

Reflective Report: Research Project

'Academic Freedom and Censorship in Biodiversity Conservation'



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This summer I have spent 6 weeks working on a research project with Professor George Holmes, from The University of Leeds under the organisation and funding of The Laidlaw Foundation. The following report outlines the trajectory of the project and presents its key outcomes.

Project Outline

Contributing to the global discourse on academic freedom is essential because the integrity of knowledge production underpins informed decision-making worldwide. This research project aimed to investigate the vulnerabilities and pressures faced by researchers, especially those working in areas critical to global sustainability, such as biodiversity conservation. By exposing these pressures, researchers are able to contribute to not only the protection of autonomy in research, but also the protection of the reliability of knowledge that informs conservation strategies, development policies and international agreements.

Ensuring that solutions to global conservation challenges are grounded in comprehensive, unbiased science and evidence leads to more effective outcomes, rather than those based on selective or incomplete information.

A further motivation of our research was based on seeking to create a platform for researchers to expose the challenges and suppression that they have experienced. Given the sensitivity of this issue, opportunities for researchers to disclose their experiences are limited, largely due to fear of retribution. This concern motivated us to develop a fully anonymous channel through which experiences could be expressed and exposed to promote proactive change. The extent of suppression within academia remains largely unknown, precisely because researchers lack safe opportunities to disclose it without risking negative consequences.

Initial Challenges

Unfortunately, the beginning of my research this summer was turbulent, as unforeseen circumstances prevented me from completing my original project. The intended focus was on climate resilience strategies within cultural heritage governance, contributing to global climate resilience research through a case study on flood adaptation in the Global South. This work was to be conducted under the AGREE Project (*Advancing Cultural Heritage Governance for Resilient Climate Adaptation*) and aimed to explore the relationship between climate change and community. The project would have involved qualitative research and data analysis to strengthen the case for diversifying the technical focus of the climate conversation.

However, the project was cancelled midway through summer, only a few weeks before I was supposed to start. Therefore, I had to find a new project to complete this summer as failing to do so would prevent me from progressing to the second stage of the programme, my 'Leadership in Action' next year. Fortunately, the Laidlaw team at Leeds were highly supportive and accommodating, which ensured it was a seamless process.

Initially, I looked into self-defined projects as I was still keen to complete a research project in a similar field. I have an interest in sustainable development and the relationships between leaders, experts and stakeholders. However, attempting to develop a project within such a limited time frame was unrealistic. Ultimately, I felt that finding a professor who had the free time at such short notice to supervise my project would not only be challenging but also an undue request. As a result, I turned to the pre-defined projects which were already underway and found one which could align with my interests and specialties.

Despite this new project on academic freedom falling under a completely different subject area, I thought it would be a beneficial opportunity to expand my knowledge base and learn something new. The basis of the project being on censorship is something that has previously interested me. In my studies the theme of suppression appears constantly. Whether in the form of silenced political voices, constraints on public reasoning or theories on freedom of speech. Researching censorship in conservation reveals how these theories or abstract debates on freedom of speech manifest in scientific practice. Furthermore, I thought that my work in philosophy would offer background on the conceptual tools of suppression, whilst politics provides the lens to see the institutional and structural mechanisms behind it.

Research Conducted

To express the reflective nature of this report, what follows is a week-by-week account of my experience during this summer's research project.

Week One:

I joined the project at the end of July, three weeks after fellow scholar Xanthe Hudson had started. This timing worked well as Xanthe had completed the initial research and construction of the survey but took a break over the period of my arrival. This allowed me to immerse myself in the subject area with literature on academic freedom as a theoretical concept and completing an online course provided by Scholars at Risk on the subject. The online course was interactive, incorporating discussions with fellow learners which helped to develop my initial understanding.

Towards the end of the week, I started to diversify my reading to include further papers on academic freedom but in the context of biodiversity. This was interesting to start to read, as it allowed me to see how the issue plays out beyond abstract theory and within an applied field. It became increasingly clear to me how essential comprehensive and uncensored evidence is for shaping effective policy and decision-making. At the same time, reading about cases where knowledge was restricted or selectively presented made me reflect more on the real-world consequences of compromised academic freedom, reinforcing its significance in ways I had not fully appreciated before.

