological bias in our sample, with more than three-quarters of academics in our unique sample leaning left and just one in ten leaning right. We find that large numbers of academics are self-censoring political beliefs on campus and that those who comprise the political minority are especially likely to do so.

Popular claims that the vast majority of academics oppose the principle of academic freedom are wide of the mark, however. At broad level, we find strong support for the principles of academic freedom, freedom of speech and also for exposing students to viewpoint diversity, to ideas and thinkers who might offend them.

However, at the same time we find clear evidence of a sizeable and radical minority of academics who openly dislike individuals at the other end of the political spectrum. This group is far more willing to prioritise ideological goals over academic freedom, appears comfortable with limits on freedom of speech, do not see these as undermining the principles on which universities were founded and do not support exposing students to speakers who might offend them. Academics who lean left are especially likely to think this way.

We also find a much larger circle of tacit support among academics for initiatives that are considered by some scholars to be overtly political in nature, such as the growing use of 'diversity statements' on campus, whereby academics are incentivised to endorse a particular worldview, and support for university administrators making overtly political statements. Future research would be well placed to explore these issues in more detail, especially given their tendency to violate the academic freedom of nonconformists who do not share this worldview. While the debate about academic freedom has tended to remain fixed on individual academics and events it should be broadened out much more fully.

Endnotes

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22. Case, S., (2021), 'Political Conviction and Epistemic Injustice', Philosophia, 49(1), pp.197-216.
23. The academic freedom index is constructed using factor scores generated by a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of responses to questions 6 thru 12 of the survey (see questionnaire). The CFA shows that a one-factor model fits the data well. The RMSEA goodness of fit statistic = .075. All factor loadings are statistically significant and correctly signed given how the variable were coded. Higher scores on the academic freedom index indicate greater support for academic freedom and lower scores indicate less support.

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