

RESPONSIBLE RESEARCH  
SERIES 1:2025



**SAFEGUARDING THE FREEDOM OF  
EXPRESSION OF RESEARCHERS  
AND EXPERTS**

## RESPONSIBLE RESEARCH SERIES

Responsible Research Series publishes declarations, policies, studies, recommendations and other documents relating to the openness, responsibility and accessibility of science and research. Publications also cover science communication and science-society interactions. The publication series is not a scientific peer-reviewed publication. The series is published by the Committee for Public Information (TJNK) and the Federation of Finnish Learned Societies (TSV).

**PUBLICATION:** Safeguarding The Freedom of Expression of Researchers and Experts

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The recommendations were developed as part of the Freedom of Expression for Researchers project under the Committee for Public Information. The project was funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The objective was to create a common set of guidelines for all actors in the scientific community. To draft the guidelines, the project organised a series of nationwide consultation events for stakeholders in 2024. The draft recommendations were open for public comment in late 2024. The recommendation text was authored by Oula Silvennoinen and Reetta Kettunen.

The Committee for Public Information approved the recommendations in its meeting on 17 December 2024.

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### INTRODUCTION TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS

The freedom of expression of researchers and experts is closely linked to academic freedom and the societal impact of scientific knowledge: only accessible knowledge can have an impact. To safeguard the freedom of expression of researchers and experts, these guidelines and recommendations provide support for situations where an expert's right to share their knowledge is hindered through harassment or coercion.

Although these recommendations primarily reflect the research community, they can be applied broadly. Scientific knowledge is produced by a wide range of actors, including not only academia but also civil society organisations, think tanks, journalists, and businesses, all of which influence society through the knowledge they generate.

To protect the freedom of expression within the research community, it is recommended that a national body be established to coordinate efforts in defending freedom of speech, provide advice and training, and monitor the development of the situation. Additionally, occupational health and safety measures should be extended to researchers and experts who are not in formal employment relationships. Science communication and protection from harassment should be incorporated as a permanent part of doctoral training programmes in universities. Research organisations, in turn, must develop their procedures for preventing and managing harassment incidents, for instance by updating their equality, non-discrimination, and safety policies. Finally, close collaboration and networking between research organisations and experts are encouraged to establish shared operational models and facilitate knowledge exchange.

The key message of these recommendations is: do not leave anyone alone. We need collaboration and community support to create a safer and more unified working environment for expert work and science communication.

## UNDERSTANDING THE HARASSMENT OF RESEARCHERS

The freedom of science has always faced attempts at restriction. Throughout history, both science as a discipline and individual researchers' findings have been met with resistance, particularly when conflicting with political objectives or religious perspectives. However, freedom of thought and expression are essential prerequisites for science and research. From the perspective of the societal benefits they provide, it is in the interest of all—beyond the research community itself—to defend academic freedom. Researchers must be free to speak publicly about their work and findings.

In its recent declaration (*Call to Action on the Freedom and Safety of Scientists*, July 2024), UNESCO urges its member states to strengthen protections for academic freedom. Safeguarding researchers' freedom of expression and security is a crucial factor in maintaining public trust in science. Without broad public support, science cannot retain its position as a foundation for decision-making. This is now more important than ever.<sup>1</sup>

Concerns over the state of researchers' freedom of expression are widely recognised both nationally and internationally. The most serious threat faced by researchers globally is the risk of direct physical violence. The *Scholars at Risk* organisation's *Academic Freedom Monitoring Project*<sup>2</sup> tracks and documents cases of harassment and violence against researchers. Even in countries where researchers and journalists are not at risk of physical violence, they may still be subjected to coercion, intimidation, and verbal harassment designed to silence them.

In Finland, harassment is the most common and well-documented threat to researchers' freedom of expression. Harassment typically involves attempts to silence a researcher or undermine their expertise through personal attacks, public defamation, coercion, and hate campaigns.

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Perpetrators of harassment often present themselves as critics of science, claiming that their actions constitute legitimate scientific critique. However, there is a clear distinction between scientific criticism and harassment. Scientific criticism is the foundation of both the academic method and discourse. Critical public debate is also important and well justified. It is always directed at the subject matter, not the individual, and it is presented in a professional manner, and backed by established research principles. Making unfounded accusations, deliberately misinterpreting arguments, disregarding counterarguments, engaging in coercion, or adopting a threatening demeanour do not constitute legitimate criticism—when these characteristics emerge, criticism becomes harassment.