As I was new to this field, this first week was invaluable in providing the necessary background knowledge that would underpin the work we would later undertake.

Week Two:

At the beginning of the second week, we were granted ethical approval, enabling us to begin distributing our survey. Much of my time during this week was spent balancing distribution and continued reading. While disseminating the survey was crucial to securing valuable responses, it was equally important to remain engaged with the literature in order to contextualise our findings within the wider academic discourse. This balance also reinforced one of the central insights of our research: that the issue we were investigating remains under-exposed in academic spaces, largely because many researchers feel unable to advocate for themselves due to fears of retribution in various forms.

In terms of distribution, Professor Holmes shared the survey with his colleagues in the field, while I focused on identifying potential contacts within a broader network. I began by researching ecological societies and then looked into email lists and newsletters. This was a careful and time-consuming process, as our survey was only applicable to those working directly in biodiversity conservation. I wanted to ensure that our outreach was both targeted and respectful of recipients' relevance to the project.

Overall, this week felt particularly productive. We achieved strong outreach, began receiving responses, and simultaneously widened our base of literature. Both tasks of the week were essential to the eventual writing up of our findings.

Week Three:

This week differed slightly from my previous ones, as my research supervisor was on leave. This gave me the opportunity to independently manage the project, with full responsibility for the progress made during this period. Fortunately, in the week prior we had outlined our goals and expectations, which provided a clear framework to guide my work.

The focus of this week continued to build on the previous tasks of distribution and reading, though it introduced a new challenge. By the end of the second week, I had identified much of the literature that explicitly addressed either academic freedom or censorship in biodiversity conservation. However, in order to strengthen our research, I located more indirect references - sources where the themes were present but not the central subject of discussion. This required a far more detailed and time-sensitive search, involving hours of combing through databases such as Google Scholar.

Overall, my independent work in week three became an important learning experience in persistence and the necessity of thoroughness in academic research.

Week Four:

After the previous three weeks working remotely from home, I travelled up to Leeds to work with Xanthe and Professor Holmes in person. This was Xanthe's first week back from her break, so it was beneficial for us to be together in person. It gave me the opportunity to update her on the progress made during her absence and to discuss our next steps collaboratively.

This week entailed us working together to once again further the dissemination of the survey and complete our research on the surrounding literature. While survey distribution remained a consistent priority throughout the project, we had by this point identified and read all the key literature relevant to our research. This allowed us to begin shifting our attention toward a new stage - analysing the survey and organising the literature thematically in relation to emerging responses.

Together, we examined patterns in the responses, paying particular attention to whether incidents had been reported, the role of commercial interests, the gender of respondents, and whether the experiences described were perceived to have advanced or constrained academic freedom. This stage of the process felt particularly significant, as it marked the point where our efforts in survey distribution, data collection, and literature review began to converge. It was here that the project started to take shape more cohesively, allowing us to reflect critically on what the responses revealed about the suppression of academic freedom.

Week Five:

In the penultimate week of the project, we concentrated on advancing the survey analysis, with particular emphasis on the qualitative data generated through Question 18. This open-ended question invited respondents to provide detailed accounts of their experiences, personal narratives, and outcomes to offer depth and context beyond the closed-response items. The inclusion of this question was intended to personalise the data and to capture the complexities behind the statistical patterns identified earlier in the survey.

To analyse these responses, we implemented thematic coding. This allowed us to systematically organise the qualitative data into categories, ensuring both rigour and replicability. Through this process, recurring themes emerged, including institutional corruption, bullying, government policy, intimidation, physical threats, alterations to academic writing, industry influence, legal threats, and funding constraints.

