

IHRN and Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters Host International Meeting on Academic Freedom and Human Rights

The International Human Rights Network of Academies and Scholarly Societies (IHRN) held its 15th biennial meeting at the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters from 9-11 September 2025, with a focus on urgent threats to human rights and academic freedom. The IHRN is a global consortium of honorary societies in the sciences, engineering, and medicine that works to protect and promote human rights. 53 participants from 38 national academies were involved with the meeting, along with other members of the academic and human rights communities.

Participants discussed the alarming escalation of threats to academic freedom worldwide.¹ The following issues were identified by numerous speakers and attendees as areas of grave concern, impeding the ability of people throughout the world to access knowledge and information, participate in and benefit from science,² and enjoy a range of human rights—including the right to life and the right to health.

- **Attacks on Scientists and Scholars**

Scholars and scientists—our colleagues—continue to be persecuted by governmental authorities in many countries in connection with their research and professional activities, particularly where those activities are seen to question official government narratives. The IHRN’s Secretariat is currently following cases involving the human rights of colleagues in all regions of the world. Persecution occurs on a spectrum of severity that includes, among other things, surveillance, harassment, unjust prosecution, and imprisonment, sometimes leading scientists and scholars to flee their countries. Various speakers, including a [Scholars at Risk](#) fellow from East Africa, discussed the importance of support for academics under threat, including through stable professional opportunities in safe countries.

Frequently, authorities seek to legitimize persecution through vaguely defined references to national security, as in the case of U.S. physicist Xiaoxing Xi, a speaker at the meeting. Several years ago, Professor Xi faced unjust criminal charges connected to his scientific collaborations with Chinese colleagues. These charges were ultimately dismissed. Online and other attacks on scientists and scholars from members of the public, often fueled by disinformation campaigns, are a related problem.

¹ See https://academic-freedom-index.net/research/Academic_Freedom_Index_Update_2025.pdf

² <https://council.science/our-work/right-to-science/>

Many participants also emphasized the catastrophic impact of violent conflict on students, scholars, and educational systems³ and the urgent need to support scientists, scholars, and other individuals in Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine, and other conflict settings.

- **Politicization of Science and Ideological Censorship**

The politicization of science represents a severe threat to research and innovation worldwide. Examples cited by participants ranged from termination of scientific research on ideological grounds to infringements of university autonomy. Direct political interference with, and censorship of, science often creates a chilling effect within scientific and academic communities, further limiting access to the benefits of science, and sends a message to the wider public about the consequences of critical thinking. Speakers from several countries, including Turkey, Nicaragua, and the United States, detailed problems in this regard.

- **Defunding of Science**

In many parts of the world, severe cuts to science funding are forcing researchers to leave their fields and halting research that advances knowledge, health, and well-being. Participants pointed both to cuts to particular fields of study as well as the defunding of basic research. As science is a public good, defunding decisions have widespread repercussions throughout society. The situation in Argentina is emblematic. Abrupt reductions in funding and the deterioration of scientific equipment maintenance and infrastructure are leading to collapse of the country's national Science, Technology, and Innovation system.

Massive cuts to scientific research in the United States, for ideological and other reasons, together with unprecedented government intrusion into the activities of U.S. higher education institutions, was a major concern of many speakers and attendees. These threats to academic freedom and the right to participate in and benefit from science in the United States have already had devastating repercussions globally.

- **Inequity in International Collaborations**

The global science system is marked by power asymmetries and inequities, with highly uneven resource investments. Inequity in international collaborations hinders scientific discovery and innovation, and participants discussed the urgent need for funding institutions, publishers and others to help address this challenge, including through open access to scientific information.

³ <https://protectingeducation.org/>

Participants emphasized the essential role of the international scientific and scholarly community in responding to the above concerns through strong, consistent support for the right to academic freedom, by monitoring and denouncing violations of this right, and through support for individual scientists and scholars who come under threat. Numerous attendees shared information about their academies' efforts to promote academic freedom through statements, reports, resource collections, events, advocacy for colleagues under threat, and other means.

Finally, discussions among participants addressed the relationship between the freedoms and responsibilities of scientists and scholars, the importance of integrating a human rights perspective into research, and the urgent need for better communication between the academic community and the broader public about the role of academic freedom in promoting democracy and human dignity.

A more detailed summary of the IHRN meeting is forthcoming.

September 22, 2025