The growing prevalence of harassment in recent decades is largely due to the rapid transformation of the communication landscape. The digital age, with the expansion of online networks and social media, has provided new opportunities for harassment. Modern communication environments are characterised by real-time interaction, an emphasis on speed, and the integration of social media into everyday life. This means that individuals can be reached at any time, and criticism—whether legitimate or not—can be instantly disseminated both to its target and to a wider audience, often anonymously.

Social media users form communities that facilitate online harassment. Audience reaction plays a crucial role: public responses amplify the impact of harassment, and when more people join in, isolated incidents escalate into full-scale harassment campaigns.

### A Transnational Phenomenon in a Global Environment

Attempts to challenge researchers' freedom of expression have existed throughout history, with varying levels of influence depending on societal conditions. The history of science—from Hypatia to Galileo Galilei to Alan Turing—is full of examples of researchers being silenced for different reasons.

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Modern harassment is a transnational phenomenon. A significant portion of harassment conducted via social media takes place in a borderless, global environment, even though the use of local languages may create an illusion of confinement within national boundaries. Due to this transnational nature, the origins and driving forces behind harassment campaigns may be located beyond Finland's borders, beyond the reach of national legislation and countermeasures.

Who engages in harassment and coercion, and why? The phenomenon is driven by a diverse range of actors, including state actors, government authorities, organisations, political movements, and individuals motivated by their own reasons.

In addition to harassment, other threats to freedom of expression must be recognised. Some of these originate from within the research community itself, arising from tensions between researchers and funders, internal academic disputes, or conflicts between lecturers and students. Unfortunately, in Finland, even political figures occasionally attempt to restrict researchers' freedom of expression.

It is unlikely that undue criticism, attempts to restrict freedom of expression, and harassment directed at researchers will ever be completely eliminated. The goal of the research community's countermeasures must be to minimise their impact, implement effective preventative strategies, and provide support to those targeted.

### Multiple Forms of Harassment

In Finland, researchers' and experts' freedom of expression is primarily restricted through psychological and verbal violence, including threats, coercion, and harassment. The Committee for Public Information has been monitoring the development of this issue in recent years through surveys. At the turn of 2023–2024, a new, more extensive survey was conducted among researchers and experts to assess the prevalence and nature of challenges to their freedom of expression.

Approximately one-third of respondents reported having been subjected to such attempts at influence. Their experiences ranged from

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threats and coercion to various forms of harassment, with the latter being by far the most common. The majority of respondents also believed that harassment had increased compared to previous years.

The most frequent form of harassment is public defamation, with social media being the most common platform for it. Social media makes it easy to carry out such harassment and bring it to the target's attention in real time. Defamation is often used to publicly undermine a researcher's expertise and credibility. Harassment also occurs in educational settings<sup>3</sup>. It is often highly gendered and disproportionately affects individuals from minority backgrounds.

The aim of harassment is to silence its target. It can be orchestrated and deliberate or emerge organically. These targeted harassment campaigns are sometimes referred to as *malicious targeting* (in Finnish: *maalittaminen*). In Finland, there have been discussions on updating criminal law to cover cases where the initiator of harassment merely identifies the target while a loosely organised or self-directed network of followers carries out the actual harassment. However, the majority of harassment remains unorganised.

Harassment is not always directed at individuals. Entire organisations may also be targeted, with attempts to discredit their reputation or manipulate their operations through harassment. Nonetheless, the most severe forms of harassment typically target individuals. Personal details of victims including their address may be uncovered and publicly disseminated with the intent to intimidate. Authorities may also be misused as instruments of harassment, most commonly through baseless criminal complaints or unwarranted child welfare reports. There have been cases of this in Finland, including a precedent set by the Supreme Court in 2022 (KKO:2022:1). The Supreme Court has also issued a precedent regarding the harassment of a journalist (KKO:2022:8).

The legal system may also be exploited through fabricated lawsuits. This practice, internationally known as *Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation* (SLAPP), is not necessarily intended to win in court but



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rather to force the target into a financially and emotionally draining legal battle. The mere threat of such proceedings may be enough to silence a researcher or drive them away from their field of study.

Professional self-regulation mechanisms can also be misused for harassment. An example of this is the misuse of the *The Finnish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and Procedures for Handling Alleged Violations of Research Integrity*<sup>4</sup>. Using these procedures as a tool for harassment contradicts their intended principles and may lead to consequences for the person filing such claims.

## EFFECTIVE COUNTERMEASURES

Harassment and attempts to restrict researchers' freedom of expression will likely never be entirely eradicated. However, with well-considered countermeasures, their negative impacts can be mitigated. Effective action must be taken at the transnational, national, organisational, and individual levels.

