

## **Challenges for supervisors: Safeguarding your PhD candidates' academic freedom**

### ***Workshop on 14 April 2026***

In your role as a PhD supervisor, how do you promote and protect your PhD candidates' right to academic freedom, particularly when their research or education addresses politically or socially sensitive issues? And what is the meaning and importance of academic freedom more in general?

The EGSH explored these questions in a workshop for PhD supervisors on 14 April 2026. The workshop began with a presentation by Prof. Dr. Irene van Staveren (ISS) on the general principle of academic freedom, followed by a presentation by Dr. Jeff Handmaker (also from ISS) on academic freedom in relation to discussions about Palestine.

The main takeaways from the workshop were as follows:

1. Participants felt that supervisors and policymakers often do not sufficiently appreciate the importance of academic freedom. Academic freedom is not a "luxury" but an essential component of scientific integrity.
2. Supervisors should protect academic freedom in general, and that of their PhD candidates in particular, as a matter of principle rather than only when it appears safe or pragmatic to do so, or when they personally agree with the views being expressed.
3. Academic freedom in the Netherlands seems to be under pressure. For example, according to the Academic Freedom Index, the Netherlands lost over 17% of academic freedom resources since 2018.
4. Various factors have caused this decline, including regulations imposed by governments and universities themselves, as well as pressures arising through social media and political channels.
5. In discussions about academic freedom, the distinction between academic freedom and freedom of speech is sometimes highlighted. The question was raised why this distinction is of practical importance. One reason is that it reminds us that scholars, like all citizens, may hold personal opinions. However, when speaking in their capacity as academics, their views should be grounded in evidence, theory, methodology, or well-reasoned hypotheses. At the same time, there appears to be a grey area in which academics participate in public debate and are called upon to speak not only as scholars but also as citizens, parents, activists, or members of particular social groups.
6. There were some questions about the extent to which academic freedom is legally enforceable. While the code of scientific integrity is binding for all publicly funded research institutions in the Netherlands, academic freedom is not.

7. It therefore appears that academic freedom is, at present, more an informal norm or an ideal than a formally recognised right enshrined in legislation or university regulations. In this light, participants discussed which actors (such as deans or confidentiality councillors) could play a mediating role when disputes concerning academic freedom arise.
8. Participants referred to various cases illustrating the importance of academic freedom, especially in relation to sensitive and uncomfortable topics. Discussions concerning Palestine have been among the most prominent examples in recent years.
9. In the Netherlands, threats to academic freedom in relation to Palestine have been induced by various organisations, and primarily by CIDI and CJO, that have effectively functioned as Israel lobbies, and which have increasingly focussed their attention on, and greatly contributed to increased tensions on university campuses. Other initiatives, including StandWithUs, Canary Mission, Legal Insurrection, and Chabad on Campus, play a similar malicious role.
10. The “Taskforce Antisemitismbestrijding” was also recently launched as an initiative to “enhance the safety of Jews, in particular the safety of Jewish students at universities, the exclusion of antisemitic speakers from universities and universities of applied sciences, and addressing the security implications of sit-ins at public transport stations.” They produced a report in February 2026 that has faced significant resistance, notably from Jewish scholars and antisemitism experts.
11. While the wording that such organisations and initiatives use to describe their work may seem laudable, in practice they play a negative role in regard to academic freedom. For example, to constrain criticism of Israel, these organisations and initiatives weaponise the accusation of antisemitism, purposefully conflate antisemitism with antizionism, and appeal to seemingly innocent notions such as “avoiding polarisation” and “ensuring safety” while – ironically – exacerbating both.
12. Academic policymakers should not be receptive to such lobby tactics and instead ensure the academic freedom of scholars that wish to draw on their expertise to critique Israel’s policies, or to exercise their freedom of expression to stand up for the victims of colonial policy. Universities are an important place for such criticism and protest.
13. It is important to amplify the perspectives of Palestinian scholars whose academic freedom is highly constrained. Forging partnerships with Palestinian universities is one way of accomplishing this.