

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND THE EVALUATION OF UNIVERSITIES: A CULTURE-CENTERED CRITIQUE OF GLOBAL RANKINGS

On the structural omission of academic freedom from ranking methodologies and the case for its incorporation as a constitutive criterion of institutional evaluation

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The Center for Culture-Centred Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE) at Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand, is a global hub for communication research that uses participatory and culture-centred methodologies to develop community-driven communication solutions to health and wellbeing. Through experiments in methods of radical democracy anchored in community ownership and community voice, the Centre collaborates with communities, community organisers, community researchers, advocates and activists to imagine and develop sustainable practices for prevention, health care organising, food and agriculture, worker organising, migrant and refugee rights, indigenous rights, rights of the poor and economic transformation.

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ABSTRACT

Global university rankings present themselves as neutral measures of institutional quality. This paper argues that they instead operate as communicative infrastructures that convert the unequal distribution of material and colonial advantage into the language of merit, and that their methodologies are structurally incapable of registering academic freedom, the condition upon which scholarly knowledge production depends. Drawing on the culture-centered approach, which treats structure, culture, and agency as analytically inseparable, the paper interrogates what rankings measure and what they omit. An original cross-national analysis links the 2026 QS World University Rankings to the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset, version 16, across 102 countries. The bivariate association between democracy and university strength is shown to be largely attributable to national wealth: once income per capita is controlled, the relationship between democracy and elite university quality is not statistically distinguishable from zero, and academic freedom is the weakest of the predictors examined, retaining no independent association with ranking position. These results indicate that rankings reward attributes that material resources can secure; citation output, reputation, and internationalisation, while remaining insensitive to the conditions that academic freedom protects. The paper contends that this insensitivity generates a structural incentive for institutions and states to neglect, and in some instances to suppress, academic freedom, and it advances the case for treating academic freedom as a constitutive and heavily weighted criterion of evaluation. Eight policy recommendations are set out, spanning reform of existing instruments and the development of alternative, community-grounded evaluative practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

University rankings have become among the most consequential instruments of governance in contemporary higher education. Produced by commercial organisations and amplified through extensive media circulation, they condition institutional strategy, student mobility, the allocation of funding, and national science policy across both the Global North and the Global South.¹ Their authority rests upon a claim to neutrality: that they assess, through standardised and comparable indicators, the quality of universities worldwide.

This paper examines that claim from the standpoint of the culture-centered approach (CCA), an analytic framework that treats structure, culture, and agency as inseparable and that directs attention to the conditions under which particular voices are rendered audible or inaudible within systems of representation (Dutta 2011). Developed through sustained community-engaged research with marginalised populations across the Global South, the approach carries a methodological scepticism toward measures that present themselves as value-neutral. Applied to rankings, it poses three questions of any indicator: what structural conditions produce it, whose cultural assumptions it encodes, and whose agency it obscures.

The observation that motivates the analysis is an absence. The dominant ranking systems—those produced by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Times Higher Education (THE), and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)—incorporate no measure of academic freedom. Indicators of reputation, citation, faculty resourcing, internationalisation, graduate employability, and sustainability are aggregated into composite scores, yet the freedom to teach, to conduct research, and to disseminate findings without political or institutional reprisal is nowhere represented. The omission is consequential because academic freedom is not one institutional attribute among others but the condition under which the activities the rankings do measure become possible. An institution may sustain high citation output and substantial international recruitment while its scholars are dismissed for their findings, its students disciplined for dissent, and its governance subordinated to political authority; under prevailing methodologies, such conditions leave its ranking position substantially unaffected.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops a critique of rankings as instruments of communicative inversion. Section 3 reports an original cross-national analysis relating ranking position to democracy and academic freedom. Section 4 examines the structural incentives generated by the omission of academic freedom. Section 5 advances the case for treating academic freedom as a constitutive evaluative criterion. Section 6 sets out policy recommendations, and Section 7 concludes.

