

Academic Freedom in an International Perspective: A Case Study of the University of Bologna and the University of Singapore

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International Conference

“LOOKING OUT”: COMPARABILITY AND COMPATIBILITY IN GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION

10 October 2017

09.15 – 10.45 PANEL 1

University of Ljubljana



Outline of the Presentation

1. Academic Freedom: A European Concept?
2. Research Methodology
3. A Regional Perspective on Academic Freedom
 1. Europa
 2. Asia-Pacific-Rim
4. A National Perspective on Academic Freedom
 1. Italy
 2. Singapore
5. Academic's Perspective on Academic Freedom
6. Concluding Thoughts

Academic Freedom: A European Concept?

Academic Freedom and the European Idea of a University



Long History

BUT still, no clearly defined concept

(three examples: The US, Slovenia and Denmark)



Gaining International Attention

Magna Charta Universitatum

UNESCO Recommendation on the Status of Higher Education
Teaching Personnel

Scholarly Discussions

(Bruneau 2015; Yamamoto 2015; Zha 2012)

Research Methodology

Policy and document analysis

Semi-structured interviews with academics from the University of Bologna (11) and the National University of Singapore (7)

From different disciplines
At different career stages

Thematic analysis

AIM: To depict a variety of views on the meaning of academic freedom from an international perspective

*A Regional Perspective on Academic
Freedom: Europe*



EHEA

(European Higher Education Area)

Bologna Process

between protecting and reframing academic
freedom and university of autonomy

A Regional Perspective on Academic Freedom: Asia-Pacific-Rim

ASEAN

(Association of Southeast Asian Nations)

mentioning of values such as freedom and peace but NOT Academic Freedom

APRU

(Association of Pacific Rim Universities)

one mentioning but the focus is on supporting world-leadership and networking

A National Perspective on Academic Freedom: Italy



Academic Freedom a Constitutional Right

Increasing University Autonomy „the Gelmini Reform“ and its effects on Academic Freedom

Not more Autonomy

Great Amount of Academic Freedom

Internal consensus making instead of steering at a distance

(Ballarino and Perotti, 2012; Moscati, 2012; Donina, Meoli and Palerari 2015)

A National Perspective on Academic Freedom: Singapore



No mentioning of Academic Freedom BUT proclaim
fundamental freedoms

UNESCO recommendation of concerning the Status
of Higher Education Personnel (1997)

Member since 2007



*Academic's Perspective on Academic
Freedom*

What is Academic Freedom and Why is it Important?

“...by academic freedom we understand that an academic just because of his position should be free to think and write and publish and produce the kind of knowledge he believes is important.” (Unibo; researcher; medicine)

“A researcher in my opinion should be granted to be free to work on subjects that he or she thinks are important.” (UniBo; full professor; Astronomy)

“I would think that academic freedom is about freedom from the governing power” (Unibo; lecturer; Social Science)

“...to develop the ideas that you find consisting and motivating.” (Unibo; engineering; full professor)

“...you should have some space to create in the in the world of ideas” (Unibo; social science; full professor)

Do You Have Academic Freedom? The case of Italy

“If you don’t ask for power then you have a very large autonomy you can do almost everything you want, within the laws of course but you are very free to do anything you want. But then you don’t have to ask for resources or funds or money or power within the organization et cetera. But if you accept to leave all this aside you are really free in Italy”

(Unibo; researcher; social science)

“...the äh amount of freedom that you have I think is directly äh linked to the ähm to your experience .”

(Unibo, researcher; law)

“Well, that you can select on the basis of your let’s say eh professional ehm let’s say competence, the topic, or the research question that you feel are most important in your field at the moment, in this respect you are free, of course again, if you ask for funding a then we have funding programmes in the university, small funding but still you can get some money then of course you have selection process, so there you have your freedom, so you are free to apply for with your topic ... then of course you are compared with other topics, right?! So you it might happen that your topic is considered the less important than others, that’s all part of the game.”

(Unibo; full professor; social science)

Do You Have Academic Freedom? The case of Singapore

“Obviously you have to follow the general structure but I do know that you have freedom to structure it and of course someone has to approve it when you come up with a plan.” (NUS; lecturer; natural science)

“Faculty members are free to innovate to use different pedagogics to encourage discussion, debates and so on...” (NUS; full professor; social science)

“And you should see these young students...so they are fearless they now say whatever they want...” (NUS; full professor; humanities)

“More than any other country probably Singapore has handled its, has balanced its authoritarianism better than most, so there are certain topics that are banned particular you cannot say any personal about... but its lower than in China...so the limitations are much more restricted...” (NUS; full professor; humanities)

“...at least I exactly know what I can talk and what I cannot talk about.” (NUS; social science; full professor)

“The government has scared a lot of people out but it’s by no means heading to disaster...” (NUS; full professor; social science)

What are Problematic Restrictions to Academic Freedom?

“Exceptional weight that is now put on the number of papers that you write, how many students you have. Of course some check is useful but you cannot classify people just saying one of you published ten papers the other published nine papers...” (Unibo; full professor; astronomy)

“...only their way of thinking and äh banning, literally banning the opposite way of thinking or alternative way of thinking...that can also arrive at the freedom of teaching but it's more an freedom of interpreting...publishing in journals, you can see these fights, which are fights against different interpretations based on different interpretations and schools of people who made their career out of some interpretations... I'm sure that that will prevent also people in their schools teaching subject in a different way from what they think ...” (UniBo; full professor; engineering)

“I had been at the right place at the right time, because in Europe in the US funding has been cut so badly that now even if you have a very good grant it is almost impossible to get the money ... because without the money you cannot do anything even if got great ideas I have been given everything that I needed because in the US you would be much more stressed to produce more... and you know in Europe finding research funding is very tough...” (NUS; full professor; medicine)

Concluding Thoughts

Academic freedom is not a sole European idea

legal frameworks are very different

From a personal perspective: interpersonal differences are more significant than intercultural differences

Thus, academic freedom does not only vary between countries but also between different career stages, disciplines and the individual situation

Overall, there is always some space to exercise academic freedom

=> Academic freedom is a complex issue and further research is needed to explore academic freedom in daily situations and from an international perspective

THANK YOU!

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This project is part of EU funded (ITN) research project Universities in the Knowledge Economy (UNIKE).