

EIS ULA Annual Conference 2026 'The Future of Higher Education in Scotland'

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# Academic Freedom in the Digital University

An exploration of how technology-enabled management practices, metrics and the culture of continuous real-time performance evaluation mediate power relations between academic staff and their university employers in the contemporary digital university.



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Firstly, universities are being measured, ranked and benchmarked from multiple angles by many bodies for many purposes.

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Within the context of this intense performance management, universities are embracing digital transformation and digital transformation within universities is happening in a way that allows institutions to better performance manage academics.

As institutions evolve to become top-down metric driven, they can better shift responsibility for performance onto their workers and frame this as transparency and accountability.

“Metrics shape how we judge and, more crucially, how we are judged” (Beer, 2016).

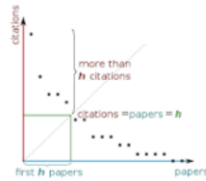
“In an increasingly performance orientated society, metrics matter” (Stiglitz et al, 2010, xvii).

“Metrics are needed to enable differentiation, to facilitate rankings and to demarcate winners from losers” (Beer, 2016).

**Digital higher education** can be seen as the “**reconfiguration of educational practices** and relations into forms that can be quantified and exchanged; government practices are increasingly directed by market rationale, supported and fostered by principles of international ranking based competition”. [L. Castañeda, N. Selwyn (2018) "Digital Technology and the Contemporary University: Degrees of Digitalisation", *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 15(22): 1-10].

As a consequence, individual academics are being measured in real-time from many angles with little scope to opt-in or opt out, and this is leading to a well-being crisis.

The **h-index** is an author-level metric that attempts to measure both the productivity and **citation** impact of the publications of a scientist or scholar. The **index** is based on the set of the scientist's most cited papers and the number of citations that they have received in other publications.



[h-index - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H-index)  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H-index>

28,938  
Views  
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 55  
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Original Articles

## The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity

Stephen J. Ball

Pages 215-228 | Published online: 09 Nov 2010

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### altmetrics = alternative metrics

Altmetrics are alternative metrics used to measure the impact of research.

The term altmetrics was first proposed in a tweet by Jason Priem in 2010, and further detailed in a manifesto.

The term is not clearly defined and can be used to mean:

**Impact measured based on online activity**, mined or gathered from online tools and social media for example:

- tweets, mentions, shares or links,
- downloads, clicks or views,
- saves, bookmarks, favourites, likes or upvotes,
- reviews, comments, ratings, or recommendations,
- adaptations or derivative works, and
- readers, subscribers, watchers, or followers.

Altmetric score (what's this?)

248

- Tweeted by 305
- On 9 Facebook pages
- Mentioned in 13 Google+ posts
- Blogged by 28
- 2 Wikipedia



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## Research Output

2002 ————— 2019

47 Article   13 Paper   8 Chapter   6 Other report   9 More

# Our study

The study (2,100 responses) undertaken with the UCU:

- Explored **academic's lived experiences of Academic Freedom.**
- Measured the impact of employer-initiated digital transformation of universities and how these link to **new forms of digital systems-enabled performance management.**
- Analysed the ways in which these **new forms of performance management** impact staff's lived experiences of Academic Freedom.

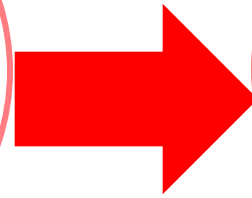
# Key concept 1: What is academic freedom

## SUPPORTIVE ELEMENTS

INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

TENURE – JOB SECURITY

GOVERNANCE



## SUBSTANTIVE ELEMENTS

FREEDOM TO TEACH

FREEDOM TO RESEARCH

### **THE PILLARS OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM:**

*“The three supportive elements acting in tandem are necessary for academic freedom, but each is insufficient for academic freedom to flourish. So, single elements are less individually important than the fact that they mesh together. Hence, where one of the mutually supportive elements falters, it undermines the other two, thereby weakening substantive academic freedom for research and teaching. For example, if tenure is lacking, academics may not be able to enjoy autonomy or participate in shared governance, for fear of losing their jobs.*”

# Key concept 2: What is digital transformation

Home > Digital Transformation > What is Digital Transformation?

## The Digital Transformation of Universities (University of Edinburgh, 2021)

### What is Digital Transformation?

Digital Transformation is the application of digital technology across the University and is critical to our future success as an institution.

#### Definition

We define Digital Transformation as:

"The changes associated with the complete application of digital technology in all aspects of a modern university".

#### Video introduction

CIO Gavin McLachlan gives an introduction to Digital Transformation at the University, highlighting key themes, activities, why it is important and the benefits it will deliver.

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# Research Methodology: The survey

## Questions mix:

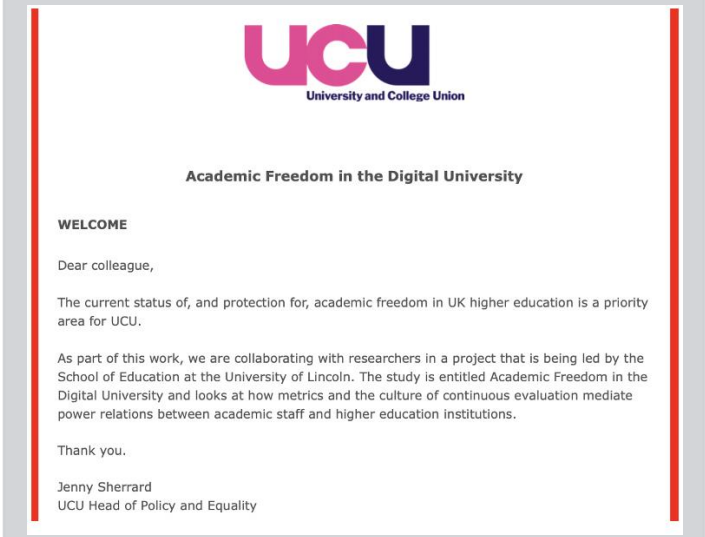
- Likert 'level-of-agreement' questions
- Open text responses

## Structure:

- Demographic and Employment information (13 Questions)
- Academic Freedom and Digital Technology (17 Questions)
- Digital governance and academic freedom in teaching (11 Questions)
- Digital governance and academic freedom in research (11 Questions)
- Trajectory of digital governance (3 Questions)
- Freedom of speech and academic freedom (4 Questions)