Importantly, these analytical choices shaped the way our findings were constructed. For example, the decision to group responses under broad categories such as “intimidation” or “institutional corruption” highlighted systemic patterns that might otherwise have appeared as isolated incidents. Then in contrast, we retained specific themes like “threat of legal action” or “funding constraints” as distinct categories. This emphasises the concrete methods used to curtail academic freedom. These decisions shaped the interpretation of the data and guided the way the findings were communicated, bringing to light the complexity and interrelatedness of the reported constraints.

Week Six:

In the final week of our research project, we consolidated our analysis and prepared for the academic write-up. This involved revisiting our notes, coding schemes, and survey responses with fresh eyes, ensuring that our interpretations were coherent and aligned with the research questions.

A key part of this process involved restructuring and reorganizing our notes into clear tables and thematic sections. One of the most valuable steps was compiling a detailed table that compiled key case studies and anecdotes from the literature we reviewed throughout the project. This allowed us to capture and present all the relevant published work on our topic, ensuring that no insights were overlooked. The table not only serves as a reference point for the literature review section of our paper but will also be used to draw comparisons with our own survey findings. This will help us place

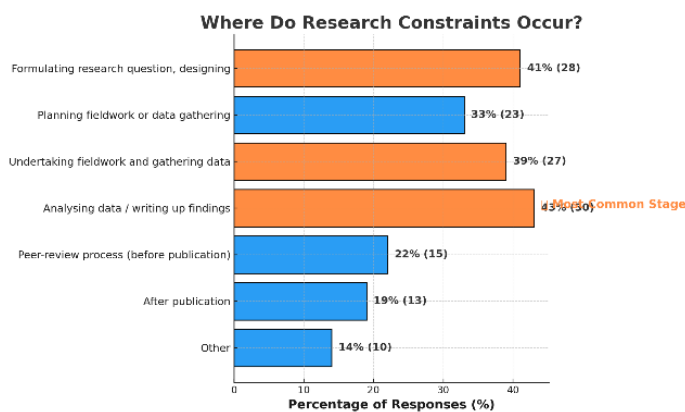
our results within the wider academic conversation and draw out where our findings align with or differ from existing research.

Organising key information in a clear, structured format has already made the writing process more manageable, helping us to bring together both our survey data and the literature in a substantiated and purposeful way. Thus, this final stage has been an important step in moving from analysing the data to starting to piece everything together into an organised account.

Results

Our survey is still in the process of collecting data as responses continue to come through. Despite this, we have analysed the first 138 responses to finish our research this summer. Our research supervisor, Professor Holmes, will continue this project to collect a conclusive set of results and finalise our findings in order to publish our research.

The following section of the report presents some of our key results and data so far.

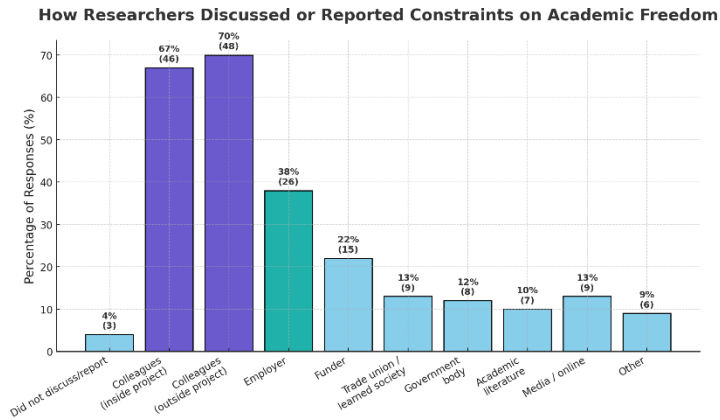


The findings show that constraints on academic freedom occur across all stages of the research process but are most frequently reported during data analysis and writing up findings (43%), when formulating research questions and designing studies (41%), and during fieldwork

and data collection (39%). These stages are critical, as they shape what knowledge can be produced, how it is gathered, and how it is ultimately interpreted and shared.

Constraints at the design stage limit the kinds of questions researchers are able to pursue; constraints in fieldwork restrict access to evidence; and constraints at the analysis stage risk influencing the reporting of results. Although fewer respondents identified constraints during planning (33%), peer review (22%), or after publication (19%), these stages still reveal that pressures persist throughout the research process.

