

Academic Freedom in Teaching in Higher Education in Europe and the Asia Pacific Rim

Extended Summary

This study and thesis are based on a research project conducted within the framework of the Marie Curie Initial Training Network UNIKE

Universities in Knowledge Economies).

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This thesis is concerned with the issue of academic freedom and teaching in higher education. *Academic freedom* – the right of the individual scholar to follow truth without fear of punishment (Berdahl 2010) – is along with *university autonomy* – the freedom of the individual university to run its own affairs without outside interference (Anderson and Johnson 1998) – one of the two key academic values in universities. Even if these academic values seem to be well elaborated in the relevant literature and research, there is still one widely neglected aspect: academic freedom in higher education teaching. Despite the fact that teaching is and always has been a key role of universities it is less promoted and valued in comparison with research in contemporary universities. Therefore, this work attempts to connect these two neglected and under-researched issues of academic freedom and teaching in higher education. It provides an updated account of academic freedom in university teaching in Europe and the Asia Pacific Rim as the two regions of concern in the UNIKE project.

A qualitative research design based on interpretative comparison (Custers et al. 2015; 2016) frames this study. In this respect, two case studies (one with the University of Bologna and one with the National University of Singapore) were conducted. The data collection includes policy and document analysis as well as semi-structured in-depth interviews with academics from different disciplines and at different career stages. Thematic analysis is used as a data analysis method (Braun and Clark 2006). The overall aims of the project are to analyse the recent situation of academic freedom and teaching in higher education, to gather diverse individual

experiences of higher education teachers and to provide a detailed account of academic freedom in higher education teaching by contextualising the individual experience within each cultural, regional, national and institutional context.

Universities are currently seen as institutions that are essential for the development of society in economic and cultural terms (Maguire 2010). As parts of the global marketplace, they have become complex large-scale organisations, which are mainly managed by New Public Management methods (Becker 2009; Ball 2008; Anderson and Johnson 1998). Today's challenges for universities are often summarised under terms such as *globalisation and globalism* (Beck 1997), the shift from *education for democracy* to *education for profit* (Nussbaum 2010), and universities as part of the global marketplace (Anderson and Johnson 1998) or as part of the knowledge society (Aarrevaara 2010; van der Wende 2008).

Within this context, the main challenge for universities is to find a “balance between the nature of higher education as a public good and the commercialisation of its services, while at the same time preserving the core values of the academic ethos” (International Conference on Ethical... 2004, 3), an “ethos that is based on the principles of respect for the dignity and for the physical and psychic integrity of human beings, life long learning, knowledge advancement and quality improvement, inclusive education, participatory democracy, active citizenship and non-discrimination” (ibid. 2004, 2).

In this discussion, the two key academic values, *academic freedom* and *university autonomy* are not first considered to be issues (Kamba 2000; Moodie 1996; Shils 1994). They are seen as a condition for following truth, for securing “long term perspectives in favour of short-term fashions” (Hamilton 2000, 212), for serving society as a whole and for the personal development of individuals (Rüegg 2011). At first, these two concepts seem to be well elaborated. Undoubtedly, this is true for university autonomy, which has certainly attracted attention in discussions around New Public Management and managerialism in higher education. Hence, some academics, such as Zgaga (2012) argue that a reflective shift from university autonomy towards academic freedom is needed today. Academic freedom has been a growing concern in the area of research and publishing for a long time, especially in the form of discussions around the freedom of speech. However, even if academic values are common and oft-mentioned topics in research and literature, one largely neglected and under-researched aspect remains: academic freedom in higher education teaching.

Despite the fact that teaching was and remains a central task of universities, it is less promoted and valued in comparison to research (Boden and Epstein 2011; Houston, Meyer and Shelley

2006; Altbach 2002; Kerr 1995). The European university started as a teaching and learning cooperation in the Middle Ages (Zonta 2002), and Humboldt reinforced teaching as one of the two main tasks of the German university model (Ridder-Symoens 2002). Humboldt's concept of *Lehr- und Lernfreiheit* depicts the dimension of academic freedom in higher education teaching and learning. It is still perceived as the true heritage of the European university (Blasi 2002) and has made a major contribution to the success of the University of Berlin.

