ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Introduction

Academic freedom is the cornerstone of a democratic and vibrant tertiary education sector.[1] It enables kaimahi (staff) and ākonga (students) to teach, research, and engage in critical debate without fear of censorship or reprisal, and underpins the role of tertiary institutions as the critic and conscience of society. Academic freedom is also indispensable to the functioning of democracy more broadly: it provides citizens with access to independent research, nurtures diverse perspectives, and ensures that those in power can be held to account through informed public debate. Without it, democratic decision-making is weakened and society risks losing the rigorous critique necessary for transparency and accountability.

The Education and Training Act 2020 provides statutory recognition of academic freedom,[2] but in practice it requires active protection by institutions, government, and the union movement.

Consistent with Te Hautū Kahurangi | Tertiary Education Union's (TEU) Equity Policy, this policy recognises the intersecting inequities experienced by women, Māori, Pacific, disabled persons, queer, migrant, and other marginalised kaimahi and ākonga. Protecting academic freedom requires attention to these inequities, but detailed commitments are outlined in the Equity Policy.

Whare – Our aspiration

We aspire to a tertiary education sector where academic freedom is lived as a daily reality rather than a theoretical right. In this vision, kaimahi and ākonga confidently pursue teaching, research, and expression of ideas across all disciplines, including those that challenge political, cultural, or commercial interests. Academic freedom is exercised responsibly and ethically, serving democracy and the wider public good in a way which foregrounds self-awareness and accountability.

In this vision, institutions embrace their role as the critic and conscience of society. They support robust and respectful debate, value intellectual diversity, and ensure that decision-making structures protect the independence of teaching and research.

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[1] Within the context of TEU policies, 'tertiary education sector' is the umbrella term used to infer the following sub-sectors: polytechnic; PRRISM (private; REAP; research institutes; statutory; miscellaneous); university; and Wānanga.

[2] See s267 https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2020/0038/latest/LMS202276.html

Academic freedom is not treated as a reputational risk but as a core democratic obligation.

Pou – Why this policy is needed

Although legally protected, academic freedom in Aotearoa New Zealand is under increasing strain. Managerial and compliance cultures narrow the scope of inquiry, while funding structures create perverse incentives that discourage independent research. Kaimahi and ākonga report self-censorship in controversial areas, particularly where their work questions political priorities or institutional interests.

These pressures undermine the public good role of tertiary education and weaken democracy. They also affect some groups more acutely than others – for example, Māori scholars advancing indigenous knowledge, publishing in te reo Māori, or challenging dominant narratives on issues such as climate change and inequality.

Without a clear commitment from institutions and government, statutory protections risk becoming hollow. TEU therefore reaffirms academic freedom as central to the tertiary education sector and asserts the need for proactive action to defend it.

Waka – Our actions

To achieve our aspirations, TEU will implement a range of the following actions.

Advocacy

- Promote academic freedom as a statutory right and a democratic necessity in relevant submissions to government.
- Oppose legislative or regulatory proposals that reduce academic freedom to a compliance exercise.
- Highlight the role of academic freedom in enabling the tertiary sector to act as the critic and conscience of society in the interests of the public good.

Campaigning

- Raise public awareness of threats to academic freedom and their implications for democracy.
- Celebrate and amplify examples of academic freedom in action, including recognition through TEU awards and campaigns.
- Challenge institutional attempts to treat critical scholarship as a reputational or financial risk.

Organising

- Support members who experience threats to their academic freedom, providing advice, advocacy, and solidarity.
- Develop training and resources to help kaimahi and ākonga understand their rights and responsibilities under the Education and Training Act.
- Build networks across disciplines and institutions to monitor and respond to emerging challenges.

Partnership

- Work with institutions to embed cultures that value, promote, and actively protect academic freedom, including kaimahi and ākonga representation in governance.
- Advocate for strong kaimahi and ākonga representation in institutional governance and decision-making structures, ensuring academic freedom is protected at the highest levels of oversight.
- Collaborate with allied organisations to strengthen sector-wide advocacy.

Policy sign-off and ownership details

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Revision history

Version	Date	Revision description	Owner
v1.0			
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