

## **University Autonomy and Teacher's Academic Freedom in Modern Russia: Challenges and Opportunities**

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**Abstract:** *Nowadays, a new paradigm is being discussed and introduced into the higher education organization. Granting autonomy to educational institutions and the subjects of the educational process is in the core of this paradigm. This paper focuses on defining the concepts of academic freedom, university autonomy, and teacher and learner autonomy and analyzes the relationship between them. Challenges faced by the Russian higher education system in implementing the ideas of autonomy and the reasons behind those challenges are also discussed in the article. Readiness for autonomy in both university teachers and learners as a key factor in successful and productive use of the benefits autonomy offers is emphasized.*

**Keywords:** *University autonomy, teacher autonomy, readiness for autonomy, academic freedom, Russian higher education.*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In modern Russian higher education the ideas of university autonomy and academic autonomy have gained currency. These two ideas are known to have developed through the centuries as "different sides of the same coin", according to Berg (1999: 28). It appears that a new autonomy-oriented paradigm is progressing in the modern theory and practice of the higher education which is manifested in the promotion of both institutional autonomy and university teachers and students' autonomy.

The search for effective ways to organize higher education in this new paradigm requires, on the one hand, thorough theoretical understanding of the ideas of academic freedom and autonomy in education. On the other hand, these ideas need to be specified through focusing on the university educational environment and its subjects: teachers and learners. This paper considers the figure of a university teacher, who stimulates and supports the process of autonomous learning, thus becoming a key figure in the educational process. A university teacher is capable of minimizing today's risks of reducing the academic autonomy space as well as promoting an increase of efficiency in design and implementation of autonomy-oriented paradigm of the higher education.

### **2. INVESTIGATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CONCEPTS OF UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM**

Compared to the concept of "academic freedom", the term "autonomy" in the current context of higher education is used as a complex characteristic reflecting self-supporting, relatively independent activity of the university and its employees in the conditions of provided freedom (Anderson & Johnson, 1998; Benson, 2000; Lamb and Reinders, 2008). Thus, the content of the concept of "academic autonomy" is broader than that of "academic freedom". At the institutional level substantive autonomy refers to the independent existence of the educational institution (perceived university autonomy), while procedural autonomy is concerned with this institution's rights (provided

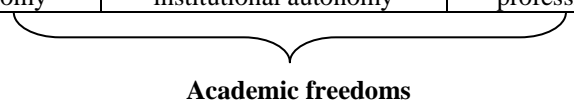

university autonomy or academic freedom). At the level of the educational process subjects, academic freedom reflects the autonomy provided to them - their rights, which can be perceived by teachers and students and manifested in their autonomous activity.

In actual practice, various types of academic freedom and autonomy are closely related and interdependent. Thus, according to Antonio Ruberti, the freedom of research is determined by the availability of means, public or private, for its conduct. If the means from public funds are appropriated and there are no restrictions, in other words, no specific goals set; there is more freedom (Ruberti, 1994). Subsequently, the higher financial autonomy provided to universities is, the higher the level of teachers and students' academic freedom.

The effectiveness of the academic freedom is manifested as academic autonomy of the educational process subjects and university autonomy. Both these types of autonomy are determined by a number of factors. These factors include both external, such as the extent of the provided academic freedom, state structure, educational legislation, funding, characteristics of the learning environment etc., and internal ones. Among the internal factors there are the desire and readiness of teachers and students to act autonomously. However, the most important factor is teacher autonomy: not only is it capable to make teachers act autonomously but it can also stimulate the development of autonomy in both learners and the university on the whole.

Ideally, under democratic conditions, the relationship is as follows. Academic freedom of teachers, which is defined by Russel as "teachers' right to put forward new ideas or unpopular opinions, their freedom to follow a line of research where it leads, regardless of the consequences, and the corresponding freedom to teach the truth as they see it..." (1993:18), seems to be an important factor contributing to autonomous professional activity. If a teacher has the desire and readiness for professional autonomy, she can use the benefits of the given autonomy to create conditions for students' perception of academic autonomy through their involvement in different types of autonomous activity. For example, various opinions expressed by the teachers can stimulate the development of independent critical thinking in learners. In other words, a teacher's academic freedom and autonomy can stimulate the development of learners' academic autonomy. The latter is ensured not only by external factors (i.e., influence of the teacher and presence of academic freedom), but also by the internal readiness and ability of the students for independent and responsible learning. Thus, teachers and students' readiness for autonomy is crucial because: a) it is capable to support a sustainable relationship of different types and forms of academic freedom and autonomy; and b) it allows (or does not allow) the teachers, students and universities to perceive different levels of autonomy (see Table 1)