## Distribution:

- UCU distributed the survey to members in May 2021

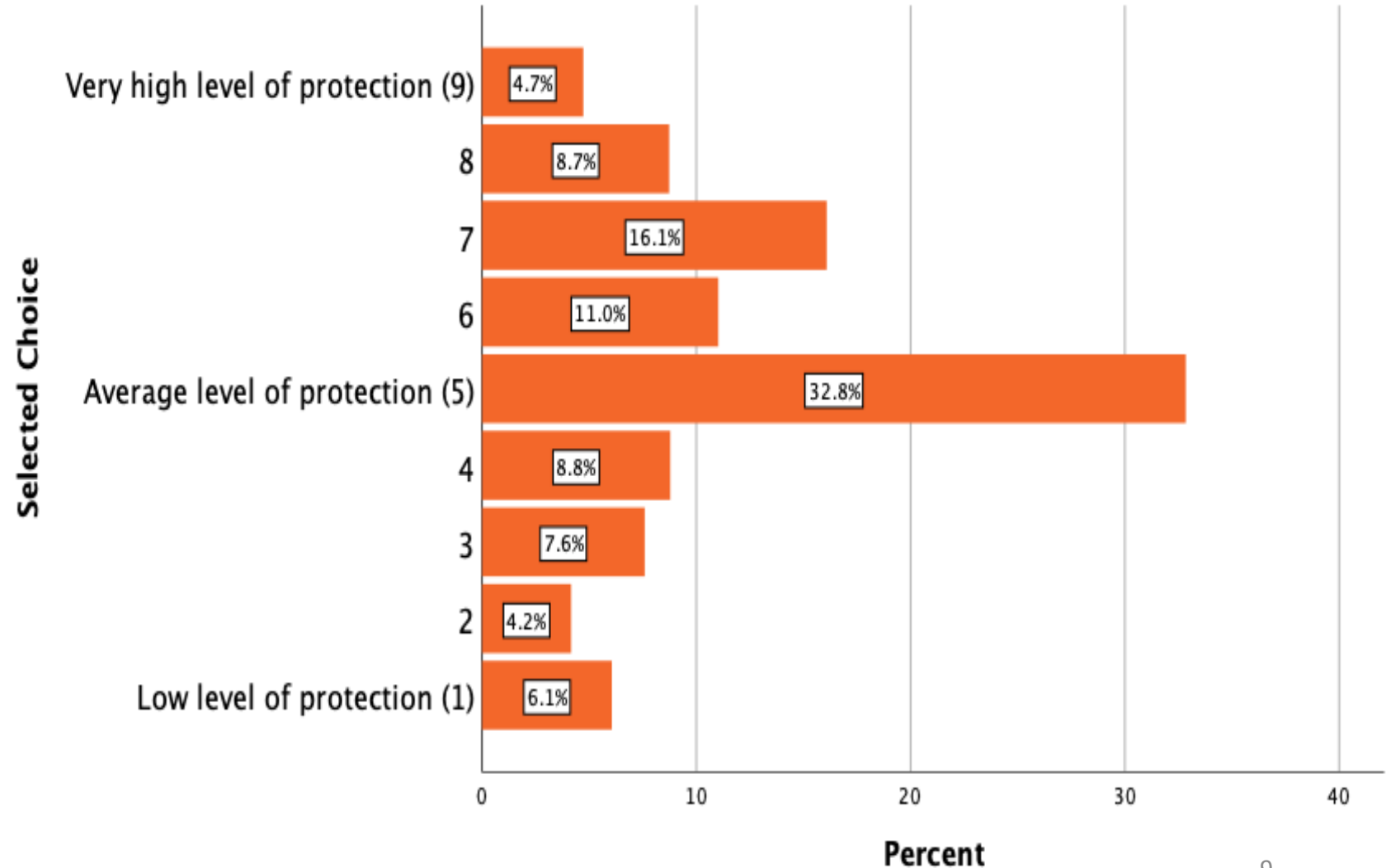


## Statistical tests run:

- Descriptive statistics: frequencies, crosstabulations, nonparametric inferential statistics such as Chi-square, comparison of means, One-way ANOVA and Tukey HSD.
- Demographic analysis (e.g. type of institution, time in UK HE, discipline, race, gender)
- Thematic analysis on the open text data

Biggest grouping of respondents (32%) rated the level of protection for academic freedom in their institution as about average.

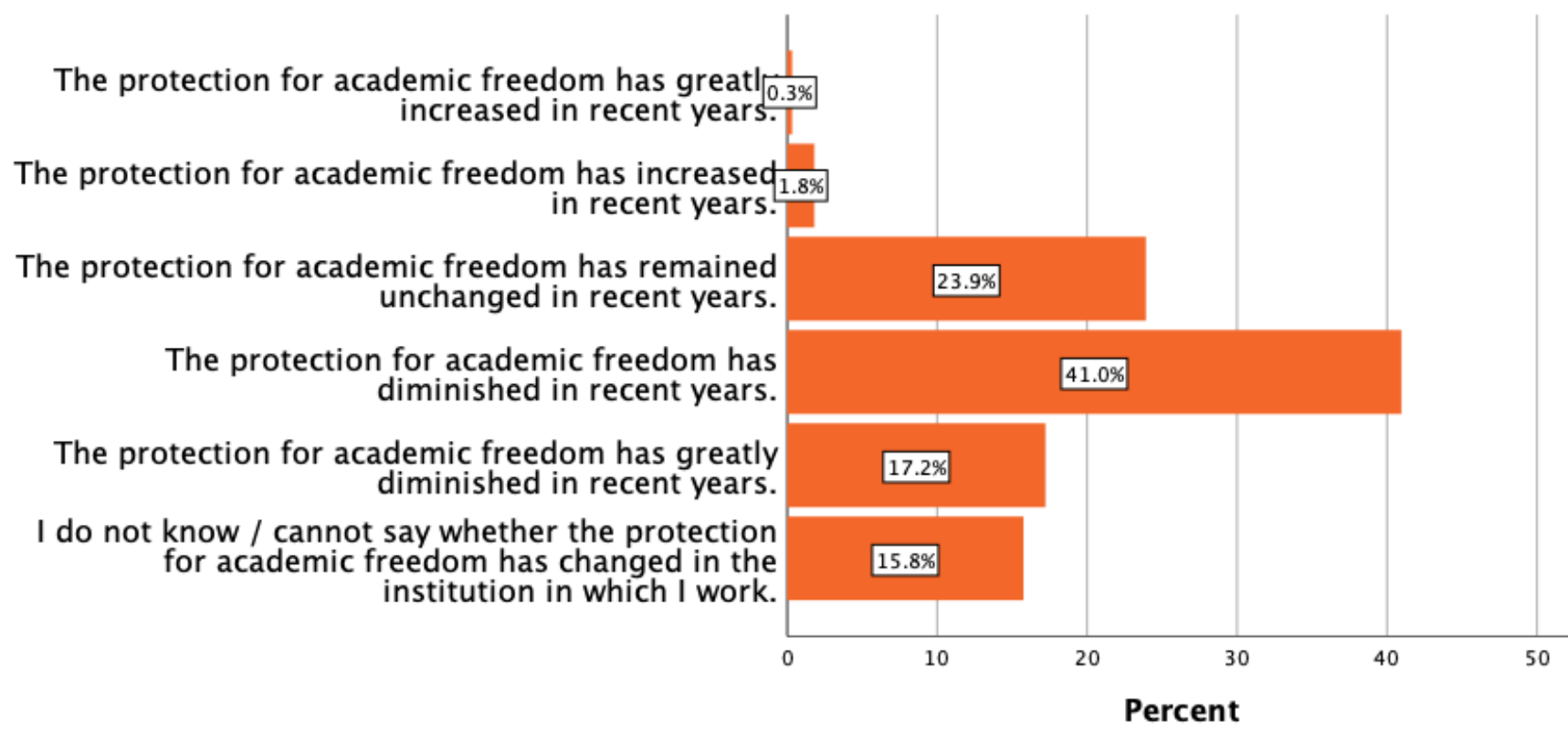
On a scale of 1-9, what do you believe to be the level of protection for academic freedom in the institution in which you work? (n=2,095)



58.2% of academics reported that protection for academic freedom has diminished or greatly diminished

In many institutions teaching higher education courses, it is argued that the protection for academic freedom has changed in recent years.

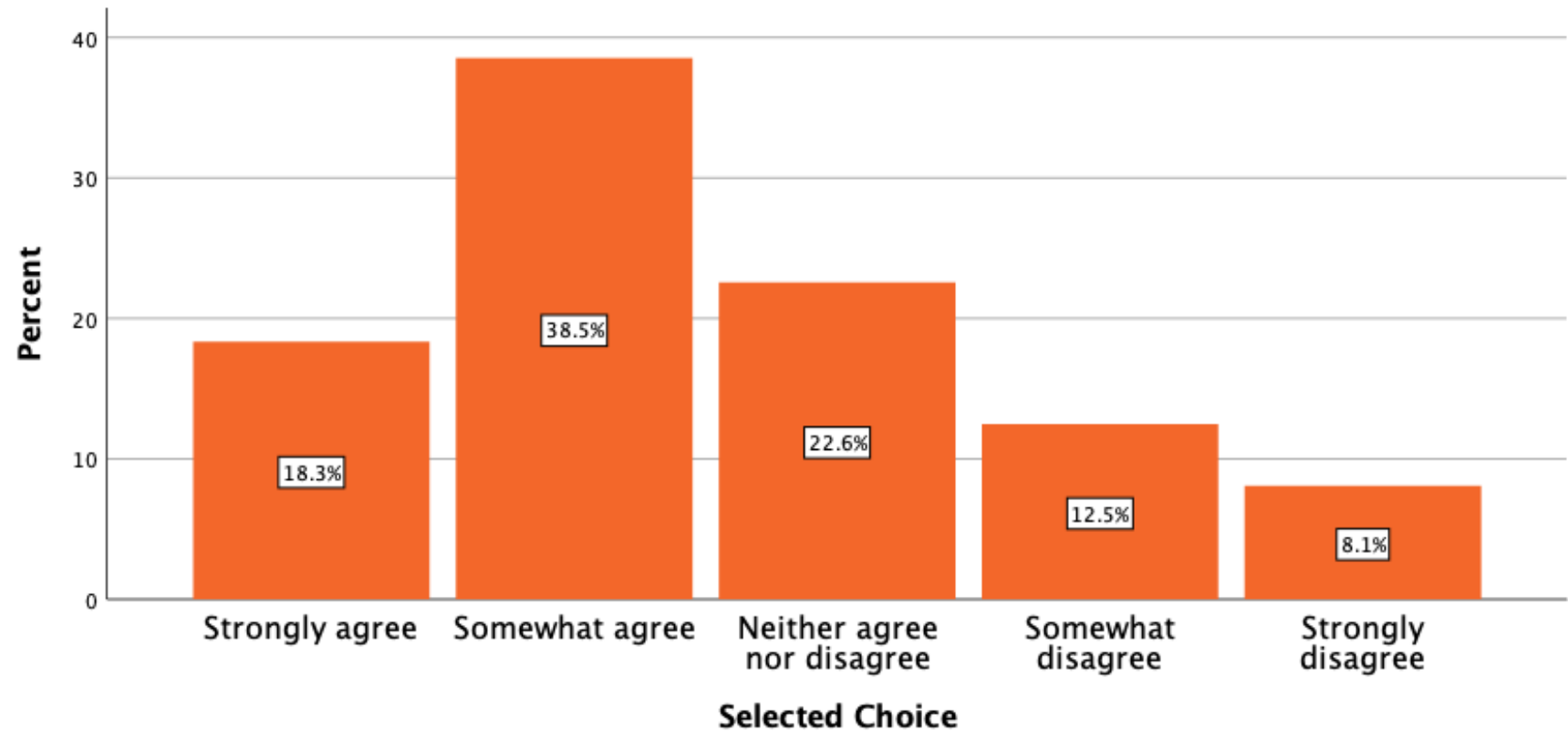
What is your view, with respect to your institution? (please select one option). (n=2,095)



56.8% of academics reported that academic freedom for teaching has declined.

