GPPi
GLOBAL PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE

SCHOLARS AT RISK
NETWORK

To All University Rankings Institutions

Accounting for Academic Freedom in University Excellence Rankings: An Invitation to Collaboration

Academic freedom is an integral part of quality academic research, teaching and learning – yet so far none of the dominant university excellence rankings include measures of academic freedom in their assessments. University rankings are in a unique position to shape incentive structures for governments, universities, scholars and students. The omission of academic freedom in existing rankings, on the other hand, negatively affects universities' and governments' impetus to improve academic freedom levels.

With the creation of the Academic Freedom Index (AFi), university rankings finally have a real opportunity to close this gap in their methodology.

The AFi is the result of a collaborative effort between the Friedrich Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg, the Global Public Policy Institute in Berlin, the V-Dem Institute at Gothenburg University, and the Scholars at Risk Network. The new dataset is part of V-Dem's award-winning global time-series database, which relies on assessments of several thousand vetted experts across the world. For each indicator, V-Dem gathers data from multiple, independent coders and uses an innovative statistical methodology to combine them into reliable estimates (for detailed insight into the methodology of the expert-coded data and the statistical modeling behind the various estimates, see Pemstein and al. 2019 and Coppedge et al. 2020).

The index is composed of five indicators on academic freedom, each of which is coded by country experts on a predefined scale from 0 to 4 and on a country-year basis: the freedom to research and teach, the freedom of academic exchange and dissemination, the institutional autonomy of universities, campus integrity, and the freedom of academic and cultural expression. More than 1,800 experts – typically academics, both in- and outside the respective country – have so far contributed assessments to the academic freedom indicators. 144 countries or territories were covered in the 2020 edition; the remaining data gaps will be filled in the coming rounds of data collection. The dataset will be updated annually; scores for the previous year are released every March.

The AFi data shows a global decline in academic freedom in recent years. For this reason, university rankings have a heightened responsibility to assess universities' excellence in a way that accounts for diverging academic freedom levels and reflects such changes. The university rankings' individual methodologies vary widely, but the respect for academic freedom should be included irrespective of their chosen method.

The creators of the AFi recognize, however, that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. We are therefore keen to collaborate with the university rankings community to jointly explore the optimal approach to reflecting academic freedom in ranking systems and data.

Toward that end, we request a meeting or call to discuss the AFi data with you, to understand your approach to including academic freedom in rankings, and to explore any opportunities for collaboration. We will reach out to you to schedule a convenient opportunity for discussion. Until then, please feel free to share any questions or suggestions by emailing jspannagel@gppi.net.