2. RANKINGS AS COMMUNICATIVE INVERSION

The culture-centered approach identifies a recurrent operation in the communication of power, termed communicative inversion, whereby the descriptive language attached to a practice comes to signify the opposite of the practice's actual function (Dutta 2011). University rankings exemplify this operation. They are articulated in the vocabulary of excellence, quality, and world-class standing, while the indicators from which they are composed track, to a substantial degree, the accumulation of antecedent advantage.

The composition of the QS World University Rankings illustrates the point. The methodology underlying the 2026 edition aggregates nine weighted indicators, of which reputation surveys of academics and employers together account for close to half of the total score, with bibliometric citation counts and measures of internationalisation comprising much of the remainder. Each of these indicators is sensitive to pre-existing resource advantage. Reputation surveys are self-referential, insofar as respondents nominate institutions already known to them, and institutional visibility is itself a function of resources. Citation metrics privilege English-language scholarship indexed in databases developed within, and oriented toward, the Global North. Measures of internationalisation favour well-resourced systems able to recruit faculty and students from less affluent ones. The indicators do not independently assess quality and subsequently discover it to be concentrated in wealthy, Anglophone institutions; they are constructed from proxies for wealth and Anglophone centrality, which the composite score then re-describes as excellence. These properties have been extensively documented in the critical literature on research evaluation, which identifies reputational bias, citation bias, and the conflation of resource inputs with quality as persistent features of the major ranking systems.

The culture-centered triad of structure, culture, and agency clarifies the mechanism. Rankings narrate institutional standing as an outcome of agency: of leadership, strategy, and institutional culture, and thereby displace from view the structural determinants of that standing: the histories of colonial accumulation that endowed certain institutions and depleted others, the differential funding regimes, and the geopolitical positioning that conditions access to global scholarly networks. The marketisation of higher education intensifies this displacement, subordinating the public functions of the university to metricised competition (Brown 2015). The erasure of structure is, on this account, not incidental to the ranking enterprise but constitutive of its product.

3. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS: DEMOCRACY, WEALTH AND UNIVERSITY STRENGTH

3.1 Data and method

To examine whether the conditions that rankings omit are associated with the outcomes they measure, an original analysis was constructed linking the 2026 QS World University Rankings to the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset, version 16 (Coppedge et al. 2026). Institutions were aggregated to the national level, yielding 102 countries present in both sources. Four measures of national university strength were derived: the mean academic-reputation score, the highest institutional rank attained, the number of institutions ranked within the global top 500, and that count expressed relative to population. These were related to V-Dem’s electoral and liberal democracy indices and to the Academic Freedom Index (Spannagel & Kinzelbach 2023), with the natural logarithm of GDP per capita included as a control for national wealth. Because the external income series in V-Dem terminates in 2019, wealth is controlled at that year; this and other limitations of the design are noted below.

3.2 Results

At the bivariate level, democracy is positively associated with university strength. The liberal democracy index correlates with mean academic reputation at $r = 0.41$ and with the per-capita count of top-500 institutions at $r = 0.53$. These associations are substantially attenuated once national wealth is held constant. With the logarithm of GDP per capita included, the relationship between democracy and elite university quality is no longer statistically distinguishable from zero, and wealth emerges as the dominant predictor across all specifications. One association survives the introduction of the wealth control: liberal democracies exhibit a somewhat broader distribution of strong universities relative to population than their income alone would predict.

Table 1. National-level associations between political predictors and university-strength measures ($n = 102$ countries). Cells report Pearson correlations; partial correlations control for the logarithm of GDP per capita (2019).

Predictor	Mean reputation (bivariate)	Mean reputation (partial)	Top-500 per capita (bivariate)	Top-500 per capita (partial)
Liberal Democracy Index	0.41***	0.18	0.53***	0.26**
Electoral Democracy Index	0.33***	0.11	0.46***	0.20*
Academic Freedom Index	0.17	-0.02	0.33***	0.12

Significance: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Sources: QS World University Rankings 2026; V-Dem v16 (Coppedge et al. 2026). Coefficients without asterisks are not statistically significant at conventional thresholds.