Your views on the importance of academic freedom and the strength of its protection in your institution (please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree by selecting one of the six options in each row).

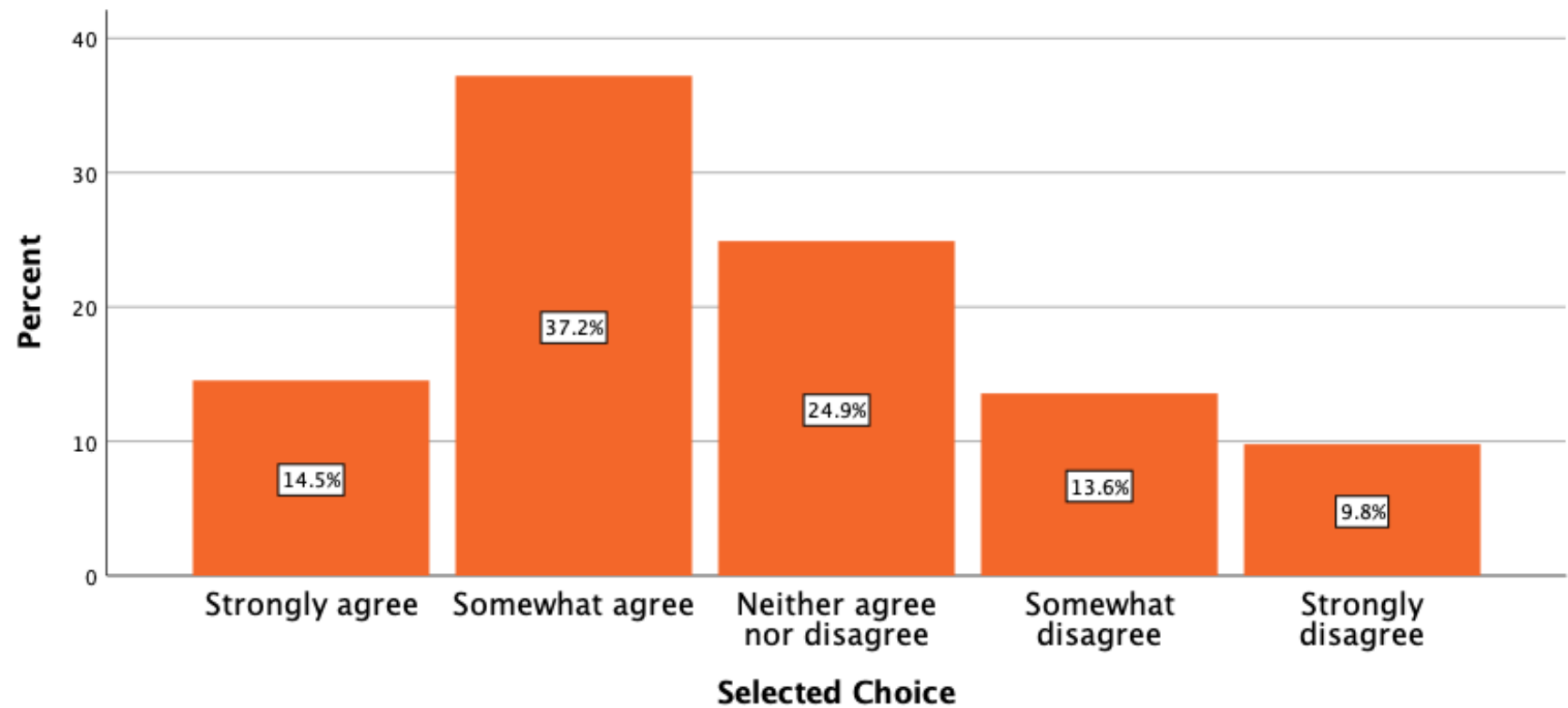
Individual academic freedom for teaching has declined in my institution in recent years. (n=1,892)



51.7% report a decline in academic freedom for research.

Your views on the importance of academic freedom and the strength of its protection in your institution (please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree by selecting one of the six options in each row).

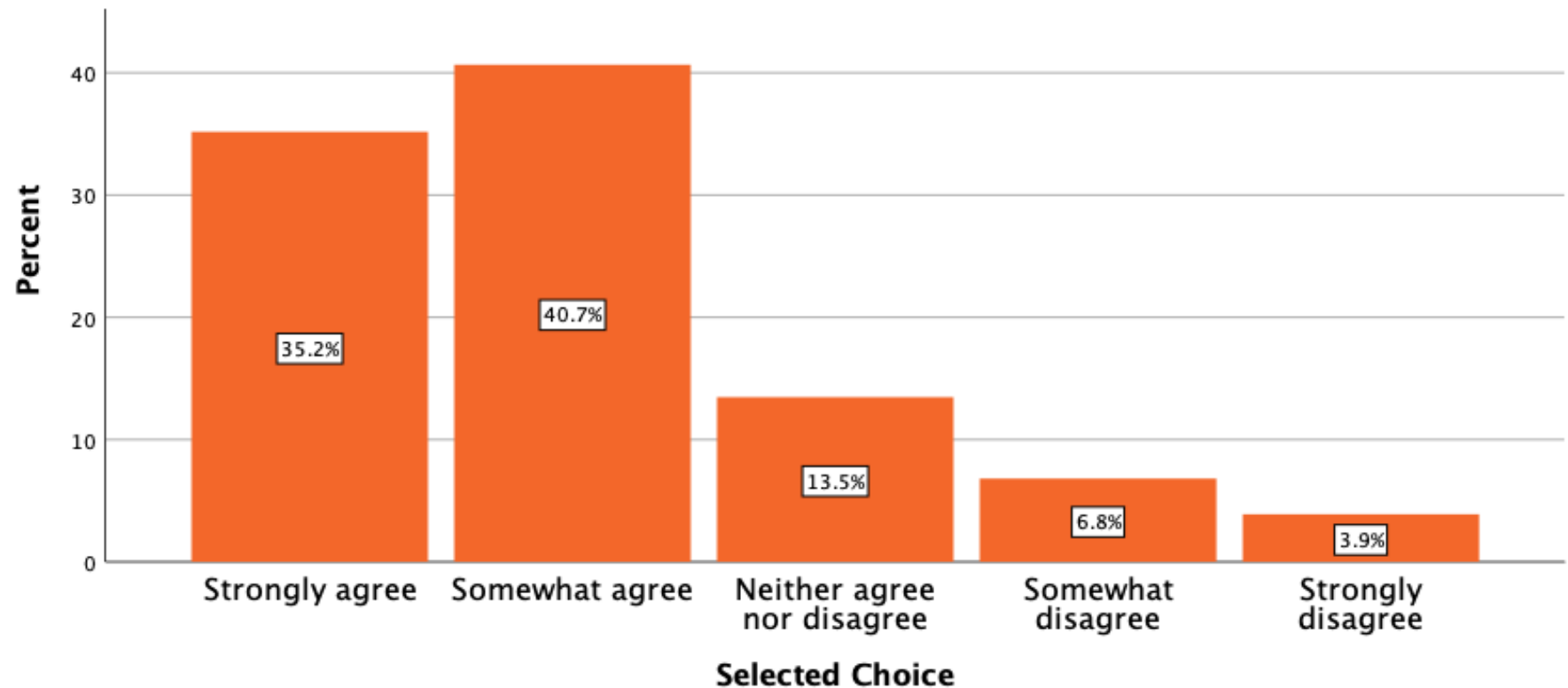
Individual academic freedom for research has declined in my institution in recent years (n=1,879)



75.9% report a decline in individual autonomy.

Your views on the importance of academic freedom and the strength of its protection in your institution (please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree by selecting one of the six options in each row).

