**Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education**

**ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION**

**IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS**

**CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

For her upcoming report to the Human Rights Council to be presented in June 2024, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education, Ms. Farida Shaheed, will consider academic freedom and freedom of expression in educational institutions.

The report will build on previous work achieved by other United Nations human rights mechanisms on the topic, particularly the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. While recognizing that there is no single, exclusive international human rights framework for the subject, Ms. Shaheed will consider academic freedom through the right to education framework. More precisely, the report intends to consider academic freedom as part of the entitlement to receive and provide quality education, at all levels of education.

The Special Rapporteur intends to take stock of setbacks and progress both under international human rights law and in domestic legislation and practice with respect to defining academic freedom, ensuring its enjoyment by all relevant actors and protecting it from attacks and interferences.

The report will examine existing legal frameworks and normative content of academic freedom as a human right. It will consider subjects and duty bearers of this right. It will also analyze, from a human rights perspective, direct and indirect attacks on and interferences with respect to academic freedom of staff and students, including through commercialization, online surveillance, funding, conditions of work and studies and other pertinent issues.

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| **Name of the country/entity submitting information** | Iran/[International Community of Iranian Academics](https://icoia.org/)1 |

**Questions**

**General framework**

1. How is academic freedom defined and protected in the constitution or laws of your country, and what are possible limitations or restrictions? Please provide the original citation and source, as well as a summary of relevant judicial practice, if any.

In Iran, there is no specific definition for academic freedom in the constitution or laws. Even the freedom of expression in not well defined which is the case in totalitarian regime. Therefore, academic freedom has been limited by various factors, including government censorship, restrictions on expression, and political interference in educational institutions. The Iranian government has implemented strict controls on academic activities, particularly in areas deemed sensitive or politically controversial.

Some specific challenges to academic freedom in Iran include:

* **Government Control:** The Iranian government exercises significant control over educational institutions, including universities and research centers. Government-appointed officials often dictate curricula, research priorities, and administrative decisions, limiting the autonomy of academic institutions and individuals.
* **Censorship:** Iranian authorities censor academic materials, including books, journals, and online content, that are deemed politically sensitive or contradictory to official ideologies. This censorship stifles open academic inquiry and limits access to diverse perspectives.
* **Restrictions on Expression:** Professors, researchers, and students face restrictions on their ability to express dissenting or critical views, particularly on topics related to politics, religion, and social issues. Scholars who engage in controversial research or advocacy may face harassment, arrest, or dismissal from their academic positions.
* **Gender Discrimination:** Women in Iran face additional challenges in accessing academic opportunities and exercising academic freedom. Gender segregation policies in universities, restrictions on women's participation in certain fields of study, and discriminatory practices limit women's academic freedom and opportunities for scholarly engagement.
* **Persecution of Scholars:** Scholars, intellectuals, and students who advocate for political reform, human rights, or academic freedom are often targeted for persecution by Iranian authorities. This persecution may include harassment, arrest, imprisonment, and violence.

2. Are academic staff, teachers, students all entitled to academic freedom? Does this differ by level of education? Please explain.

Regrettably, in Iran, a pervasive climate of restriction has led to a widespread lack of awareness among academic staff, professors, and students regarding the fundamental concept of academic freedom. Merely mentioning the term "Academic Freedom" can pose significant risks, reflecting the deeply entrenched challenges facing intellectual inquiry and expression within the country's educational institutions.

The structural framework within Iranian academia is meticulously designed to ensure the pervasive influence of representatives aligned with the ruling regime in all aspects of hiring, evaluation of staff members, professors, and graduate students. This oversight extends to the presence of clerical figures in every university and research institute, with their involvement in decision-making processes and representation on selection and evaluation committees being mandated. These committees, commonly referred to as "Disciplinary Committees," were established during the Cultural Revolution of 1980, marking a pivotal moment where the erosion of academic freedom in Iran began.

The aftermath of this revolution witnessed a systematic violation of academic freedom, culminating in the mass dismissal and coerced early retirement of nearly half of the faculty members then serving in Iranian universities. Furthermore, the closure of universities for an extended period of three years and the subsequent deprivation of educational rights for thousands of students, particularly those affiliated with political groups during the 1979 revolution, underscored the severe repercussions of dissent within academic circles.

This suppression of academic freedom persists within Iranian universities, perpetuated by a cycle of control and surveillance reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution. The events of the 2022 uprising, often termed as the "Second Cultural Revolution," served to exacerbate these constraints, further restricting intellectual discourse and dissent within academic spheres.

