

381 The challenges of academic freedom of expression in the Scandinavian universities – and how they are handled

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Abstract

Academic autonomy- and freedom of expression is central for democracy as well as scientific progress. This principle is under threat due to a range of developments; managerial governance, external funding and commercialization of research, populist movements, woke, and research collaboration with autocratic regimes. This paper is based on an empirical investigation of recent cases and public debates related to the academic freedom of expression in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. It provides an overview of how these are handled by the central authorities and institutions to safeguard academic autonomy and freedom of expression, in legislation, funding, organization, governance and management.

Full paper

In international comparison, the Nordic university and research system has been characterized by distinct public funding, and part of a welfare state system where the state has long functioned as a guarantor and protector of academic autonomy. In the wake of developments such as the New Public Management trend, a greater degree of institutional exemption in addition to extensive growth, differentiation and devaluation of the academic profession, academic autonomy has come under more pressure. However, the Scandinavian countries first and foremost have been characterized by a large degree of trust and consensus, where higher education and universities are seen as important democracy-building institutions. Against this background, it is interesting that academic freedom of expression is also being challenged in this region.

This empirical study was originally presented as a part of the Norwegian report Freedom of expression under pressure? Academic freedom and freedom of expression in a time of crisis.

The sample of empirical cases was the result of a search for media debates and discussions concerning academic freedom of speech in the three Scandinavian countries from 2015-21. The aim was to get an overview of issues characteristic of the current climate for academic freedom of expression in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. When using news articles as data there is always a risk of sample and selection bias, and as a quality precaution the final sample was discussed internally among the five authors of the initial report. The Swedish and Danish samples were in addition presented for academics from Sweden and Denmark with special competence on higher education and education policy.

Denmark: The cultural struggle

In Denmark, the challenges to academic freedom of expression can be understood in the light of an extreme polarization between right and left in politics throughout the 2000s, characterized as the cultural struggle, or the value struggle. Academia is and has been an important arena in the cultural struggle. The right has criticized the entire field of research and individuals for being unscientific and political. However there are two major scandals related to commercial interests and commissioned research, the so-called beef-report and the muck-case[1], which really put academic freedom and academic rights on the agenda in Denmark the last few years.

Sweden: Selv-sensorship?

The dialogue between academia and Swedish society is according to Heuman, Sandström and Widmalm (2020) threatened of market management and politicization and of "nervous self-censorship" and fragmentation. We do find several examples of conflicts between students and lectures related to race and gender in our material.

Norway: A more peaceful climate?

A recent Norwegian study reveals that immigration and integration researchers, gender researchers and the climate scientists are the ones who limit themselves the most in their research dissemination. There are both fear of a general tabloid media logic, incitement and threats, career considerations and that the topic is political controversial behind these limitations (Mangset et al., 2021).

Research on the commercialization of natural resources has been exposed to critic from companies as well as private persons and communities dependent on this income. One example is The Norwegian Institute for Natural Research (NINA), which has been unpopular for years in parts of the salmon industry because of research on the unfortunate effects of salmon lice and escaped farmed salmon on Norwegian wild salmon. Evidence that has set limitations for growth in farming along the coast (Myklebust, 2019).

Even though there have been public discussions related to topics such as identity politics, decolonization of academia, no-platforming and safe-spaces, in general such topics have not dominated the Norwegian debate concerning academic freedom of speech as seem to be the case in Sweden.

Concluding remark:

The Nordic universities, like the trends in the rest of Europe, are thus also characterized by turbulent times in terms of the autonomy of academic staff in relation to their public role. How has this pressure been handled by the universities? Taken together, we find that political, organizational, legal and financial measures have been proposed and implemented in the wake of events and debates surrounding academic autonomy and freedom of expression.

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