Individual autonomy has declined in my institution in recent years (n=1,892)

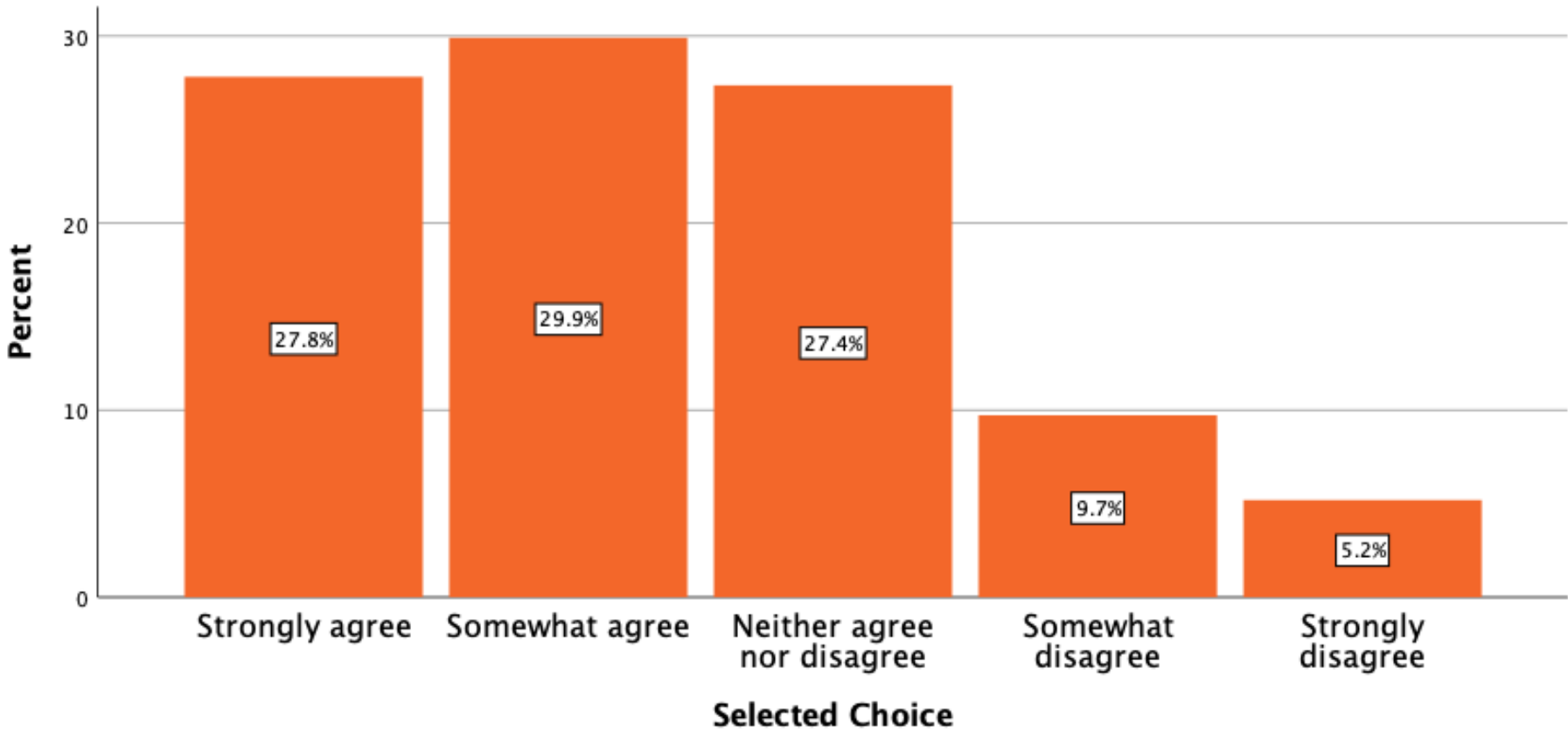


*'Many changes are imposed due to committee without academic consultation. There is a definite sense of management by spreadsheet'*

57.7% report a decline in university self-governance.

Your views on the importance of academic freedom and the strength of its protection in your institution (please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree by selecting one of the six options in each row).

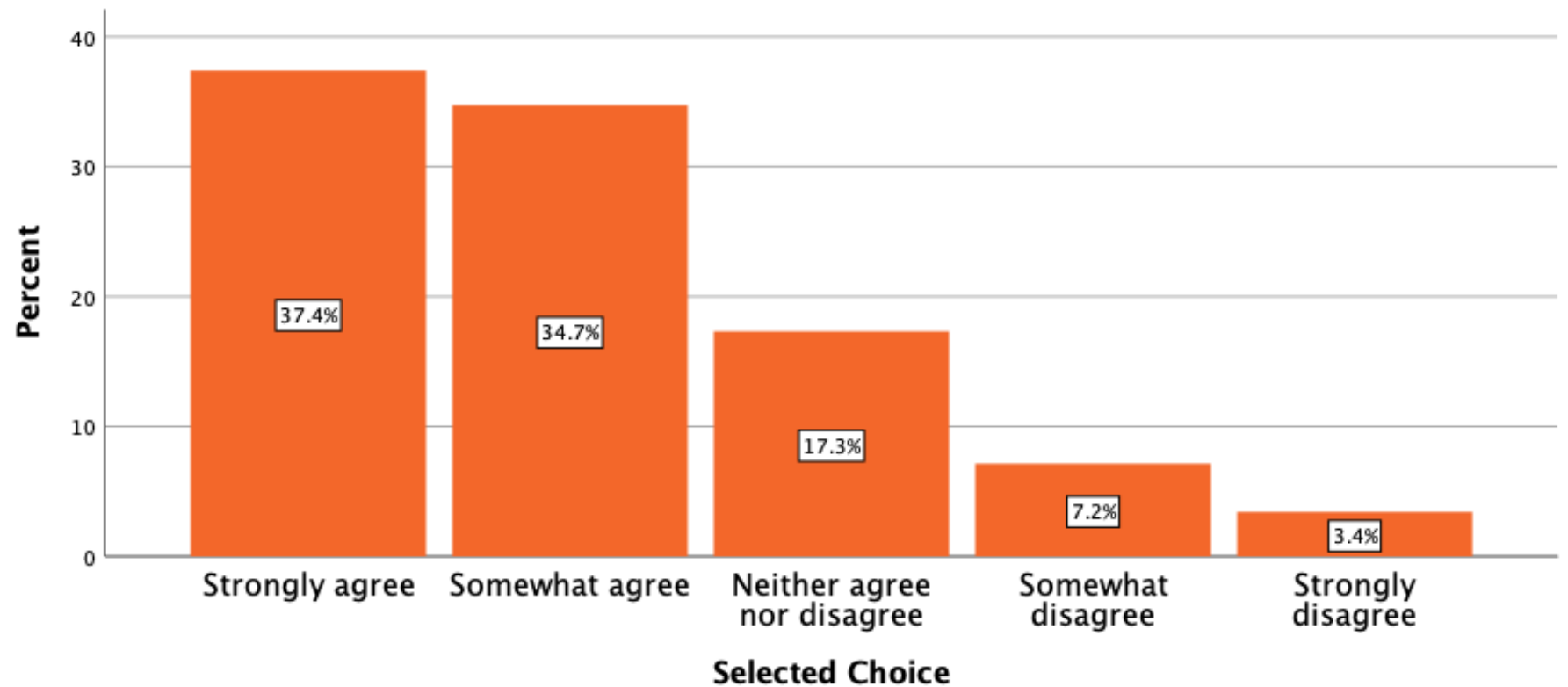
University self-governance and decision-making (by means of senate or academic board) has declined in my institution in recent years (n=1,769)



72.% report a decline in employment protection.

Your views on the importance of academic freedom and the strength of its protection in your institution (please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree by selecting one of the six options in each row).