At the transnational level, international cooperation organisations such as UNESCO and EU legislative and policy measures play a crucial role. These include, for example, the EU directive on SLAPP lawsuits and its national implementation<sup>5</sup>.

At the national level, measures should focus on Finnish legislation and law enforcement practices. Legal frameworks must be kept up to date, and the judiciary must be provided with sufficient expertise, consistent practices, and adequate resources for law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, and courts.

Organisations have statutory and regularly updated guidelines where preparations against harassment should be naturally included. These include equality and non-discrimination plans and security policies.

### Recommendations for the Finnish Research Community

The Finnish research community has long been aware of attempts to restrict the freedom of expression of researchers and experts. Efforts have been made to develop support and countermeasures, and various guidelines have been created. However, the Finnish operating environment remains fragmented: different actors are developing their own approaches independently. This lack of coordination leads to inefficiencies and overlapping efforts.

#### Recommendation 1: Establish a National Coordination Body for Protecting Freedom of Expression

Finland should adopt a support model similar to Germany's *scicomm-support.de*. This model involves a collective organisation comprising universities, research institutes, research funders, and professional unions. Its purpose is to provide advice and support, monitor developments, offer training, issue statements, and act as an expert body on these issues.

The Finnish research community would benefit from a similar arrangement, where efforts to better safeguard researchers' freedom of expression are centralised under a single national body that also enhances connections with international partners.

#### Recommendation 2: Improve Protection for Independent Researchers Facing Harassment

Employed researchers are covered by occupational health and safety legislation, meaning their employer has a legal obligation to support them in harassment cases. However, independent researchers (such as grant-funded researchers) are in a weaker position, as they often fall outside the scope of employer responsibilities regarding workplace safety.

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The duty to protect must be extended to all members of the research community engaged in research and expert roles. The national coordination body proposed in Recommendation 1 could provide advice and support on issues related to freedom of expression, regardless of the researcher's position. This would strengthen support services for all researchers and experts.

### **Recommendation 3: Integrate Science Communication Training as an Integral part of Doctoral Education**

Science and research are expected to have societal impact. However, impact cannot be achieved without science communication. Training in science communication must become an integral part of doctoral education. Harassment is now an inherent aspect of the modern science communication landscape, and protection against it should be integrated as a standard component of doctoral training programmes at universities.

## **Guidance for Researchers and Experts**

### **Be prepared and Protect Yourself**

You may face coercion and harassment due to your research, and it is not always possible to predict it in advance. Be aware of the potential for harassment and consider how to protect yourself as part of your science communication strategy. Practical advice on handling harassment is available. Check if your research organisation has guidelines. Professional associations also offer practical guidance.<sup>6</sup>

### **Do not Face It Alone**

Support and assistance are available, even if others have not yet noticed inappropriate feedback, harassment, coercion, or threats directed at you. Contact your institution, employer, funder, supervisor, or

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professional union. In severe cases, they can also provide legal advice and support. Remember peer support as well. You are not alone.

### Claim Your Rights

You have the right to conduct your work and speak publicly about your findings. No one has the right to harass or threaten you because of it. Your employer has a statutory obligation to assist in workplace safety matters. Even if you are not employed under a contract, as a member of the research community, you should have access to support and assistance in defending your freedom of expression. If you experience harassment, only you have the right to decide whether or not to make it public.

## Guidance for Research Organisations

### Protect

Employers have a legal obligation to protect their employees. Make sure your organisation has effective guidance and support procedures in place. This protection must also be extended to all members of the research community, including students and independent researchers.

### Do not Leave Anyone Alone

Continuously monitor the situation of your employees, researchers, and funded individuals. In challenging situations, offer support proactively, even without a formal request. Show your support publicly, but make sure to discuss and agree on it with the person involved in advance. Ensure that you can provide legal advice when necessary. Protecting freedom of expression requires resources.

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### Take Action in Society

As a representative of a research organisation, you and your institution must develop preparedness to handle these issues. Research organisations must advocate for the entire research community and society at large, supporting the modernisation of legislation and securing adequate resources for authorities.

### Research, Listen, Educate and Prepare

Defending freedom of expression requires awareness of the nature of threats and effective countermeasures, supported by up-to-date research. Listen to researchers and experts to stay informed about the current situation. In today's communication environment, threats to freedom of expression are increasingly prevalent. Research organisations must train their staff and students to handle them. Freedom of expression training and protection against harassment must be integrated into doctoral education at the latest.