Looking shortly at the status of academic freedom and higher education teaching and referring in this respect to the history of universities shows that universities have a long tradition and that academic values are rooted in one of the oldest institutions, next to the church (Zonta 2002). The European university emerged during the Middle Ages but the idea of academic freedom can be traced back to ancient Greece and the writings of Plato. Hence, it is important to understand the historical context when talking about academic freedom.

However, not only the historical context needs to be considered, as academic freedom has strong connections to two other concepts, namely university autonomy and the social responsibility that the university has towards society in modern times.

Currently, the role of universities is (not for the first time in history) changing as universities were always dependent on the *zeitgeist* they existed in (Rüegg 2011; Gascoigne 1998). Today, universities are increasingly turned into institutions that have to serve the economy, to produce practical innovation and to produce ready-made employees (see for example Wright 2014; Boden and Epstein 2011; Nedeva 2007; Bleiklie and Byrkjeflot 2002). Therefore, the social responsibility of universities is embedded in its changing roles and missions which are threefold and include research, teaching and the third mission.

Whereas research and teaching are the traditional roles of universities, which were always well connected, the third mission is a rather new concept. Research in comparison to teaching is usually valued higher in academia (Meyer 2012; Boden and Epstein 2011; Houston, Meyer and Shelley 2006; Altbach 2002; Kerr 1995) and some academics even claim that they have to buy their time out of teaching in order to conduct research (Boden and Epstein 2011; Houston, Meyer and Shelley 2006). With the shift towards the commercialisation of higher education and a decreased trend towards quantifying and optimising academic work (Mossmayer 2011) teaching and research have changed. Teaching in higher education is mainly influenced by massification (Trow 2007; Blasi 2002). Research needs to attract more and more external funding from funding agencies or the private sector (Boden and Epstein 2011; Houston, Meyer

and Shelley 2006). The unity of teaching and research is as well under pressure (Meyer 2012; Scott 2004).

Consequently, universities had to rethink their tasks from *the quest for knowledge for its own sake* towards *the production of knowledge and innovation* and from *educating critical thinkers and future researcher* towards *training employees for the job market*. The third mission can be seen as a formal way of reformulating the tasks of universities. This transformation of the core roles of universities combined with a decreasing trust in the academic profession (Carvalho 2012; Trakman 2008) has certain effects on the key academic values of university autonomy and academic freedom.

University autonomy was traditionally seen as a precondition for academic freedom (Anderson and Johnson 1998) and included the independence of the university from the state in academic matters. In more contemporary terms, *university autonomy* refers mainly to managerial, administrative and financial autonomy (Zgaga 2012). In other words, this means that many universities are pressured to act like businesses and enterprises (Becker 2009; Ball 2008; Anderson and Johnson 1998) as they have to take care of their financial sustainability. Hence, university autonomy is no longer perceived as a protecting factor for academic freedom but even a danger to it by many academics (see for example Zgaga et al. 2015; Erkkilä and Piironen 2014; Zgaga 2012, Wright and Ørberg 2011).

Academic freedom is not a clear-cut concept because definitions range from the freedom of speech (Hayes cited in McCrae 2011) towards definitions that focus on the social responsibility that is connected to academic freedom (Aarrevaara 2010; Manan 2000). Similarly to the diversity in definitions on academic freedom, the policy context is quite different even within Western countries. Whereas academic freedom in Denmark, for example, refers only to the freedom of research it also applies to teaching in the Slovene and the US contexts. Slovenia sees academic freedom as a right that is exercised within the academic community but in the US academic freedom is meant to protect the individual academic from its university and hence the academic community (see for example Danish Government 2011 for Denmark; Slovene Constitution 2013 and Legislative and Legal Service 2013 for Slovenia; Nelson 2014 and AAUP 2016d for the US).

Despite the diverse meanings of academic freedom, the roots of the concept as already mentioned can be traced back even to ancient Greece and Plato's allegory of the cave (Plato 1998 [360 B.C.E.]) and his summary of Socrates' apology (Plato 2004 [before 387 B.C.E.]

give good reasons why academic freedom is important for advancing knowledge and finding “truth” to use Plato’s and Socrates words.