The result of principal relevance concerns academic freedom. Among the predictors examined, the Academic Freedom Index is the weakest, and it retains no independent association with ranking position once wealth is controlled (Table 1). This pattern is not evidence that academic freedom is immaterial to scholarship; it indicates that ranking indicators are insensitive to the conditions academic freedom protects. Highly resourced systems in which academic freedom is substantially constrained, the analysis records academic-freedom scores of 0.227 for Hong Kong and 0.466 for Singapore on a zero-to-one scale, nonetheless sustain highly ranked institutions, because citation output and international recruitment can be maintained under conditions of constraint. The contraction of a research agenda, the closure of an academic unit, and the surveillance of a campus are not registered by the indicators in use.

These findings acquire further significance in light of documented global trends. The 2026 update of the Academic Freedom Index, derived from the same V-Dem data, reports that academic freedom declined to a statistically and substantively significant degree in fifty countries over the decade to 2025, while improving in only nine, with the most pronounced deterioration in the freedom to research and teach and in campus integrity (Kinzelbach et al. 2026). The decline is not confined to authoritarian states: India, the United

Kingdom, and the United States are among the cases of significant deterioration, and the contraction of institutional autonomy in the United States has exceeded that recorded in several states undergoing overt authoritarian consolidation. Academic freedom is thus eroding across diverse political contexts at the same juncture at which the dominant instruments of institutional evaluation remain unable to detect its erosion.

3.3 Limitations

Three features of the design qualify the interpretation of these results. First, the analysis is cross-sectional, and the associations reported cannot establish causal direction. Second, national wealth may function as a mediator as well as a confounder: to the extent that democratic institutions contribute to the prosperity that funds universities, controlling for income removes part of a causal pathway rather than an extraneous correlation, rendering the wealth-adjusted estimates conservative. Third, the sample is subject to selection, since countries with no ranked institutions, disproportionately poorer and less democratic, are absent, a censoring that biases the observed associations toward zero. These qualifications do not weaken the central finding regarding academic freedom; they indicate that its independent contribution to ranking position is, if anything, likely to be overstated rather than understated by the present analysis.

4. THE OMISSION OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND THE STRUCTURE OF INCENTIVES

The exclusion of academic freedom from ranking methodologies is not solely an evaluative deficiency; it establishes a structure of incentives that operates against the protection of academic freedom. Attributes that are measured become objects of institutional management, whereas conditions that are unmeasured do not. An institutional leadership oriented toward ranking position, an orientation that the marketisation of the sector renders increasingly difficult to avoid, derives no reputational benefit from defending a persecuted scholar, safeguarding the right to protest, or declining conditions attached to politically motivated funding. Such actions may, moreover, incur reputational and financial costs to which ranking indicators are negatively sensitive, through diminished philanthropic support, reduced international enrolment, or controversy reflected in reputation surveys. The instrument therefore not only fails to reward the defence of academic freedom but tends to penalise it.

The consequences are evident in the documented relationship between democratic backsliding and the academy. Scholarship has established that the erosion of academic freedom constitutes an early and reliable indicator of democratic decline (Ginsburg 2022). The pattern recurs across cases: the subordination of universities to governing parties in Hungary and Poland (Enyedi 2018; Pirro & Stanley 2022); the dismissal of academics and the closure of programmes in Turkey following the consolidation of executive power (Abbas & Zalta 2022; Alemdaroğlu 2022); and the constriction of dissent and the reconfiguration of the university under Hindutva majoritarianism in India (Bhatty & Sundar 2020; Ganguly 2019; Altbach & Mathews 2025). In each instance the assault upon the academy preceded or accompanied broader democratic decline, and in each instance the indicators upon which rankings depend would have registered little of it.

Within the culture-centered framework, the more fundamental consequence is the attenuation of voice. The university functions, on this account, as an infrastructure through which questions that political and economic authority would prefer suppressed may be posed, and through which subaltern knowledge discounted by markets and states may be articulated and defended. Academic freedom is the precondition of that infrastructure. An evaluative apparatus indifferent to academic freedom communicates, through the authority of its metrics, that the protection of such voice is immaterial to institutional standing, a determination registered by institutions and governments alike.