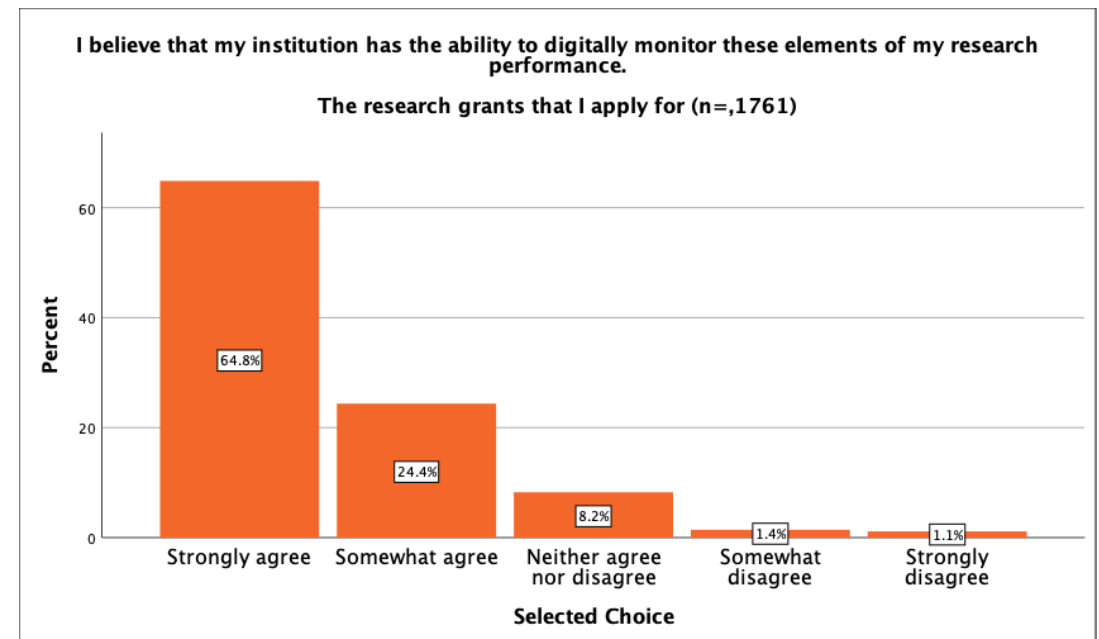
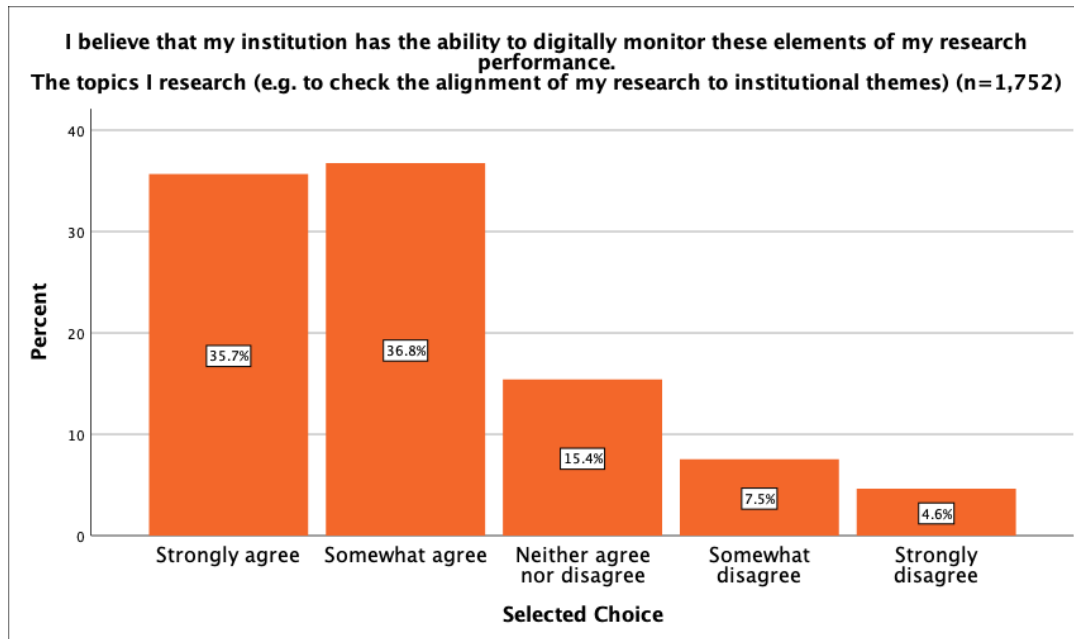
Employment protection for academic staff has declined in my institution in recent years (n=1,958)



# Awareness of institutional monitoring:

While there is high awareness of some institutional monitoring activities, there is less so for others and this can cause knowledge asymmetry between management and workers, and knowledge asymmetry is a form of power.

Research-wise, the results show that: 89.2% are aware that their institution monitors the research grants they apply for; 81% are aware of their institution monitoring impact activities; 72.8% are aware of their employers monitoring how they choose to disseminate their research, and 72.5% are aware of their research being monitored for alignment to institutional themes.



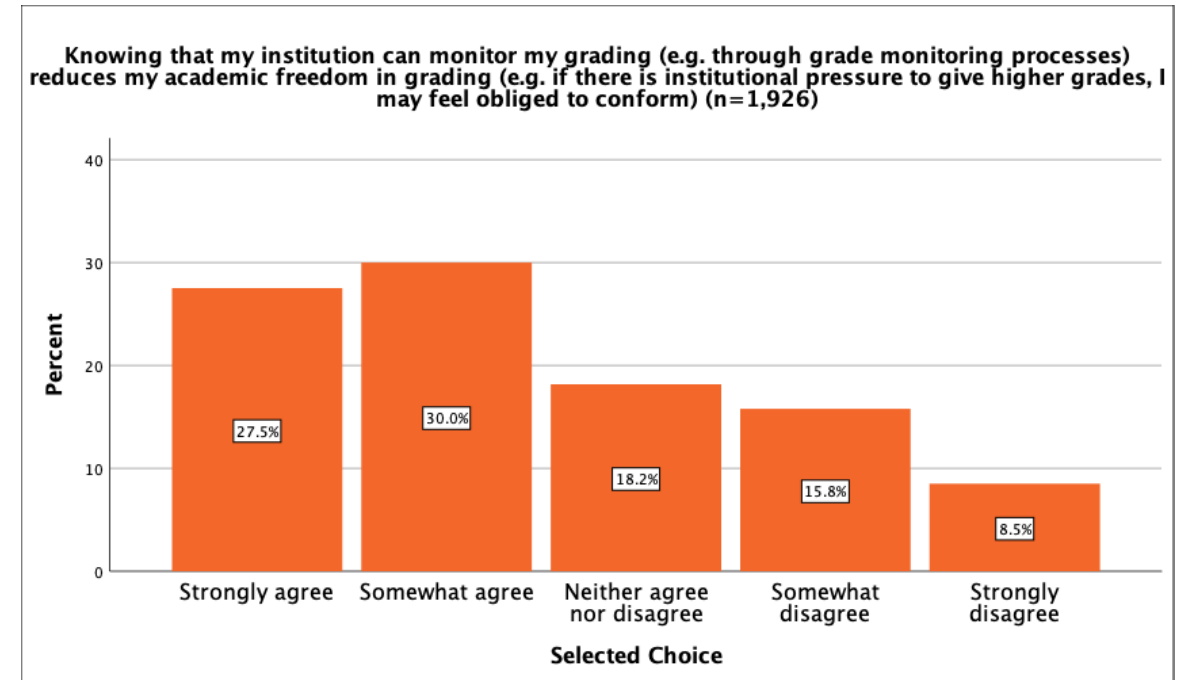
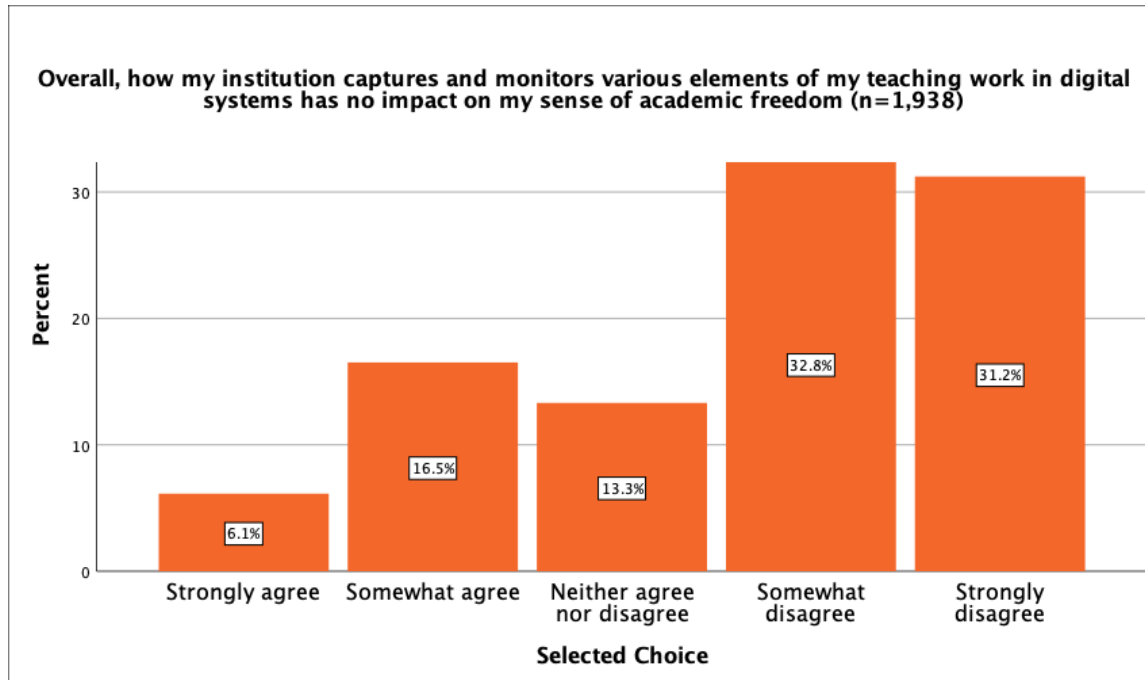
## THE IMPACT ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM:

*“Observed behaviour changes behaviour and adds another layer of emotional stress”.*

*“Anyone not fitting the performance profile is pushed into more hours of teaching and administration, now typically all-year around.”.*

# Why institutional monitoring matters

Digital monitoring can work as a soft power by incentivising academics to align behaviour to the perceived needs of their institution.

