

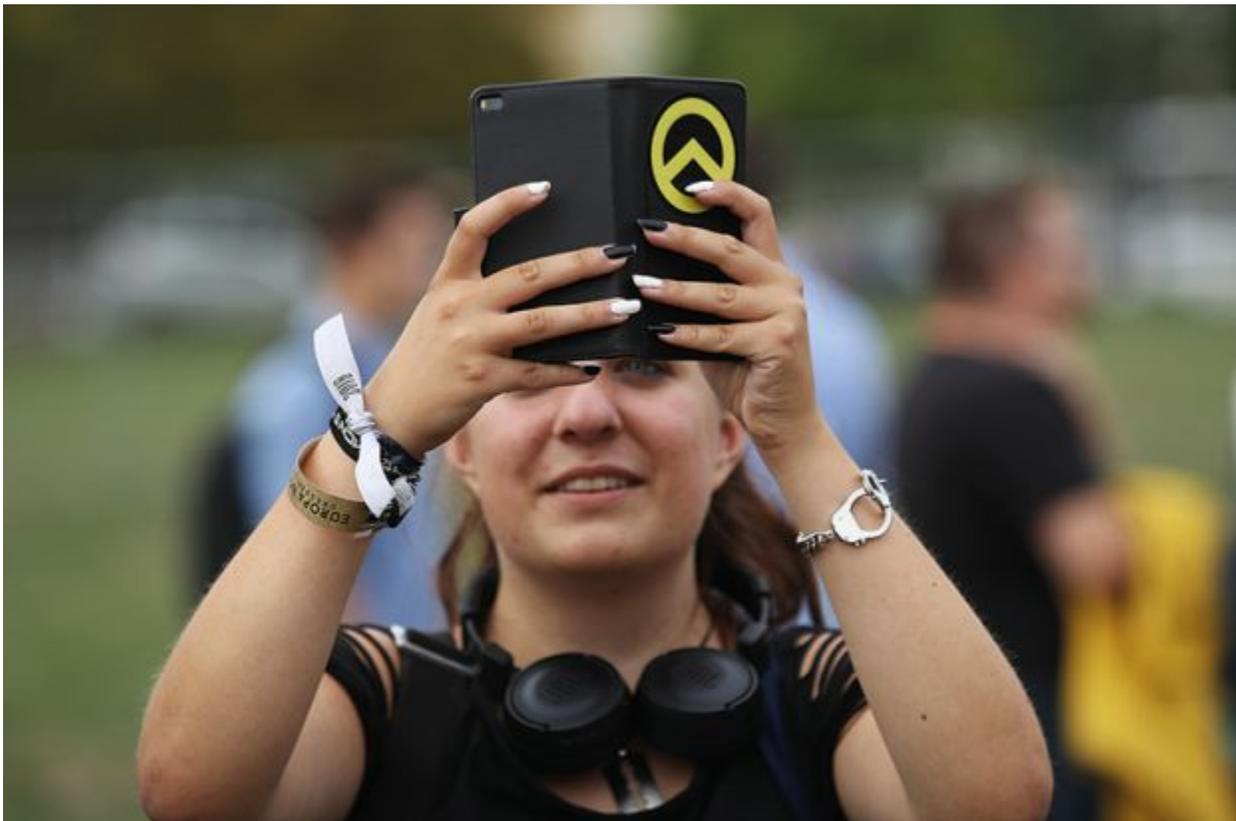
# Online ‘intimidation’ of ‘left-biased’ academics spreads worldwide

In Germany, Brazil and Hungary, students are being encouraged to film ‘biased’ professors, mirroring far-right tactics in US

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Source: Getty

**‘Oppressive climate’: academics are demanding more support from their institutions as harassment in classrooms intensifies**

Academics around the world are facing threats of secret recording and denunciation online by their own students in a sign that tactics used by far-right activists in the US are being adopted more widely.

In response to a wave of incidents where students have posted evidence of alleged left-wing radicalism online, scholars are now demanding stronger support from their institutions in the face of resulting harassment.

In the US, websites such as the Professor Watchlist – which purports to challenge those who “discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom” – host names and pictures of academics and invite students to submit tips on who else should be publicly exposed. The campaigning news website Campus Reform lists dozens of student “campus correspondents”, recruited to “investigate and report liberal bias on college campuses throughout their state”.

But in recent months the trend appears to have spread outside the US. Last October in Germany, a politician from the far-right Alternative for Germany party launched a website where university students and schoolchildren could submit screenshots and audio of lecturers and teachers who criticised the party.

The politician who set up the portal, Stefan Räßle, said at the time that names of teachers or professors could be made public. The party has claimed that the site was essential to counter the “red-green” worldview being taught in schools and universities.

The portal was condemned by Peter-André Alt, president of the German Rectors’ Conference, as an attempt to “intimidate” professors using students. The portal is currently unavailable and displays a message saying that it has been hacked. Mr Räßle did not respond to a request for comment from *Times Higher Education*.

Filming in class has also become an issue in Brazil since the election of far-right president Jair Bolsonaro, with one of his allies urging students to [send in evidence](#) of “ideological professors and indoctrinators”.

Frederico Dourado Morais, professor of pedagogy at the State University of Goiás, said that there had been “isolated cases in some universities of students who have made denunciations against teachers, videos of classes and aggressive interventions in academic events”.

The students had not been punished, he said, and lecturers feared that “an oppressive and punitive climate is approaching”.

In Hungary, too, some [media outlets](#) have called on students to inform them of left-wing teaching by professors after a student [polemic](#) last November accusing professors at [Eötvös Loránd University](#)’s department of media and communication of propagating anti-government propaganda during a protest against government changes to the higher education system.

Ferenc Hammer, head of the department, put out a [statement](#) pointing out factual errors in the student’s piece. But in response he received a “blast” of critical stories from pro-government media and an inbox full of abusive emails, he said.

He said that he “would not be surprised” if far-right groups had shared tactics on how to intimidate academics between countries, although there was no direct evidence for this.

In November, a group of US scholars launched the [Network of Concerned Academics](#) in response to what they said was a “sustained campaign of demonisation” and a “manufactured” media storm around free speech on campus.

University administrators “need to be firm and vigilant about prohibiting surreptitious recording in classrooms”, the group said.

Whether universities should ban students from recording in class has been contested in the US, with some academics [arguing](#) that recording could be useful in exposing sexual harassment, for example, and that to punish students for it would be repressive.

Michael Meranze, a history professor at the [University of California, Los Angeles](#) and one of the founders of the NCA, argued that it should be up to the academic whether students are allowed to record. “When faculty fail to meet [their] responsibilities they can be held to account through clearly defined procedures. Surreptitious taping doesn’t do that,” he said. In 2017, the American Association of University Professors released guidelines urging universities to “establish institutional regulations that prohibit the surreptitious recording of classroom discourse”.

But there are fears that universities are still not confronting the scale of the challenge, with administrators unaware of how online harassment works and failing to demand corrections in stories circulating online, according to a [report](#) released last year by Carolyn Gallaher, a professor at the [American University](#) in Washington. “Attacks on professors are likely to continue, if not accelerate. The cases detailed here suggest that universities have a steep learning curve and not much time to climb it,” the report warned.

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