

The Gothenburg Manifesto

of the Movement for a Free Academia

We write this manifesto from a position of humility. We are aware of, and are grateful for the privilege of having the opportunity to work in research. With this privilege we feel a responsibility to draw attention to the conditions within academia today – first and foremost out of a concern for the society and the times we live in.

Academic freedom is under pressure. Private- and public-funding agencies, university governance bodies, and prevalent societal values constantly influence which type of research is undertaken by our academic institutions, and how it is presented. Therefore, it is time we reclaim agency in how our academic environments are shaped, and regain the freedom to pursue and ask the right questions.

The severity of the crises our societies face today calls for academics to create more trustful and compassionate environments where ideas, creativity, and collaboration can flourish. It is difficult to pose the right questions when we as academics are bound up by systems whose logics are also some of the underlying drivers of these crises: competitiveness, power imbalances, collegial mistrust, and unhealthy hierarchies. Therefore, we need to find new paths to free ourselves from these systems and their logics and to create an academic system built on openness and an ethics of care and trust.

We want to build an academic system that is democratic and autonomous. We acknowledge the imbalances and injustices of the current academic system in a global perspective, and the need to act on these. The new system must be structured to serve people and nature, not to profit from their exploitation. This is an impossible task to solve individually and there is more than ever a need to come together across disciplines, universities, and countries to create a new collective movement of scientists, scholars, and knowledge-producers of all kinds.

The aim of the movement for a free academia is to explore, not just theoretically but also physically and organizationally, new ways to create true freedom for academics. This collaborative manifesto is intended to be a seed of change and an open-ended invitation for all researchers around the world to heed this call.

The Movement for a Free Academia
Gothenburg, 7 April 2024

Freedom & Power

The role of the university is to maintain, curate, expand, and pass on knowledge from generation to generation in support of democratic enlightenment and societal development. To do so, we need new structures of power that protect and promote academic freedom and expression internally within institutions and externally in society, as these freedoms are a prerequisite for critical, independent, and diverse research, teaching, and academic debate.

1 - Distribute power

We believe in structures that decentralize power and ensure checks and balances and that safeguard academic freedom and well-being and protect the most vulnerable members of our institutions. Such structures could imply rotation of positions, democratic control over finances and governance, the creation of an independent ombudsman, and abolition of long-term management positions, to name a few examples.

2 - Secure researchers

We aim for an academic system whose members do not suffer from job insecurity or precarity, while recognizing that these are pervasive in our current systems. In the path towards a better future, we aim to protect currently non-permanent academic staff, who must have better means of support within the university when work conflicts happen, while we also work towards all academic staff members being granted true academic tenure.

3 - Leadership as a collective responsibility

We believe that leadership and coordination positions should be temporary responsibilities that are taken on in service to the community. Caps and floors on wages must ensure that the status of some roles are not strongly elevated or diminished in relation to others.

4 - Embrace organizational diversity

We recognize that a university is not a monolithic structure, but consists of different groups that have different roles, partly different interests, and conflicting interests. Administrative and academic staff both do useful, but different kinds of work. Both roles should be properly valued and respected.

Community & Care

In an accelerated environment frequently dominated by the pressures of productivity and performance metrics, we aim to reorient our priorities towards the fundamental human aspects and ethics of care that sustain and enrich our academic communities.

5 - Foster a language of care

We believe that caring communities create happier human beings and better ideas. A language of care can enable a sense of connectedness while supporting the inner authority of individuals. A language of care includes a focus on the journey over results and emphasizes values like joy, empathy, care, quality, intuition, play, and fun and not only excellence, impact, efficiency, quantity, and productivity.

6 - Recognize researchers as whole and diverse beings

We believe diversity within and among human beings enables creative and critical thinking. A caring and respecting environment supports that one's actions can align with one's values. Personal integrity is vital for well-being and thinking, and fosters the well-being of the community as a whole.

7 - Time to care and think

We believe that time is an important resource. It takes time to cultivate caring habits in complex societal and institutional settings like academia. Thinking is constitutive for seeking truth. Thinking is intrinsically unpredictable, it can be insecure, vague, and ambiguous. Therefore, we must have time within universities to care and think.

Knowledge & Communication

We recognize that knowledge exists on a continuum throughout society, and that we as academics must approach the world with curiosity and humility, and should communicate and interact with others in respectful ways, while having a societal responsibility that comes with the privilege and power of being an academic.

8 - Academia as a path to knowledge

We want an academia that engages with other forms of knowledge production in society, and an academia that incorporates its societal role of calling out misinformation and bad faith-knowledge claims. We believe that academia is of most value when it reflects upon its own status, roles, and ways of creating knowledge, when it seeks new ways to ensure its own quality, and when it unpacks knowledge controversies in the world.

9 - An obligation to communicate

We believe that academics have an obligation to communicate the insights of their research to all corners of society, while recognizing that academia too is full of tensions and diversity.

10 - Allowing for a diverse academia

We believe that academics must reflect on their own position within the university and within society to better understand how their work relates to other disciplines. We must embrace diversity in perspectives and methodologies so that we can create and nourish an interdisciplinary culture where we are able to imagine and explore alternative ideas and practices.

11 - A science that engages in societal challenges

We believe that the university should acknowledge and engage with societal challenges, crises, and injustices. Academics should be supported in actively engaging with other fields and participating in academic discussions in order to reflect on and develop a sense of awareness of how their work relates to such ongoing concerns. This support should not, however, be to the exclusion or detriment of other research fields and activities.

Roles & Rights

Knowledge and education are necessary aspects of a flourishing and equal society. With all of its historical flaws, the university has for a long period of time been an institution for producing knowledge and educating citizens. This fundamental role of the university and its members' rights must be protected.

12 - Safeguarding the university

We believe in the importance of safeguarding the many aspects of the university that benefit society, including allowing for spaces of learning, experimentation, dialogue and free inquiry, producing knowledge, educating citizens, and engaging with society.

13 - The rights of academics

We recognize a need for academic institutions to protect and defend the right of academics to protest and participate in political debates and struggles. This extends to both internal university politics and to the broader politics of the societies in which universities are embedded.

14 - Advocacy and activism are legitimate forms of outreach

We recognize that individual or collective advocacy and activism – meaning the active engagement of academics in societal issues – are forms of outreach that should neither be excluded nor subject to sanction and that can exist alongside more traditional forms of outreach.

15 - Democratic spaces of disagreement

We aim to foster democratic spaces of disagreement within universities to avoid the stifling of diversity and the excluding of opposing viewpoints. Different types of disagreements require tailored approaches to engage with them as do different social groups with different vulnerabilities. Practices of humility, empathy, and care are important in fostering a culture conducive to productive dialogue.