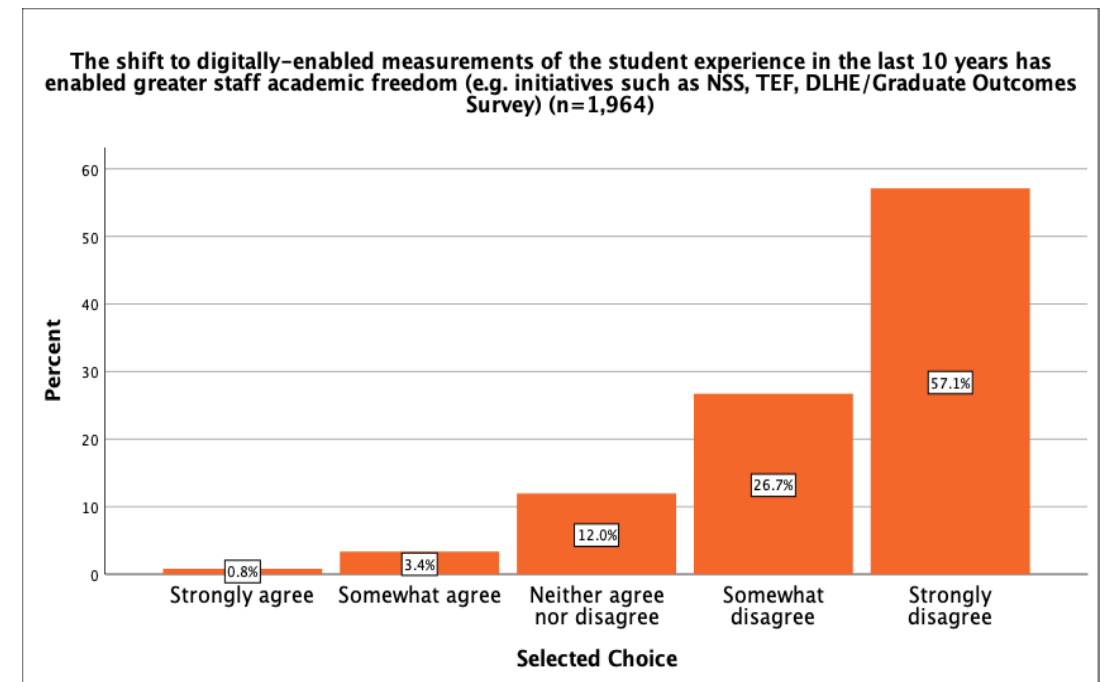
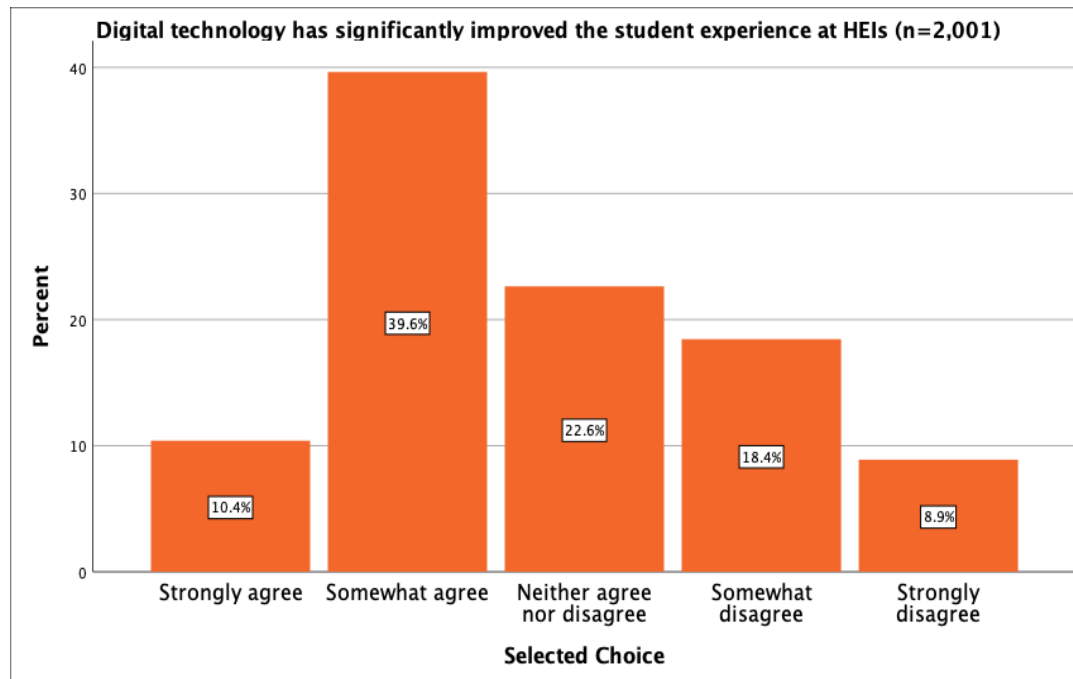


## THE IMPACT ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM:

- “We are incentivised to give higher grades, as the scrutiny means we need to work harder to justify not giving higher grades”.
- “Pressure was put on to 'improve' marks (though we told not to mark more easily)... [t]he whole process is dishonest and subject to the whim of the market”
- “...causes us to award higher grades (2:1s, 1st) in accordance with institutionally-set targets”.

# Digital technology, the student experience and academic freedom

While use of digital technology is considered to have improved the student experience, digitally-enabled measurements of the student experience — through the power of discourse and performance metrics — are concurrently eroding academic freedom.

