

Internationalisation and the challenge to academic freedom: between authoritarian control and the logic of the market

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As the 'internationalisation' of higher education generates increased partnerships in both education and research between Western institutions and those in autocracies, academic freedom is put at risk. High-profile attention has focused on researchers detained or killed in fieldwork. However, there are many more academics at risk of detention or worse who are ordinarily employed in universities under an authoritarian state. Foreign campuses in the Middle East and China are not immune from restrictions. Chinese, Russian, Turkish and Central Asian governments have cracked down in various ways on their academics and students, especially those from minority groups. Moreover, the response of universities and their representative bodies in the UK has been silence, obfuscation or denial of the problem, implying that market for students and income from autocracies makes them unwilling to defend academic freedom. University ethics committees are rarely prepared to step into these debates, other than in prohibiting fieldwork. In the roundtable six UK-based academics with experience of universities in China, Russia, Turkey and Central Asia will address these questions. What do we mean by 'academic freedom' and how is it maintained? What can IR academics do to show solidarity with colleagues who are at risk from and in autocracies (both on our campuses and overseas)? What may we do to mitigate the risks generated by internationalisation? How do we include scholars from autocracies without increasing surveillance of our work, heightening risks to them, and reducing academic freedom? What is the value of a sector-wide code of conduct (such as that proposed by Human Rights Watch with respect to China in 2019) or targeted academic boycotts (such as proposed by Turkish Academics for Peace in 2017)?

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