

Press release

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Responding to New Threats to Scientific Freedom, ICSU Revises and Reaffirms Commitment to the “Universality of Science”

***As scientists face growing restrictions on freedoms to associate,
collaborate and publish, science organizations sharpen focus on
protecting rights and promoting responsibilities***

Suzhou, China-Warning that changes in the global political climate and concerns about international terrorism pose new challenges to scientific freedoms, the International Council for Science (ICSU) today urged its members to consider a renewed and broader commitment to the organization's bedrock Principle of the Universality of Science.

A statement on threats to the Principle was formally presented by ICSU's Standing Committee on Freedom in the Conduct of Science to the ICSU 28th General Assembly in Suzhou, China.

“We think it's time to reinforce the relevance of this principle in today's environment,” said Carol Corillon, a member of the committee, who is executive director of the International Human Rights Network of Academies and Scholarly Societies, as well as director of the Committee on Human Rights of the US National Academies.

“Scientific research is more enmeshed with society than ever before and we understand that its potential for misuse is perhaps greater than at any time in history” she added. “But we also need to understand that when responses to security and political concerns weaken a commitment to scientific inquiry, there can be serious consequences for scientific progress and, given the role of science in advancing human welfare, for national and international social and economic development as well.”

The committee's review of the Principle of Universality cites two distinct threats. There are today greater restrictions on the freedom to associate, which are leading to the relocation or cancellation of scientific conferences. There are also increasing restrictions on the freedom to pursue science, including politically motivated boycotts against countries and scientific institutions, and new security policies that

have a chilling effect on such matters as hiring decisions, access to equipment and materials, and scientific publication.

According to the committee, impeding the freedom of association endangers science because it is such a “fundamental part of the scientific endeavor” as “even the power of the Internet cannot substitute for personal interactions and discussions.” The committee found that “visa restrictions and delays, based on country of birth, residence or citizenship, religion, ethnic origin, and field of scientific expertise, are increasing in some countries,” disrupting what had been routine scientific gatherings.

Meanwhile, the committee observes that a variety of new circumstances are impeding a general freedom to pursue science.

The committee notes that certain scientists and scientific institutions are today being shunned by sweeping boycotts intended “solely to make political statements about the policies of the countries with which they happen to be associated.” At the same time, in some parts of the world, the “persecution of individual scientists”—which includes imprisonment and torture—as retribution for their research activities “continues to contravene basic human rights.”

The committee also points to a new emphasis on security that has imposed restrictions that, even when driven by legitimate concerns, end up “undermining the Principle of Universality.” According to the committee, “these issues are often complex and may manifest themselves as cumbersome or time-consuming new procedures and regulations or even re-interpretation of existing regulations” that prompt, among other things, censorship by authorities or “self-censorship by scientific publishers.”

“They affect individual scientists,” the committee observes, “but also have broader policy implications involving careful judgments as to the appropriate balance between the freedom to pursue science and national and international policy imperatives.”

The committee has proposed that ICSU adopt a restatement of its Principle of the Universality of Science that will serve both as strong call for scientists to recognize their responsibilities while insisting on maintaining their rights. The proposed language declares that:

“This principle embodies freedom of movement, association, expression and communication for scientists as well as equitable access to data, information and research materials. In pursuing its objectives in respect of the rights and responsibilities of scientists, the International Council for Science (ICSU) actively upholds this principle, and, in so doing, opposes any discrimination on the basis of such factors as ethnic origin, religion, citizenship, language, political stance, gender, sex or age.”

Founded in 1931, the International Council for Science (ICSU) is a non-governmental organization representing a global membership that includes both national scientific bodies (103 members) and international scientific unions (27 members).

Through this international network, ICSU coordinates interdisciplinary research to address major issues of relevance to both science and society. In addition, the Council actively advocates for freedom in the conduct of science, promotes equitable access to scientific data and information, and facilitates science education and capacity building.

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see also http://www.icsu.org/3_mediacentre/GA.html