The discussion on the ownership of academic freedom has yet been not resolved. Moreover, there are good arguments in favour of the academic community as well as in favour of the individual academic. Whereas the academic community can provide a framework for quality assurance and support in developing new ideas it can also block less fashionable research approaches, interpretation and theories by influencing peer review and, with this, also the publication and funding of certain research projects. Concerning teaching, the academic community can provide help and supervision but can also prevent academics from teaching certain controversial topics.

Even if academic freedom is rooted in European history, it is a growing concern worldwide, which can be seen in publications on the topic by key governmental and non-governmental institutions such as UNESCO, the American Association of University Professors, Scholars at Risk who work on an international scale, the European Council and the Council of Europe and, last but not least, the Magna Charta Observatory. Value statements about academic freedom such as the Magna Charta Universitatum also find increasing support by universities from all continents.

Due to this increased interest in a European value, this thesis not only looks at academic freedom from a European perspective but also includes one viewpoint from the Asia-Pacific-Rim. Contrasting one of the oldest universities in the heart of Europe, namely the University of Bologna, with a rather new university at the cross-road of Asia, namely the National University of Singapore, is meant to gather a complex and diverse picture of academic freedom. With the aim of exploring diversity in the understanding of academic freedom in teaching, this study asks the following research questions:

What does academic freedom – especially academic freedom in higher education teaching – mean in different cultural spaces?

Including the sub-questions:

What does academic freedom in relation to teaching mean for academics working at the University of Bologna and the National University of Singapore?

What is the meaning and significance of academic freedom in the daily practices of academics?

Which factors influence academics' experiences of academic freedom at the University of Bologna and the National University of Singapore?

To what extent is academic freedom – in particular, academic freedom in higher education teaching – important for academics at the University of Bologna and the National University of Singapore?

To answer these research questions, this work draws on a particular qualitative research design named “interpretative comparison” (Custers et al. 2016). This approach is based on the cornerstones of second-order interpretation and has four major methodological implications: (1) using a unit of comparison instead of drawing on a unit of analysis, (2) working with meaning, (3) acknowledging the intertwining of knowledge and social action, and (4) acknowledging the positionality of the researcher. In other words, it implies the assumption that unmediated and unconstrained access to reality is not possible and is in line with Burr's (1995) idea that knowledge is constructed in our daily interaction, to which also the research situation belongs. Hence, the positionality of the researchers needs to be considered as he or she is actively involved in the research process. The use of a unit of comparison instead of a unit of analysis means that no clear definition of the concept in question is taken into the research situation but that the interviewee is the source of framing the concept. Hence, the meaning of the concept is in the centre and not the terminology connected to this concept. Another important key point of interpretative comparison is the consideration of the context as experiences and stories are always embedded in a certain environment and time. Based on adopting a new research approach, this study offers the possibility to explore an additional methodological research question; precisely, it asks:

What are the practical benefits that interpretative comparison offers for deepening the understanding of academic freedom in different cultural spaces?

In practice, this means that the study is based on a qualitative research design that focuses on the stories of the interview participants (11 academics from the University of Bologna and 7 academics from the National University of Singapore). Next to the semi-structured in-depth interviews, a policy analysis of regional, national and institutional documents is meant to frame the context for the interviews. In the sample, special focus is drawn to a diversity within the interviewees; therefore, academics from different disciplines and at different career stages from each institution participated in the study. The method of data analysis is thematic analysis according to Clark and Braun (2006) as it is an appropriate tool for identifying patterns and for describing a variety of aspects of the research topic. In other words, it can depict the context as

well as the individual experiences and thus serves as a solid basis for the exploration of the research topic. Furthermore, it gives an overview of patterns included in the data and, therefore, can depict similarities and differences between different sources, areas, and cultures without implying themes to the data (Bryman 2008; Braun and Clarke 2006).

As a detailed account of each case would exceed the scope of this extended summary, only the more generalised answers to the research questions will be given here. Generalisation in this respect does not mean that the answers are generalisable to the whole population of academics but that some differences between the cases and each interviewee are lost by the pure act of summarising and comparing the individual stories with each other.