5. ACADEMIC FREEDOM AS A CONSTITUTIVE CONDITION

A common objection to assigning academic freedom substantial weight in institutional evaluation holds that it is one institutional good among many and ought not to be privileged over teaching, research, or societal impact. This objection misconstrues the status of academic freedom, which is not a discrete attribute set alongside the others but the condition of possibility for the activities the rankings already purport to measure. The understanding is foundational to the modern university and to the professional norms developed in its defence (AAUP 1915, 1940; Finkin & Post 2009; Reichman 2019, 2021; Rabban 2024). As Post (2012) argues, academic freedom is justified not by an individual right to expression but by the social value of disciplined knowledge production, which constitutes the defining function of the university. In the absence of the freedom to pursue inquiry without prescribed conclusions, research is reduced to commissioned confirmation; in the absence of the freedom to teach against prevailing orthodoxy, instruction becomes the transmission of authorised conclusions; and in the absence of the freedom to dissent, claims of societal impact risk serving the legitimisation of power. The indicators that rankings prize are, accordingly, dependent upon a freedom those indicators do not assess.

Recent theoretical work reinforces rather than qualifies this position. Levy (2024, 2026) reconceptualises academic freedom not as an individual liberty of speech but as a complex freedom of association grounded in the self-governance of scholarly communities, a formulation that distinguishes academic freedom from the campus-speech controversies with which it is frequently conflated and that foregrounds its institutional dimension. Scott (2019), in terms consonant with the culture-centered approach, emphasises that academic freedom is never neutral but is constituted within relations of power, operating as the protection of inquiry that authority would prefer foreclosed. The underlying principle possesses a long lineage in the theory of the university and of intellectual liberty (Kant 1798; von Humboldt 1792; Mill 1859; Weber 1917), although its material conditions are now subject to pronounced strain.

The objection that academic freedom is not amenable to measurement is no longer sustainable. The Academic Freedom Index provides standardised, time-series assessments for 179 countries across five validated dimensions: freedom to research and teach, freedom of academic exchange and dissemination, institutional autonomy, campus integrity, and freedom of academic and cultural expression, constructed from the assessments of more than two thousand country experts through a peer-reviewed measurement model (Spannagel & Kinzelbach 2023). The monitoring conducted by Scholars at Risk furnishes a complementary record of attacks upon the academy. Institution-level indicators are equally specifiable, including the security of tenure, the protection of student and staff protest, the autonomy of governance from political and donor influence, and the treatment of contingent and dissenting scholars. The instruments required to incorporate academic freedom into evaluation therefore exist; what is absent is the determination to employ them.

A further consideration concerns the corrective potential of such incorporation. An evaluative framework that assigned academic freedom substantial weight would be compelled, by its own construction, to represent institutions situated in conditions of constraint as such, rather than re-describing them as unqualifiedly excellent. The measure would, in this respect, render the underlying structure visible. This furnishes a criterion against which any proposed reform may be assessed: whether it discloses the structural conditions of institutional performance or further conceals them.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations that follow are organised on two registers. The first concerns reform internal to the existing apparatus: should ranking systems continue to govern the sector, academic freedom must be incorporated as a central, weighted, and decisive criterion. The second concerns the development of alternative evaluative practices grounded in the communities that universities serve, on the premise that no reform internal to ranking can substitute for an evaluative culture organised around voice and communicative justice.