The impact of this suppression disproportionately affects undergraduate students, given their younger age and larger numbers, making them particularly vulnerable to censorship and punitive measures. Similarly, among faculty members, those without permanent contracts are subject to heightened scrutiny and suppression, as the termination or suspension of their contracts is facilitated by administrative mechanisms.

In sum, the legacy of the Cultural Revolution continues to cast a long shadow over academic freedom in Iran, with pervasive controls and punitive measures stifling intellectual inquiry and expression, particularly among the country's academic community.

3. What do you consider to be (a) the main challenges to academic freedom, and (b) gaps in the legal framework for protecting academic freedom?

a) Lack of Autonomy: In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the dynamics of higher education governance exhibit a notable lack of autonomy, particularly in the context of leadership appointments within academic institutions. A conspicuous pattern emerges wherein changes in presidential leadership at the national level prompt corresponding alterations in the composition of key ministerial positions, namely the Minister of Science, Research and Technology, and the Minister of Health and Medical Education. These ministerial appointees wield significant authority in determining the appointment of university presidents.

Regrettably, the criteria guiding the selection of university presidents in Iran do not prioritize their academic or managerial competencies. Rather, individuals are chosen for these pivotal roles based on their perceived alignment with the objectives of the ruling regime, effectively positioning them as instruments of state suppression within the academic sphere. The demonstrable involvement of university presidents in acts of suppression within educational institutions over the past seventeen months serves as compelling evidence of this phenomenon.

In addition to the institutional mechanisms of control such as the "Disciplinary Committees," the presence and influence of the [Basij](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Basij)3, a paramilitary organization affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, loom large within university campuses. Both the Professors’ Basij and the Students’ Basij operate as instruments of suppression within academic settings, with membership in these groups sometimes mandated by university authorities. The compulsory nature of such affiliations underscores their role as coercive instruments of state control within the academic domain.

The alarming escalation of suppression tactics within universities was starkly highlighted by Minister [Mohammad Ali Zoligo](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Mohammad_Ali_Zolfigol)l following the October 2022 attacks in multiple university campuses. Zoligol announced plans to establish military offices within universities, signaling an unprecedented intrusion of militarized forces into academic spaces4.

In summary, the pervasive lack of autonomy within Iran's higher education system is underscored by the politicization of leadership appointments within academic institutions. The instrumentalization of university presidents as agents of state suppression, coupled with the coercive presence of paramilitary organizations like the Basij, represents a troubling erosion of academic freedom and institutional autonomy within the country's educational landscape.

**Autonomy of educational institutions**

4. Please explain the autonomy and self-governance enjoyed by educational institutions at the different tiers of education. Please explain what autonomy and self-governance entail. Are there restrictions on police or military personnel entering educational institutions? If so, please share the rules.

In response to the query posed earlier, I have provided preliminary insights in question 3. Regarding the specific issue of restrictions on police and military forces entering educational institutions, it is pertinent to note historical developments following the [student uprising in July 1999](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Iran_student_protests,_July_1999), notably the severe attack on Tehran University. In response to these incidents, the Iranian regime enacted legislation stipulating that the entry of military forces into educational premises is contingent upon authorization from the president of universities and relevant ministers, particularly in cases pertaining to security concerns.

However, despite the institutional safeguards ostensibly put in place, this regulatory framework has been repeatedly breached. The year 2022 witnessed a resurgence of such violations, manifested notably in attacks perpetrated across multiple university campuses. Among these incidents, the widely publicized assault on Sharif University in Tehran, colloquially referred to as the "bloody day" occurring on 2 October, garnered significant media attention.

In addition to the overt involvement of military forces, it is imperative to acknowledge the presence of plainclothes operatives during student uprisings. The affiliation of these individuals with specific organizations remains ambiguous, further complicating the delineation of responsibility and accountability in instances of unrest within educational settings.

In summation, despite regulatory provisions ostensibly safeguarding against unauthorized incursions by security forces into educational institutions, recurrent breaches of these protocols underscore persistent challenges in upholding institutional autonomy and ensuring the safety and security of students and faculty members within Iran's academic landscape.

5. Please provide examples of institutional guidelines/codes of conduct developed to ensure respect for academic freedom, including from external public or private actors.