However, before answering the research questions, I want to add a couple of general sentences about the different contexts of each case. Whereas academic freedom is visible and adopted in regional and national policies in the case of Italy, there is almost no mention of academic freedom within the Singaporean case. The situation is similar at the institutional level. In both cases, a strong connection between university autonomy and accountability is made. The environment of academic values even if it changed according to above-mentioned trends of quantification (Moosmayer 2012) and the commercialisation of higher education (Jongbloed, Enders and Salerno 2008) is still based on traditional academic values in the Italian case, even if a shift towards the contemporary understanding of accountability can be seen. The main focus in the Singaporean case is on competition and world leadership as a driving force for university reforms that also include a slowly growing trend towards university autonomy in the modern sense which emphasises administrative, financial and managerial autonomy (Zgaga 2012). Therefore, there is an obvious difference between the cases, academic freedom is officially recognised in one case and not even mentioned in the other case.

In this light, the answer to the question *What does academic freedom – especially academic freedom in higher education teaching – mean in different cultural spaces?* might be surprising as the core meaning of academic freedom from the interviewees perspective differs more between individuals based on their (disciplinary) background than between the different cultural contexts. In other words, the assumptions, ideas, and feelings towards academic freedom were more similar between Italy and Singapore than between each individual academic. Nevertheless, in accordance with the quite different policy contexts, the degree of academic freedom that academics experience is dependent not only on the individual situation but also on regional, national, and institutional policies. Next to these influence factors, the immediate academic community and the career stage seem to be essential for the experience of academic freedom. A lower academic rank is not necessarily connected to the degree of

freedom, because some interviewees from Italy even decided to remain in the position of a researcher instead of following an academic career towards a professorship in order to secure less teaching obligations and more freedom. What seems to be influential is hence not the career status but the practical experience or in other words the time on the job. When judging their own degrees of freedom, it is also interesting to look at the point of reference that interviewees take in their comparison. Unsurprisingly, those who took comparisons with a time or a place where more academic freedom was given as a reference point judged their own situation rather negatively. Those who referred to a less positive situation evaluated their situation in a more positive way.

The answers to the sub-questions will provide some more detail to the above-stated answer. *What does academic freedom in relation to teaching mean for academics working at the University of Bologna and the National University of Singapore?* Overall, academic freedom in teaching is perceived as important by almost all interviewees regardless of which university they are from. The reasoning behind this perception is that without academic freedom it is almost impossible to encourage critical thinking and to introduce diverse and sometimes controversial ideas on a certain topic in class. One academic from Singapore who teaches in the social sciences referred to this specifically. Despite the fact that a clear reasoning behind the importance of freedom in teaching is not emphasised by many interviewees, most of them feel that it is important for their teaching activities. Nevertheless, they appreciate that teaching has to take place in an organised setting that allows coherent study programmes and timetables for the students. All academics think that they have enough freedom in their teaching, of course within the set framework described above.

'What is the meaning and significance of academic freedom in the daily practices of academics?' is the second sub-question of this study. The answer to this question is in favour of academic freedom because it is important for academics in both contexts and perceived as a necessary condition for academic work. Despite this conclusion, not all academics that participated in the study were immediately able to connect academic freedom to their daily work. This is particularly true for the case of the University of Bologna. This lack of awareness was clearly visible when one of the participants answered the questions about academic freedom with the comment that he was very sorry for me but he has not had any problems with academic freedom. Later in the conversation, he discovered that he has some severe issues about evaluation procedures and the quantification of academic work that impact his academic freedom. Finally, before closing the interview, he openly admitted that he was wrong about his first impression. This example shows that thinking about academic freedom needs time and

engagement with the topic as academic freedom has also some subtle dimensions. Moreover, this case supports the idea of interpretative comparison that knowledge cannot be merely collected but is produced mutually between the researcher and the interviewee.

The degree of experiencing academic freedom as already mentioned in the answer to the main research question is influenced by many factors, which include the legal framework, experiences, the academic discipline, the research area, and the micro-climate within a certain school, faculty, or research unit. The interviews also show that academic freedom is not a sole variable that creates a good academic atmosphere but that things like funding, research collaboration and an international environment are also very influential. Overall, the academics that participated in this study are satisfied with their situation in both institutions.

