



Univ. Prof. Dipl.-Ing. Dr. Dr.h.c.mult. Martin Gerzabek,
Rektor,
Universität für Bodenkultur Wien,
Peter-Jordan-Straße 70/II,
1190 Wien,
Austria,

9th March 2015

Dear Professor Gerzabek,

**Participation of academic staff from the Universität für Bodenkultur Wien
in an online- survey on academic freedom.**

We are writing to you to seek your support in encouraging staff from the Universität für Bodenkultur Wien to participate in an EU funded on-line survey on academic freedom. Academic freedom is a universal right that all staff working in higher education acknowledge as an essential component of academic life, both as an individual liberty with respect to their teaching and research, and in terms of institutional autonomy and governance. At institutional level, the right of universities to self-governance and autonomy, free from governmental control over decisions about what should be taught and researched, is seen as vital for their successful working. However, in many nations, the *de jure* constitutional and legislative protection for academic freedom is limited or poorly defined. Consequently, institutional policies and norms, allied to departmental culture, are often as important in providing *de facto* protection for the academic freedom of staff, as legal instruments. Most research into academic freedom concentrates on legal frameworks, as yet no empirical work has been undertaken on the *de facto* protection for, and staff experiences of, academic freedom and institutional autonomy in higher education institutions in the EU states, and elsewhere.

The importance of academic freedom in enabling universities to operate effectively in the global knowledge economy has been acknowledged by the EU, which has funded two Marie Curie Fellowships to undertake research into the knowledge, experience and opinions of higher education academic staff in the EU states and African nations, with respect to the policies and protocols that are designed to protect academic freedom at departmental and institutional levels. In order to analyse the extent, character and strength of extra-legal informal protection for academic freedom, which operates via institutional and departmental norms, in collaboration with the Fellows, I have devised an online survey to gather data on the knowledge, experience and opinions of academic staff with regards to academic freedom. This survey can be accessed, until 31st May 2015, by going to the webpage at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/AcademicFreedomSurvey>

We would be most grateful if staff at the Universität für Bodenkultur Wien, could be informed and encouraged, by means of an "All-Staffs email alert", to access and complete the online survey. The survey is designed to be as easy as possible to complete, as most of the questions just require ticks in the relevant

boxes, and is completely anonymous, so that the names of staff who participate and the institutions within which they work cannot be identified. The data gathered by the on-line survey will be analysed by means of SPSS, with the results reported in the academic press and disseminated via other media.

Academic freedom is crucially important, not only for all those academic staff who work in universities, but also for society at large, as academic freedom enables university staff to provide expert criticism of the workings of government and the corporate sector, and ensure that they are accountable for their actions, thereby strengthening democracy. In this sense, academic freedom, like freedom of speech, is a right of the people, not a privilege of a few. By completing this on-line survey, the opinions of university staff on academic freedom will find a voice, and contribute directly to the important debate on academic freedom within contemporary higher education. Failure to nurture the concept of academic freedom within universities, more especially in those European nations which first promulgated this basic right, threatens to undermine this and other basic associated human rights, both within Europe and, by imitation, in other nation states where they are already considerably fragile. Such liberties, once lost, will be infinitely more difficult to reinstate than they were to achieve in the first place.

An additional aspect of this work involves encouraging universities to act as mentors and providing guidance and support for African higher education institutions to develop administrative procedures and institutional policies to strengthen the level of academic freedom they enjoy. At present, the following universities in Africa are seeking university partners in the EU to help them in this process: University of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania); University of Ghana; Makerere University (Uganda); University of Malawi; Obafemi Awolowo University (Nigeria); University of Seychelles; University of Swaziland; University of Khartoum; University of Sierra Leone. If you feel that your university would like to become involved in working with colleagues in Africa to help them develop new administrative procedures and raise academic standards, then please contact us by email.

We very much hope that your university will be able to become actively involved in supporting this research. Please contact us regarding any aspect of this research about which you may require further information

Best Wishes



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