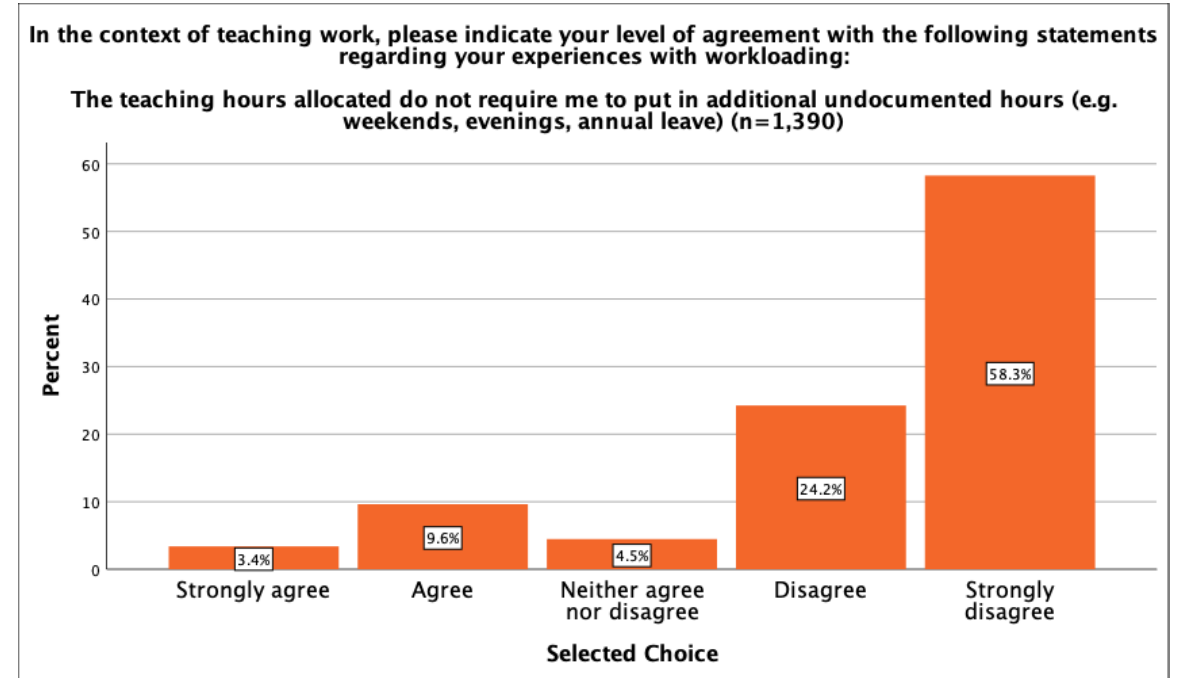
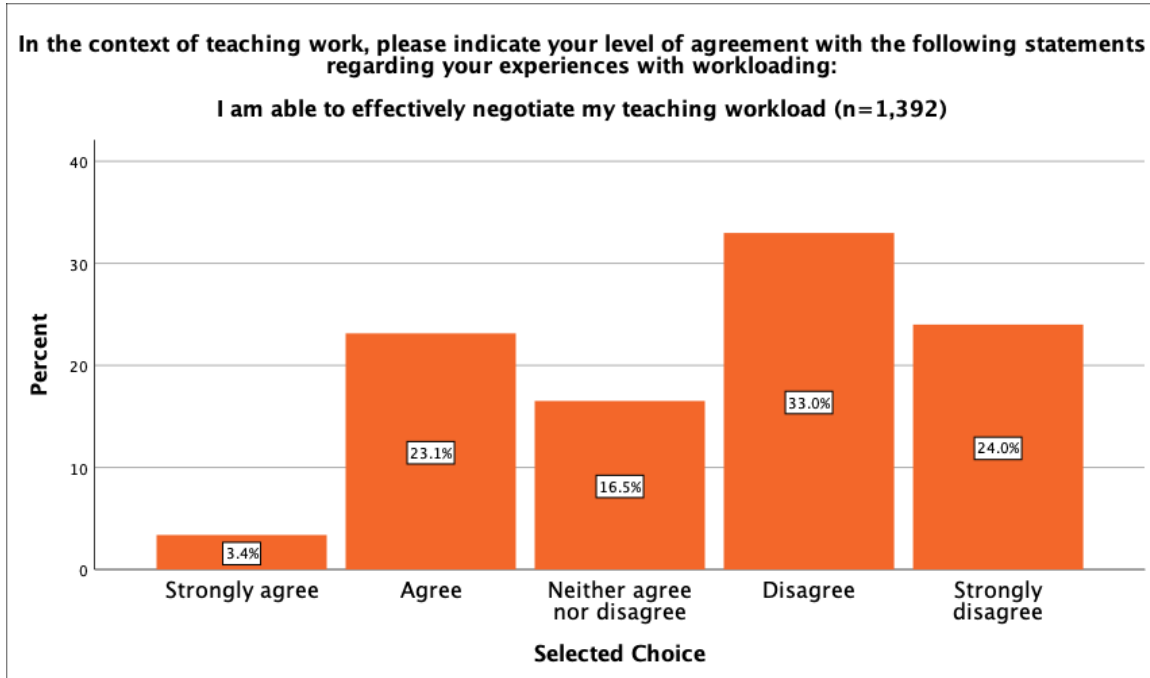


## THE IMPACT ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM:

*“I am known to be an excellent lecturer and my courses are popular with students but at my annual appraisal I am significantly downgraded for the slightest negative feedback from one or two students out of a cohort of 56, whilst the praise is downplayed. Student feedback is not used pedagogically as a sign of flourishing but as a rod to beat the lecturer with”.*

*“There is very strong pressure to conform”.*

# Digital workloading systems



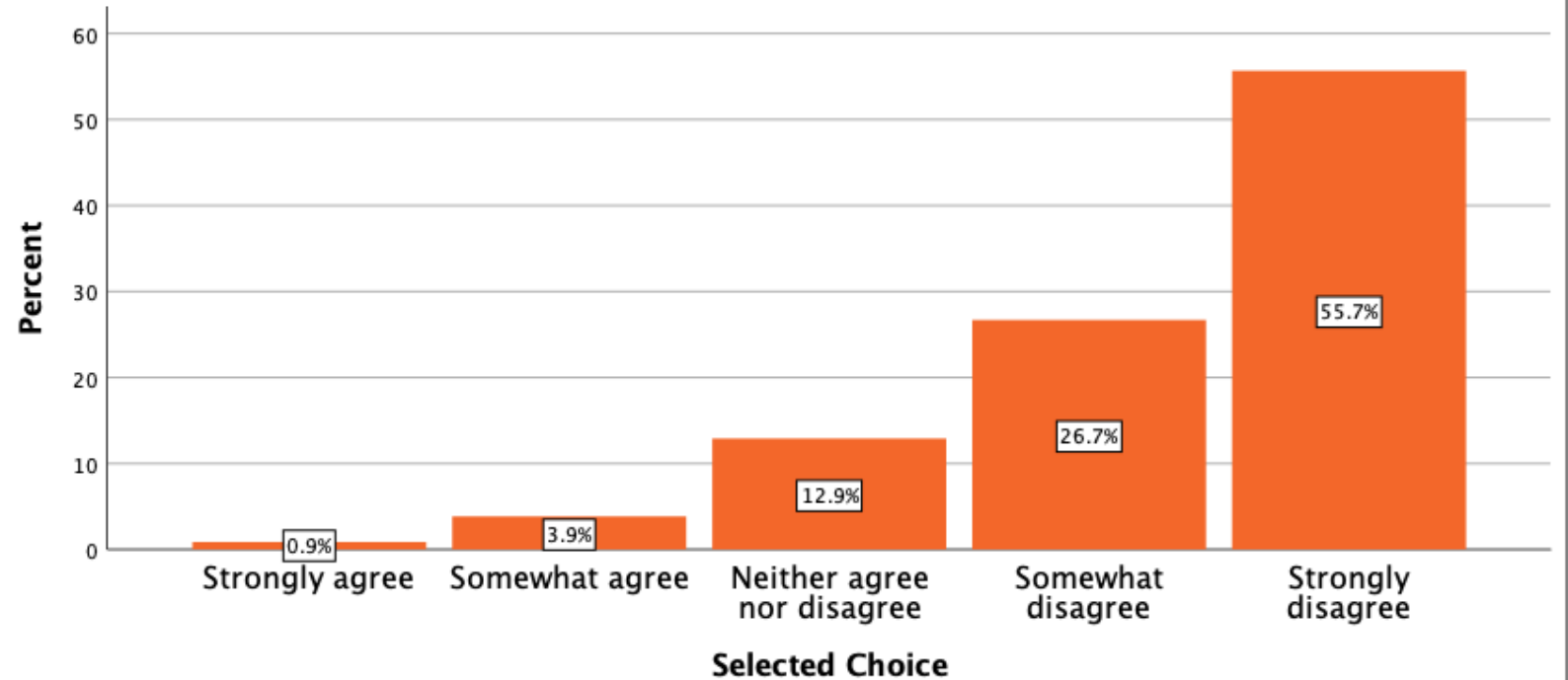
## THE IMPACT ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM:

“Technology has been used to measure and micromanage all staff virtually out of existence. Students get a blander experience ... Staff workloads look lovely on the spreadsheet, but have no bearing to realities of teaching”

“Innovation is just not worth it - there is not time, it isn't valued and if you try something and it fails you are held accountable. This is reducing the creativity and stretch in a typical UG degree”.

82.4% report that digitally-enabled performance management practices are restricting their academic freedom.

Digitally-enabled changes in performance management in the last 10 years have enabled greater academic freedom (e.g. sector-wide ranking mechanisms such as the NSS, TEF, REF, auto-generated research metrics, SciVal and institution-wide initiatives such as scalable online module evaluations) (n=1,944)