### Collaborate and Unite

Effective countermeasures against emerging threats require collaboration between stakeholders, coordination of efforts, and the elimination of inefficiencies. No single organisation has the resources to manage the overall situation alone. Join forces with others to establish a national body that provides support, advice, monitoring, and training for all members of the research community.

### GLOSSARY

**Harassment** – The purpose of harassment is to cause the target undue distress and anxiety. The goal is to silence the researcher/expert or undermine their expertise through personal or public defamatory criticism, coercion, or hate campaigns.

Harassment may also include threats, which can be physical or psychological (e.g., defamation). Threats may also target close contacts or property. Harassment can escalate to direct physical violence.

Reasoned, well-founded differing opinions or academic disputes directed at a researcher or expert do not constitute harassment.

**Researchers and Experts** – Individuals whose role is to generate new knowledge through scientific research or other reliable data collection methods. Their work typically includes applying knowledge (e.g., science advisory work) and engaging in science communication in society.

**Independent Researcher (Grant-Funded Researcher)** – A researcher who is not employed by an institution and therefore often falls outside the employer's statutory responsibilities, such as occupational health and safety protections.

**Student** – A person enrolled in a higher education institution pursuing either an undergraduate or postgraduate degree. A postgraduate student is a doctoral candidate who may be employed as a researcher or work as an independent (grant-funded) researcher.

**Science Communication** – Internal and external communication and interaction within the research community regarding scientific knowledge, research findings, the scientific mindset and methodologies, and the theoretical foundations of different scientific disciplines.

**Research Organisations** – In this recommendation, research organisations refer to universities and higher education institutions, research institutes, universities of applied sciences, as well as other structured

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research networks, think tanks, civil society organisations, and companies that produce societally impactful research-based knowledge.

**Research-Based Knowledge** – Information that has been systematically collected, analysed, and critically evaluated, based on objective and documented methods, and that can be used as a reliable foundation for decision-making, research, and knowledge dissemination.

**Research Community** – The broader entity comprising the above-mentioned research organisations, their funders, scientific and research advisory bodies, scientific societies, and support organisations.

## REFERENCES

1. Call to Action on the Freedom and Safety of Scientists (UNESCO SHS/REI/IRD/2024/7), <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389629>: “Stressing the interconnection between the promotion of the freedom and safety of scientific researchers and efforts to strengthen scientific culture, public trust and support for sciences throughout society and to use scientific and technological knowledge in decision-making and policies”
2. The Monitoring Project (<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/academic-freedom-monitoring-project-index/>) aims to identify, assess and track incidents involving one or more of six defined types of conduct which may constitute violations of academic freedom and/or the human rights of members of higher education communities:
  - Killings/violence/disappearances
  - Wrongful imprisonment/detention
  - Wrongful prosecution
  - Restrictions on travel or movement
  - Retaliatory discharge/loss of position/expulsion from study
  - Other significant events.

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3. In the spring of 2024, the Human Rights Committee of the Council of Finnish Academies conducted a survey among universities to assess how Finnish universities have prepared in advance for harassment in teaching and research and what kinds of support measures they provide for their staff in such situations. The survey results particularly highlighted the critical importance of clear guidelines and support networks in ensuring that researchers and educators can work safely and freely. Source: <https://academies.fi/uutiset/tutkimushairinta-uhka-tutkimuksen-vapaudelle-seminaaritalenne-katsottavissa/> (in Finnish)
4. <https://tenk.fi/en/news/ri-2023-guideline-published-three-languages>
5. The task of the working group appointed by the Ministry of Justice is to assess what legislative amendments are required for the implementation of the directive and what the main impacts of these changes will be. The working group will prepare the necessary legislative amendments and draft a report in the form of a government proposal. The national legislation must be in force by May 2026. Source: <https://oikeusministerio.fi/-/tyoryhma-vahvistamaan-julkiseen-keskusteluun-osallistuvien-suojelua>
6. Examples of available practical guidelines:
  - Häiritsevä palaute (<https://www.hairitsevapalaute.fi/>)
  - Tieteentekijät (<https://tieteentekijat.fi/en/spport-of-working-life/harassment-in-working-life/> )
  - Guidelines for journalists: e.g. Jokes (<https://www.jokes-saatio.fi/journalistin-verkkovihaopas/>).
  - The communication guide for foundations includes instructions written by journalist Johanna Vehkoo (<https://saatiotrahastot.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/esimerkkeja-saation-viestinnasta-2021.pdf> > see pp. 11–14)