Register One: Reform of Existing Instruments

1. Establish academic freedom as a threshold condition. Documented severe violations: campus surveillance, dismissal for protected expression, the suppression of protest, or the political and donor capture of governance, should constrain an institution's eligibility for the upper tiers of any ranking, irrespective of its citation or reputation scores. Academic freedom should function as a condition that must be satisfied before other indicators are permitted to elevate institutional standing.
2. Assign academic freedom substantial explicit weight. A composite academic-freedom indicator should combine the Academic Freedom Index as a national baseline with institution-level assessment of tenure security, the protection of dissent and protest, the autonomy of governance, campus integrity, and the treatment of contingent and marginalised scholars. A weighting of the order of twenty to twenty-five per cent would place academic freedom on a par with the largest indicator presently in use.
3. Report institutional scores in relation to their freedom context. Each institution's standing should be reported alongside the academic-freedom conditions of its environment, so that an institution that is strong but unfree is represented as such rather than re-described as simply excellent. Transparency regarding constraint is the minimum requirement of an honest evaluative instrument.
4. Reduce reliance on indicators that encode colonial epistemics. The weight accorded to reputation surveys and to citation counts drawn from databases oriented toward the Global North should be reduced, and recognition extended to multilingual publication, community-engaged scholarship, Indigenous knowledge partnerships, and mātauranga Māori. Determinations of what constitutes legitimate knowledge should not be confined to a single language or region.

Register Two: Reconstruction of Evaluation

5. Incorporate subaltern voice into evaluative governance. The criteria of institutional worth should be co-determined with the communities that universities are intended to serve, including scholars of the Global South, Indigenous knowledge holders, students, and contingent faculty, rather than with employers and elite academic respondents alone. The prior question concerns who is empowered to define value, and it warrants resolution through participatory infrastructures of voice rather than through market surveys.
6. Subject the producers of rankings to independent audit. The principal ranking organisations are commercial enterprises that market advisory, advertising, and improvement services to the institutions they evaluate. Disclosure of conflicts of interest and independent audit of methodology should be required, since an evaluator with a financial interest in the evaluated cannot credibly claim neutrality.
7. Decouple public policy from commercial rankings and protect academic freedom in law. Governments and sector bodies, in Aotearoa New Zealand and elsewhere, should sever funding and policy decisions from commercial rankings; legislate for and fund academic freedom and institutional autonomy as public goods; and anchor evaluation in public-interest criteria and, in the Aotearoa context, in obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are, in this respect, already codified international norms in the UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel (UNESCO 1997) and in the Magna Charta Universitatum (1988), to which more than a thousand universities are signatories, and the task is to render those commitments enforceable.
8. Reorient institutional practice away from freedom-blind metrics. Institutions should cease the optimisation of activity toward indicators insensitive to academic freedom; publish annual reports on the state of academic freedom within their governance; and treat the protection of scholars under threat not as a reputational risk to be managed but as a condition of institutional integrity.