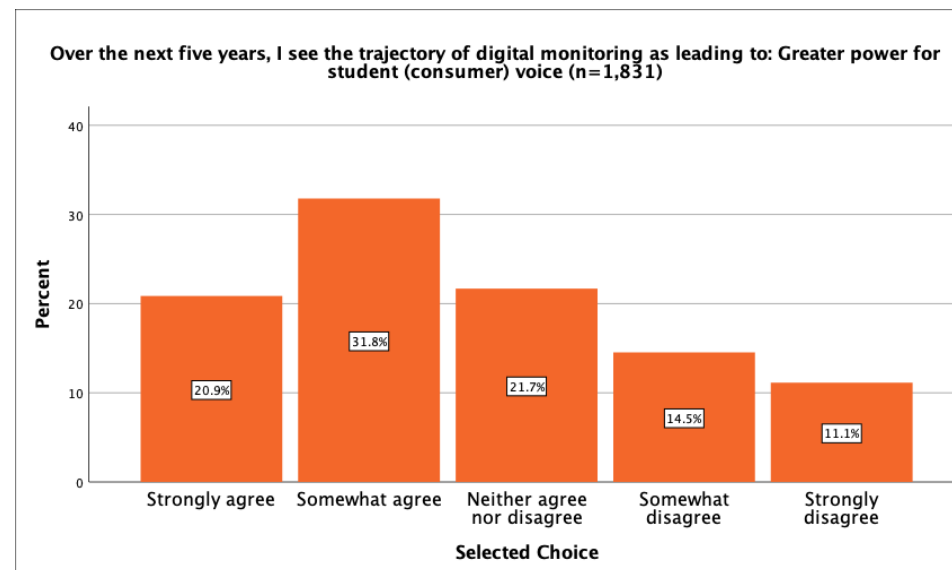
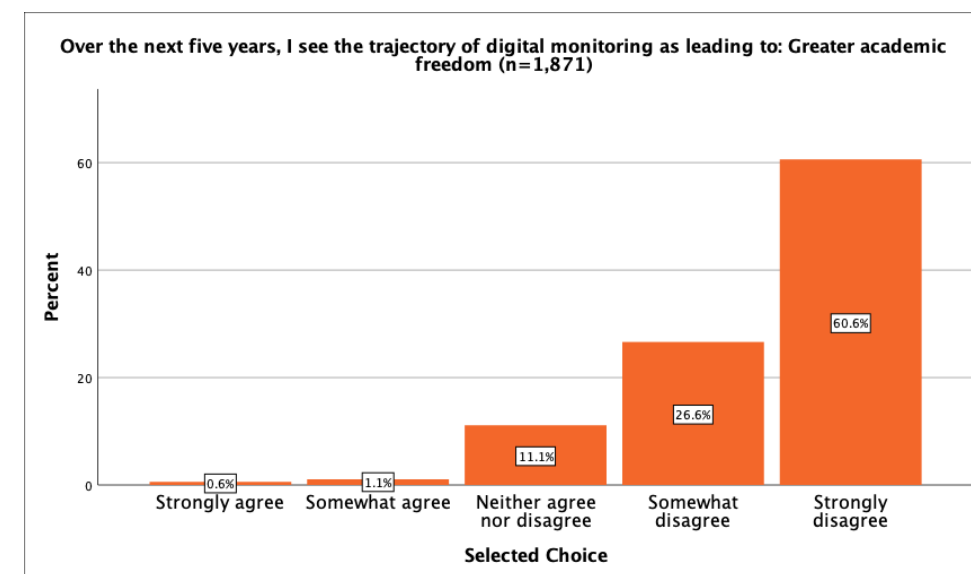
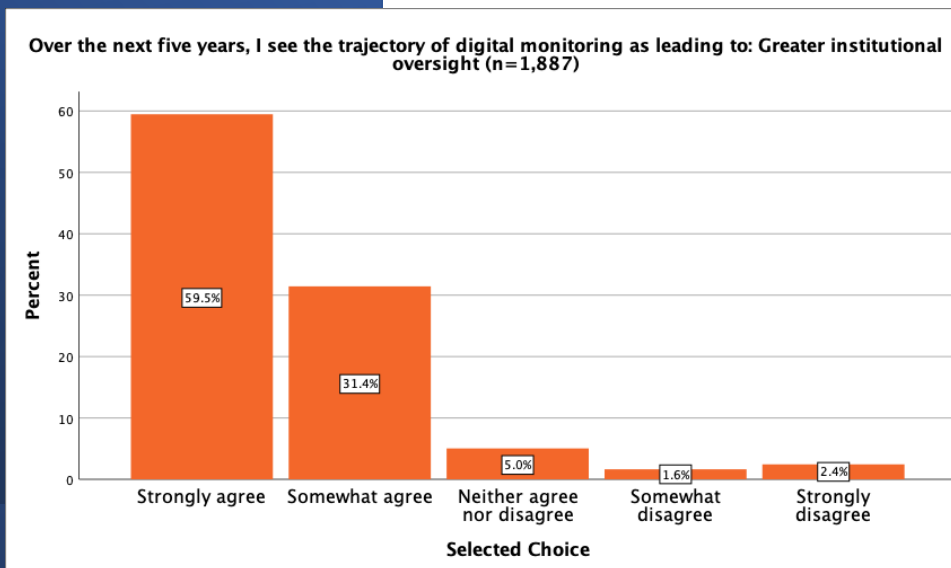


**THE IMPACT ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM:**

*“Digital systems for evaluating modules etc. basically pushed everything in quantifying performance but then the nuance is lost, as well as any important qualitative information you may get from feedback from students, and it becomes a number game for managers”.*

*“We are assessed by students and by management – student surveys, performance assessments, grading and pass rate targets. Hence, we are punished from both sides”.*

In five years:  
 greater curbing of  
 academic freedom,  
 more powerful  
 student voice and  
 greater institutional  
 oversight



- 90.9% see institutional oversight increasing
- 87.2% see academic freedom reducing, and
- 52.7% see student consumer voice becoming even more powerful.

# Key findings

- 1. Protection for academic freedom is perceived to be declining in terms of:**
  - individual academic freedom for teaching
  - individual academic freedom for research
  - individual autonomy
  - university self-governance, and
  - employment protection.
- 2. Technology-enhanced management practices:**
  - have eroded academic freedom through reducing individual autonomy.
  - are enabling better worker time control, monitoring of teaching activities and monitoring of research activities
  - this is leading to increased exploitation of academic staff through overwork and the chasing of never-ending and, in the long run, ultimately unachievable performance targets.
- 3. There is mixed awareness** among academics of the full scale of the university digital governance infrastructure and the managerial significance of this technological monitoring is not always understood in power relations terms.

*“While it is important for there to be some monitoring to ensure pedagogic soundness, **an over emphasis on managerialism in institutions is undermining of academic freedom**”.*

# Select recommendations

## For the Educational Institute of Scotland University Lecturers' Association (EIS-ULA):

1. To consider **organisational technology as a key variable** shaping how power is exercised in the contemporary university.
2. To appreciate the ways in which employer-implemented technology can instigate alterations in power relations through i) greater employee surveillance, ii) better performance analytics potential, iii) creating new areas of knowledge asymmetry and/or iv) by introducing new incentive and disincentive structures to align worker behaviour more closely with organisational objectives.
3. To take a **greater active interest in the implementation of digital technology** and monitoring of the ongoing impacts of digital systems on power at work.

# Select recommendations for academic staff

1. To appreciate **the importance of academic freedom as a key variable in determining working conditions**, and that employer-initiated erosion of academic freedom leads to poorer working conditions for all.
2. To actively consider **the ways in which different technologies mediate your individual autonomy** and shape your power relations at work.
3. To be more ***institutional technology literate*** by i) recognising that institutional technology implementation is not neutral and that through collective pressure the impacts can be different, and ii) that such technologies can be enabling for individual academics and for collective action. Improvement comes through knowledge.

# Protecting Academic Freedom in the Digital University: 5 Guiding Principles.

**1) *Transparency, not opacity***: The ways that universities use digital technology for performance management must be transparent. Academics and unions should have access to information about: the tools are used; how they are used; the data collected; how these tools and the data are used for performance evaluation (e.g. how they inform recruitment and promotion).

**2) *Informed consent not assumed consent***: Academics must have the right to provide informed consent about whether they agree to their data being collected and used to evaluate their performance. They must have the right to opt out of this process without negative career consequences. Unions must be informed by h.e. institutions when these systems do not allow individuals to opt-out.

**3) *Digital tools must be used developmentally, not punitively***: Digital performance management tools should be used developmentally, rather than punitively, institutions should make academics and unions fully aware of how they evaluate the performance of individual academics using different technologies.

**4) *Equity, not equality***: Performance metrics should take into account differences in personal circumstances, workloads, and responsibilities between different academics, and in the composition of different research and departmental teams (e.g. % of staff who are research active or early career, allocation of teaching loads) when making judgements about individuals and teams (i.e. not one size fits all). Unions should be involved in agreeing terms of use and overseeing the resultant effects.

**5) *Shared open governance, not managerial oligarchy***. Universities must develop governance and oversight mechanisms so academics and unions will be informed which technologies are being implemented, and able to raise any concerns that arise

# Recent Publications



Kissoon, C.S and Karran, T., (2024). *Academic Freedom in the Digital University*, London: UCU

Kissoon, C.S and Karran, T., (2025) "Academic Freedom: Swimming against the Technological Tide" in (eds.) F. Magret, N. Ramanujam, *Academic Freedom in a Plural World*, Budapest: CEU, pp.401-428.

Kissoon, C.S and Karran, T., (under review, 2026). "Conceptualising the institutional barriers to academic freedom for research: The fixed-term faculty experience", *Organisation*.

Thank you for listening. If you want a copy of the slide show or the publications please contact Chavan Kissoon: [ckissoon@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:ckissoon@lincoln.ac.uk) or Terence Karran: [tkarran@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:tkarran@lincoln.ac.uk)