It is evident from previous responses that Iran lacks explicit guidelines or codes of conduct aimed at safeguarding academic freedom within its educational institutions. While the "Disciplinary Committees" mentioned earlier operate under their own set of regulations, these protocols often facilitate violations of academic freedom5. In October 2022, the [Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Supreme_Council_of_the_Cultural_Revolution) issued a statement indicating forthcoming [changes](https://www.wikiwand.com/fa/%D8%A2%DB%8C%DB%8C%D9%86_%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%87_%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B6%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B7%DB%8C_%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%AC%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86) to the existing rules, signaling a shift towards more stringent measures. These amended regulations were ostensibly implemented to deter and punish students who participated in protests, thereby exacerbating restrictions on academic freedom.

Despite the introduction of these heightened regulations, instances of non-compliance and selective enforcement have been observed in various universities. In such cases, decisions made by the "Disciplinary Committees" often appear to be influenced by personal interests rather than adherence to established rules or principles6. Till December 2023, five thousand students were summoned to the disciplinary committees of the universities, and 18 professors were banned from leaving the country7.

**Funding**

6. How is funding, including for research, regulated? Is the process transparent, and are there any guarantees put in place to ensure respect for academic freedom?

In this context, it is important to highlight the pervasive lack of transparency regarding funding allocation, particularly concerning research initiatives within academic institutions in Iran. While the overall budget of the ministries of higher education is ostensibly disclosed to the public, critical details pertaining to the distribution of funds for research purposes, as well as the proportion allocated to academic staff salaries, remain obscured from public scrutiny8. Moreover, the precise allocation of budgetary resources among different universities lacks transparency, with pertinent information remaining inaccessible to both the public and university faculty members.

Given this pervasive lack of transparency, it becomes inherently challenging to provide a comprehensive assessment of the regulatory framework governing funding, particularly as it pertains to research endeavors. Moreover, as alluded to in previous discussions, there exists a fundamental discrepancy whereby any purported budgetary allocations may be directed towards initiatives that impede academic freedom rather than foster its protection.

7. Which rules and regulations protect academic freedom from interferences by commercial actors and financial sponsors, at different tiers of education? Please explain how conflicts of interest that may arise are addressed.

Given the absence of regulations aimed at safeguarding academic freedom in Iran, the discussion on this matter is tangential to the current topic.

**Surveillance**

8. Please explain whether and the extent to which academic staff and students, at all levels of education, are subject to surveillance by public authorities, for example through on-site cameras or online scrutiny. Has this led to undue restrictions to academic freedom and freedom of expression in educational institutions?

The universities in Iran operate within a framework that restricts public access, requiring individuals to be affiliated with a specific institution to gain entry. Even with valid professor or student credentials, access to other universities is prohibited, contributing to a controlled environment aimed at identifying and monitoring participants of protests, with subsequent punitive measures often enacted.

Each university is equipped with an internal monitoring system, overseeing the electronic communications and activities of both students and faculty members. Access to this system, controlled by username and password credentials, can be restricted upon orders from the "Disciplinary Committees," effectively impeding students from tasks such as semester registration and accessing their academic records.

Since September 2022, reports have emerged of students and their families receiving threatening text messages, particularly targeting female students who choose not to adhere to compulsory hijab regulations. This pressure extends beyond students to include faculty members and their families, underscoring a pervasive atmosphere of surveillance and intimidation within educational institutions9.

Furthermore, there has been a notable increase in the deployment of cameras equipped with facial recognition technology across university campuses10. In addition to surveillance cameras, plainclothes operatives and Basij members are authorized to photograph students and request identification cards, subsequently reporting any perceived infractions. Female students who fail to comply with compulsory hijab regulations have reportedly faced severe repercussions, including suspension from educational activities for multiple semesters based on these reports.

In summary, the extensive surveillance measures implemented within Iranian universities, coupled with punitive actions against individuals deemed to be in violation of imposed regulations, contribute to a climate of undue restrictions on academic freedom and freedom of expression within educational institutions.

**Freedom of expression in teaching and access to books**

9. Do teachers and professors, at all levels of education, enjoy freedom of expression in their own teaching? Are there any limitations imposed, such as remaining “neutral” or forwarding a particular perspective, e.g. on religious and political matters?

It is abundantly evident that within the totalitarian regime of Iran, the fundamental right to freedom of expression is severely curtailed. The intensified wave of suppression witnessed over the past 17 months serves as unequivocal evidence of this reality. Shockingly, over 100 faculty members have faced punitive measures, including termination and suspension, merely for expressing solidarity with students through the act of signing a statement.

For further elucidation on this matter, I strongly recommend consulting the [report](https://drive.google.com/file/d/12ayUn1trU46AvHu1Jk38z0ht01Od9K3O/view) published by the International Coalition of Iranian Academics (ICOIA) regarding the government's crackdown on university students and academics in Iran11. It is important to note, however, that due to a dearth of comprehensive information and the pervasive climate of intimidation and threats, many affected students and professors have been compelled into silence. Consequently, while the report provides valuable insights, it remains incomplete.