7. CONCLUSION

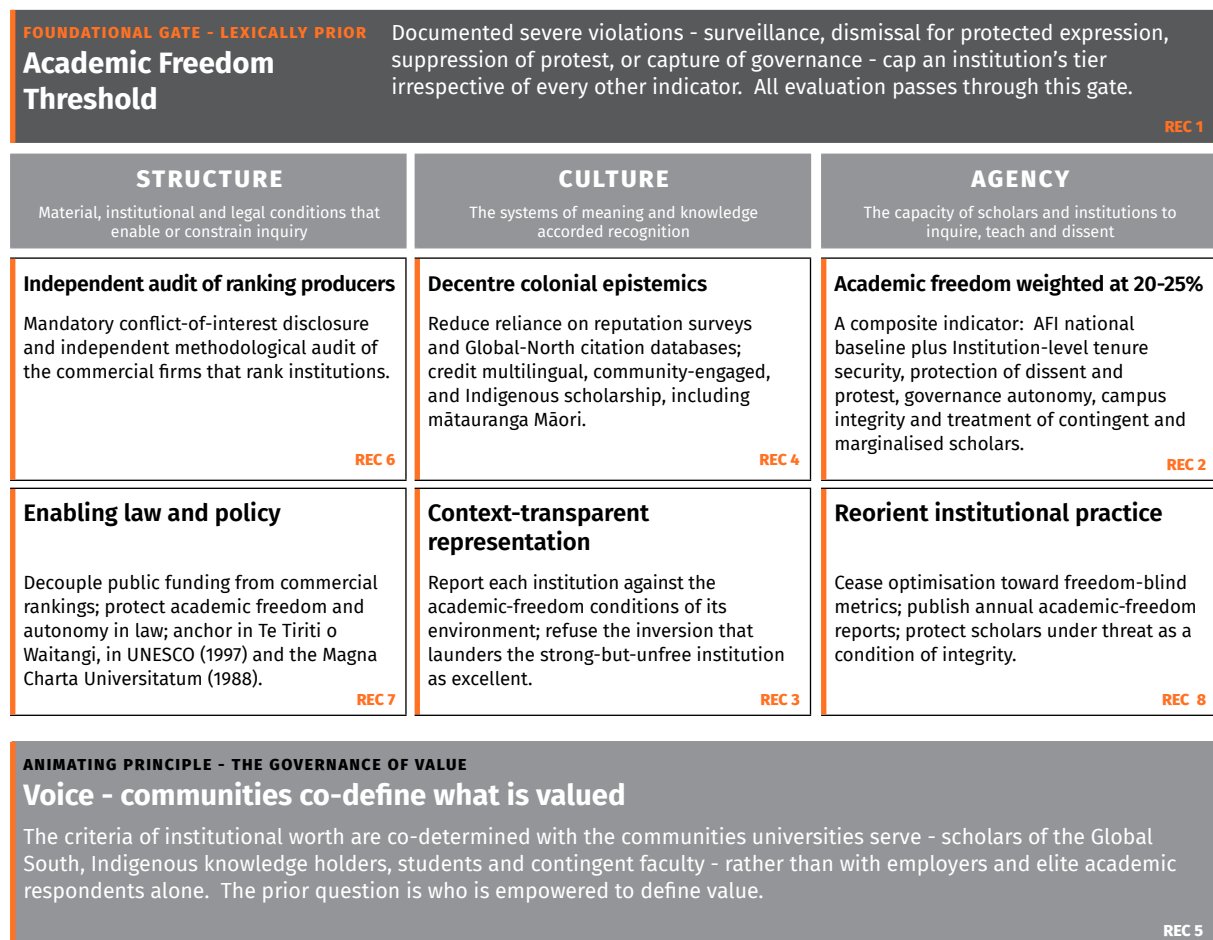
The incorporation of academic freedom as a substantial and decisive criterion of institutional evaluation would constitute a material improvement upon present arrangements, and the foregoing analysis supports its adoption, given the demonstrable harm produced by the existing incentive structure. The culture-centered approach nonetheless cautions against treating such reform as a terminus. An evaluative instrument that measured academic freedom adequately would remain a single composite score, a compression of the plural and incommensurable functions of the university into an ordinal position, and a technology oriented toward the management of institutional reputation.

The more fundamental implication of the analysis is that the premise of ranking itself warrants reconsideration, and that evaluation might instead be reconstructed around the questions the prevailing instruments are constituted to exclude: whose knowledge is accorded recognition, whose voice is rendered audible, and whether the conditions of scholarly freedom obtain. These constitute the appropriate objects of institutional evaluation, and they are precisely the conditions that the indicators presently in use are unable to capture.

CARE - A CULTURE-Centered FRAMEWORK FOR ACADEMIC EVALUATION

Reclaiming the Measure of the University

Reconstructing institutional evaluation around structure, culture, agency and voice - synthesising the eight policy recommendations of CARE Working Paper 2026-04.



ORIENTATION

Evaluation that discloses structure rather than concealing it: communicative justice in place of the composite rank.

Figure 1. The Culture-Centered Evaluation Framework. The eight recommendations are organised as a single evaluative model: academic freedom functions as a foundational, lexically prior gate; the constructs of structure, culture, and agency each carry two of the reforms; and the whole rests on voice as the governance principle through which the communities universities serve co-determine the criteria of worth.

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DATA AND METHOD

The empirical analysis links the QS World University Rankings 2026 to the V-Dem version 16 country-year dataset across 102 matched countries, with the Academic Freedom Index and the democracy indices as predictors and the logarithm of GDP per capita (2019) as a control for national wealth. The associations are cross-sectional; the considerations bearing on causal inference, mediation, and sample selection are discussed in Section 3.3. The merged country-level dataset is available on request.

¹ I used Claude Opus 4.8 to support with editing the document.