Overall, the results highlight that academic freedom is not only about the ability to publish findings but also about the freedom to ask questions, access data, and interpret results without undue restriction. Protecting academic freedom therefore requires safeguarding every step of the research process, not just publication.



Most respondents chose to discuss or report constraints on their academic or scientific freedom, but mainly within informal professional networks. The majority spoke to colleagues outside their immediate research project (70%) or within it (67%), suggesting that when freedom is challenged, researchers first

seek support or validation from peers rather than from formal structures. Fewer raised issues with their employer (38%) or research funder (22%), and very few involved external advocacy or oversight bodies such as trade unions or learned societies (13%), government bodies (12%), or the media (13%). Only 10% wrote about the incident in the academic literature. Just 4% said they did not discuss or report the incident at all.

These findings show that although concerns about academic freedom are widely shared and frequently discussed informally, formal reporting channels and public disclosure are used far less often. This pattern points towards a lack of confidence in institutional or external mechanisms to address such issues, or concern about professional risks associated with raising them formally. Strengthening the protection of academic freedom will therefore require not only fostering a supportive peer culture but also ensuring that formal reporting routes are trusted and effective for addressing and challenging constraints.

The Importance of My Research

This research addresses the underexplored, yet critical issue of how academic freedom is constrained across different institutional and disciplinary contexts. Moving beyond informal discussions, our project strived to systematically expose the various forms these constraints take - identifying who imposes them, at what stages of the academic process they occur, and how individuals experience and report such limitations. By investigating these patterns, we aim to contribute a clearer understanding of the scale and complexity of the problem.

A key motivation behind this research was to create a safe platform for researchers to disclose their experiences without fear of retribution. Through the anonymous survey, we sought to open up a more honest dialogue around academic freedom, moving it from the margins of verbal academic discourse into evidence-based inquiry. Our hope is that this work not only sheds light on existing challenges but also encourages sustained conversation, deeper investigation, and policy-oriented solutions. Ultimately,

we aim to foster greater transparency within academic institutions and support the development of mechanisms that actively protect academic freedom. By doing so, we contribute to the creation of a more open and supportive research environment for current and future scholars.

Personal Impact

This research project has had a significant impact on my personal and academic development. I deepened my skills in data analysis and qualitative coding, learning how to approach complex data sets with greater precision and critical awareness. Engaging closely with sensitive material also helped me develop a stronger understanding of the care, responsibility, and ethical considerations required in academic work - particularly when handling participants' experiences and data.

Throughout the process, I became more confident in my ability to carry out independent research, from designing and refining research questions to analysing findings and presenting them in a clear, structured way. My academic writing skills have improved through drafting, editing and engaging with feedback, helping me to communicate ideas more effectively and persuasively. Overall, this experience has not only strengthened my research abilities but also deepened my commitment to producing thoughtful, responsible and impactful academic work.

Looking Ahead

Looking ahead, I am committed to applying the research, analytical, and academic writing skills developed during this project to excel in my next two years of my degree. The experience has strengthened my ability to approach complex topics with critical insight, engage with literature more deeply, and communicate findings with clarity and academic rigour. These skills will be essential as I undertake future academic projects and my dissertation next year.

As I begin to look at Leadership In Action placements, I am eager to immerse myself in new cultural contexts and broaden my perspectives through meaningful, hands-on work related to this research field. The opportunity to collaborate with like-minded individuals in the field excites me, as it will allow me to apply my skills in a real-world setting, grow as a leader, and contribute to a shared goal with purpose and impact. In addition to this, I hope to present this research at the European Laidlaw Conference, using the opportunity to refine my ideas further, gain feedback, and contribute to a broader academic dialogue on academic freedom.

As I move forward, I look forward to building on this experience by deepening my engagement with independent research, refining my academic writing, and exploring further opportunities to share my work. This marks the beginning of a continued journey toward academic development and meaningful impact.