In the absence of any dedicated organization advocating for academic freedom in Iran, the ICOIA report offers a crucial perspective on the prevailing suppression within the academic sphere.

The [report](https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/free-to-think-2022/) published by [Scholars At Risk](https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/) serves as a significant and reputable resource for comprehensively understanding the widespread violations of academic freedom within Iran during the period spanning 2022-2023. Scholars at Risk, renowned for their dedication to defending academic freedom worldwide, provide invaluable insights and documentation regarding the various forms of suppression experienced by scholars, researchers, and students within the Iranian academic landscape during this timeframe12.

10. Please explain the extent to which teachers and professors at different education levels can chose school manuals and other books/resources for teaching, and the reasons for any restriction in this regard. Have any specific books/materials been banned, including from school libraries, and alternatively is some material mandatory? If so, why?

Following the revolution in 1979, there was a significant overhaul of school textbooks in Iran, with notable alterations reflecting the ideological shifts brought about by the cultural revolution. These revisions extended to the removal of depictions of females without hijab attire, emblematic of the broader societal changes enforced during this period.

In the realm of higher education, subjects pertaining to politics, religion, and art underwent substantial modifications, reflecting the ideological underpinnings of the regime. Notably, the study of Women's Studies and related rights was prohibited for several years, with current allowances limited to interpretations aligning with Islamic principles. Even within disciplines like astronomy, there are constraints placed on questioning certain aspects, such as the creation of the universe, if such inquiries diverge from interpretations of the Quran.

The scope of censorship extends beyond textbooks, encompassing restrictions on internet access13, with numerous scientific websites and other online platforms being blocked within Iran. These limitations on access to information further contribute to the constraints on academic discourse and intellectual inquiry within the country.

**References:**

[1] The [International Coalition of Iranian Academics (ICOIA)](https://icoia.org/) was established in November 2022, emerging in the wake of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprising in Iran. Positioned as a collective platform, ICOIA serves as a vocal advocate for Iranian scholars who contend with severe suppression within the academic sphere.

[2] Encieh Erfani, formerly an Assistant Professor, tendered her [resignation](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-03246-x) from her position in September 2022, citing her support for protests and the menacing threats posed by the regime. Subsequently, she was compelled into exile. This poignant case serves as a glaring example of the profound absence of academic freedom, wherein even the act of resignation in support of academic principles is met with suppression and punitive measures.

[3] [Basij](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Basij) is one of the forces of the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Islamic_Revolutionary_Guard_Corps).

[4] <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/32105861.html>

[5] <https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/100384>

[6] Regrettably, owing to the prevailing suppressive environment, no official report documenting the violations of academic freedom has been made available. However, despite the absence of formal documentation, some affected students who have faced repercussions at the hands of the "Disciplinary Committees" for alleged breaches of academic freedom have chosen to share their experiences. These individuals have bravely recounted their stories in a [podcast](https://www.instagram.com/p/C1v3DOite9b/?hl=en&img_index=1) conducted in Persian, shedding light on the challenges and injustices they have encountered within the academic sphere.

[7] <https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/cv2vl1yr6l1o>

[8] <https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/report/show/1757657>

[9] <https://www.iranintl.com/202309297701>

[10] <https://www.sharghdaily.com/fa/tiny/news-883710>

[11] [The International Community of Iranian Academics (ICOIA) report on government](https://drive.google.com/file/d/12ayUn1trU46AvHu1Jk38z0ht01Od9K3O/view)

[crackdown on university students and academics in Iran](https://drive.google.com/file/d/12ayUn1trU46AvHu1Jk38z0ht01Od9K3O/view), January 2023

[12] [Free to Think](https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/free-to-think-2022/)

[13] <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202309191557>

**How to submit information**

Submissions should be sent electronically no later than **2 February 2024 to** [hrc-sr-education@un.org](mailto:hrc-sr-education@un.org), using the email title: “Contribution: Academic freedom”.

Please select and answer the questions most relevant for your agency. Kindly limit your responses to **3,000 words** and attach annexes where necessary. To facilitate their consideration, please send responses in a Word document, and in English, French, or Spanish. **Please clearly specify the entity making the contribution on the document itself and add paragraph numbers**.

All inputs received will be posted on the OHCHR website. Please indicate if you have any objections regarding to your reply being posted on the OHCHR website.