After engaging with questions about academic freedom the third sub-question is concerned with the connection between academic freedom and teaching. Precisely, it is *To what extent is academic freedom – in particular academic freedom in higher education teaching – important for academics at the University of Bologna and the National University of Singapore?* Overall academic freedom in teaching is perceived as important in Italy and Singapore as it can support student learning and student motivation when applied in a responsible and professional way. However, there are also cases in which academic freedom is used to neglect duties towards the students in the form of not offering appropriate support and guidance within the university. This concern about the missing social responsibility that should be the counterpart to academic freedom is described by one interviewee from Italy. Despite, this negative voice the participants in this study from both universities show passion about their teaching activities even if they favour research over teaching. Comparing the contributions about academic freedom and research on the one side and academic freedom and teaching on the other side academics are more aware about research freedom than about teaching freedom. This shows that the combination of teaching and academic freedom is either less important than academic freedom in research or that there is a lack in awareness about academic freedom in teaching.

The final research question that needs to be answered is the methodological question: *What are the practical benefits that interpretative comparison offers for deepening the understanding of academic freedom in different cultural spaces?* Overall, using an interpretative comparative research design has proven to be beneficial in several respects. It can deepen the understanding of academic freedom by depicting unpredicted and hidden aspects of academic freedom together with the interview participants. In particular, the use of a unit of comparison instead of unit of analysis also enabled me to depict dimensions of academic freedom that are, for example, hidden in descriptions of the traditional role of universities. Furthermore, it supports

the search for unpredicted influence factors such as the mass media on academic freedom. The use of open-ended questions and the reluctance on my side to give any definitions of the concept prevented the sole focus on obvious aspects of academic freedom that are already widely known in academic literature. With a critical attitude towards my own person as an influence factor for the interview data and the data analysis, I was also able to give different explanations for some descriptions and points of reference for the interviewees. Overall, I believe that interpretative comparison is an appropriate tool for deepening the understanding of a complex concept as it is able to focus on the diversity in meanings and embeds the concept into the broader as well as the individual context.

Despite these advantages, interpretative comparison cannot lead to generalisable results or to a clear and sole definition or description of a certain concept. Especially in this study, the sample size is quite small, and it thus cannot serve as a basis for comparing the status of academic freedom in Italy and Singapore or the University of Bologna and the National University of Singapore. It can only provide an insight into how the context and the policies on different levels can impact the experience of academic freedom for some academics. Hence, the approach of this study can be seen as a start to depict the plurality of a concept that is often taken for granted and rarely engaged with on the level of individual experiences. Further research is also needed to understand academic freedom deriving from the European context but finding increasingly international interest from an intercultural perspective.

Despite not being able to present a final definition or common understanding of the concept academic freedom and its relationship with higher education teaching, this study can still result in some practical form as it concludes, based on the fieldwork, by giving some concrete recommendations concerning academic freedom. These recommendations can be adopted by governments, non-governmental organisations as well as universities and/or groups of academics who want to engage in the topic of academic freedom. The recommendations deal with the communication between universities, academics, and society in order to preserve and develop a relationship based on trust. Furthermore, they include the evaluations of academic work as the evaluation process is key in contemporary universities for the career advancement of academics and hence has the power to guide their work. Finally, there are some recommendations given that can enhance the understanding and communication about academic freedom which can also include discussion of the role of universities in society and university autonomy as related concepts.

1. Communication between Universities, Academics and Society:

- a) There needs to be more clarity on the missions and current roles of universities as well as on academic values.
- b) In order to explain the diverse and complex roles of universities and the need for academic freedom to the broader public, the communication between universities and the public needs to be improved.
- c) Therefore, academics need appropriate skills and tools to communicate their expert knowledge and academic issues in an easy and understandable way.
- d) Support should be offered to academics in order to develop necessary communication skills and platforms for an open-dialogue between academics and the public must be provided.

2. Evaluations of Academic Work:

- a) Serious discussions about appropriate evaluation methods need to be stimulated in order to make concrete suggestions come from within the academic community.
- b) Based on these open discussions, serious evaluations methods need to be put into place.
- c) The time and resources for more complex evaluations need to be provided.

3. Safeguarding Academic Freedom:

- a) A mutual appreciation of different meanings of academic freedom is needed in order to enhance dialogue between different cultures and stakeholders on the topic.
- b) Clear policies need to be in place that protect not only the academic freedom of the academic community but also the individual academic in order to pave the way for a plurality of ideas and thoughts that are not restricted by certain schools of thought.
- c) Open dialogue about academic freedom and its subtle dimensions needs to be established across disciplines, universities, and countries.
- d) Therefore, space and time needs to be provided for open-dialogue between members of the academic community.

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