

Thank you for the introduction. Dear academia,

(As the video has shown, my name is Quinten Jansen, a student of both International Relations and Philosophy. With this combination of experiences, I hope to one day become a diplomat, serving our European Union, our country, and our world.)

Because of my 'best' student of my faculty award, I was invited to talk about academia and freedom.

And I do not want to start with a cliché today and ask you what freedom really is. Instead, I want to ask the following: What is freedom not?

Freedom is not something to be given by somebody or something.
Freedom is a thing to have from birth until somebody or something takes it.
Freedom, dear guests, is not given. Freedom gets stolen.

From the second you are born, your freedom gets stolen. After all, hunger takes away our freedom to just 'be' and forces us to find food. Therefore, it is very difficult to ascertain what makes us free. However, what we can do is focus on what makes us unfree.

So let's talk about what makes academia "unfree". But with what definition do we work? Naturally, I asked ChatGPT

It told me that Academic freedom is the right of a teacher to instruct and the right of a student to learn in an academic setting unhampered by outside interference.

What kind of outside interferences are we dealing with? Perhaps, when a PHD student is afraid of the approval of their supervisor. Perhaps, when our university is dependent on financing from external sources. Perhaps, when our international universities are forced to change their language policies for many of their courses, giving our staff, students, professors, and all others who come from abroad the feeling that their opinions, and themselves, are no longer welcome.

We, as an international community, face these interferences together. And when we do we see our community for what it is. A family. A family that fights, argues and disagrees with one another yes. But yet, a family nonetheless who will stand up for anyone who is a part of it. Seeing that every speech today has been in English, regardless of the political pressure, shows exactly that solidarity.

And I, like so many others, am so unbelievably proud to be able to call myself a part of this family.

However, this definition of academic freedom being based on the absence of external factors does not tell the entire story. Often, interference we face comes from within.

Because, when I talked to another student, they said that the first lecture of their course started with the following statement: "I will not talk about this or that topic, because it is too polarizing and will only divide the class." This interference is caused by fear. Fear to face discomfort. Fear of being deemed controversial by their peers. How can I, as a student who aspires to become a diplomat ever be prepared to traverse the global ideological differences if my education is too fearful of facing them within the walls of its university?

And the worst part about it is that no one personally is to blame for it. After all, what if the professor fears being alienated from their students? Or what if students fear losing precious friendships with their peers, due to their differing opinions?

Imre Lakatos said that proof and refutation are the logic of the growth of science. But only when we are free, do we dare to disagree. And due to our own fear, we make ourselves unfree.

What is academic freedom? Academic freedom, to me, is to feel free to disagree and be proven wrong, knowing that when I'm wrong as an academic, it does not make me less of a person. Just like the words of a diplomat do not have to reflect the words of the person. This freedom is stolen by fear, and only we can free ourselves from it.

During my function as a university councilor, I became known for quoting philosophers when making a point. I would like to end this small speech in a likewise manner by quoting the famous writer George Orwell: "Freedom is the right to tell

others what they do not want to hear”

So next time when you enter these doors, do not be afraid to be controversial.
Because your right, dear academics, is to be able to be wrong. Only then, can we,
academics, start being right. Being free.

Thank you