**Table1.** Triad "freedom", "autonomy" and "readiness for autonomy" in the academic context

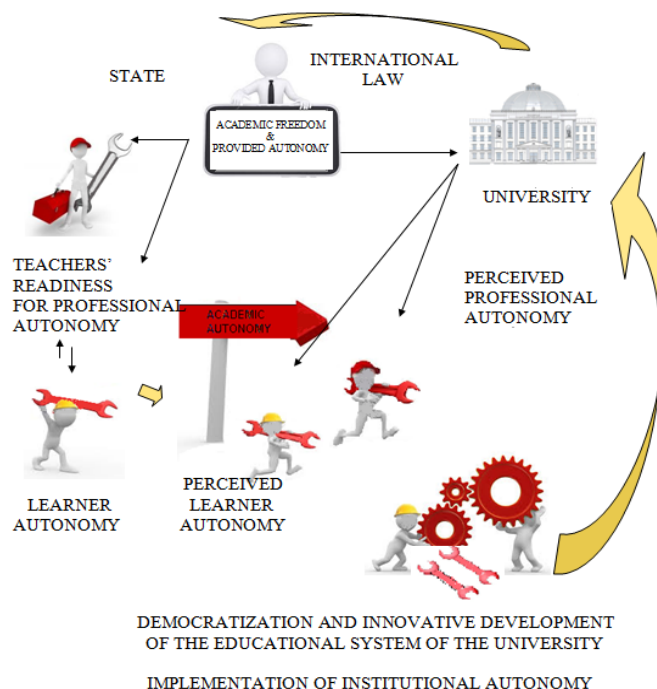
Aspects of autonomy	Student	University	Teacher
<b>External</b>	Provided learner autonomy	Provided institutional autonomy	Provided professional autonomy
	 <b>Academic freedoms</b>		
<b>Internal</b>	Readiness for learner autonomy	University students' readiness for learner autonomy + University teachers' readiness for professional autonomy	Readiness for professional autonomy
<b>External + Internal</b>	Perceived learner autonomy	Perceived institutional autonomy	Perceived professional autonomy
	 <b>Academic autonomy</b>		

It is noteworthy that the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Federico Mayor in his speech at the forum in Palermo (September, 1997), emphasized the role of academic freedom in the development of university autonomy and the

potential of "positive" type of autonomy – "autonomy with accountability". According to Federico Mayor, "the general trend towards greater institutional autonomy... places a new responsibility on universities to redefine the meaning of academic freedom in terms of academic accountability" (1997:7). In terms of the philosophical context this type of autonomy may be regarded as "freedom for" (Arseniev, 1999).

The ratio of the different aspects of academic freedom and autonomy shown in the table above can vary depending on the stage of the society and university development as Pokladok and Spasskaya state. (1992:4). The developed democratic society always stimulates the development of the academic freedom. If there is the desire and readiness for autonomy in university students and teachers, they have the opportunity to discover higher levels of autonomy.

In its turn, the developed academic autonomy of the learning environment actors contributes to the democratization and innovative development of the educational system and institutional autonomy. In a broader context, autonomy perceived by teachers, students and universities can be regarded as a factor of the state and society sustainable development. To restate, different aspects of academic autonomy, including academic freedom, are very closely connected and interdependent. This relationship is shown below in Figure 1.



**Fig1.** Relationship of academic autonomy aspects

As Figure 1 shows, the described relationship of different aspects of academic freedom and autonomy in education is not limited to the university environment and even the state borders. Here we tend to agree with the view expressed by E.B. Pokladok and V.V. Spasskaya, suggesting that nowadays academic freedom, despite its various forms of existence, is an international issue and an international privilege of university teachers (1992:4). A former rector of the University of Barcelona J.M. Brikolla, echoes this opinion stating that "freedom to teach is a fact of life in the democratic countries of Europe" (qtd. in Ruberti, 1994).

As for autonomy, in the history of philosophical ideas it has often been associated with the ability of a man to "push the limits" or to "go over the line of the institutional culture" (Marchenko, 2013). Thus, the teachers' readiness for autonomy based on thorough understanding of the socio cultural context may be regarded as an effective means for stimulating the teacher's vigorous activity and self-development both inside and outside the university environment. The readiness for autonomy can be manifested in the teacher's active participation in inter-university and international projects including those beyond teaching a particular subject. Therefore, the teacher can influence the development of the learning environment and students in formal education as well as the development of the university, state and society (including a wide area of non-formal and informal education).

### 3. UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF TEACHERS' READINESS FOR AUTONOMY AS THE MAINSPRING OF ACADEMIC AUTONOMY DEVELOPMENT

Unfortunately, many modern teachers who do not have the readiness for professional autonomy cannot take advantage of their academic freedom. A number of teachers distort or simplify the academic freedom given to them, often misusing the opportunities of the provided autonomy. The causes of the current situation in the Russian higher education need to be analyzed and the opportunities for solving autonomy and academic freedom related problems must be identified.

One of the serious obstacles for the development of teachers' autonomy is "*alienation*" of the rapidly developing society from the education, where the old traditions of lack of freedom, uniform curricula, collective learning and a minimum of elective courses are preserved. For a long time remaining an element of such an anti-autonomous model of standard and administrative pressure, a Russian teacher has found herself "alienated" from the modern society. Nowadays, this alienation is manifested in the lack of teachers' readiness to compete and demonstrate initiative, rationality, responsibility and independence. This makes it a much harder task to develop such crucial qualities in students.

This alienation seems to be caused by the particular mentality of university employees, formed in the years of the Soviet system and is characterized by "obedient expectation of instructions from above in all cases of university life, yearning for the dictate from above" as Zhurakovsky notes (1995:21). In the conditions of "freedom out of the blue" these workers obviously experience discomfort and adapt hard to the new university realities" [ibid]. This indicates that increase in academic freedom does not solve the problem of overcoming the teacher's alienation from the surrounding socio-cultural context. Consequently, special training of university teachers, preparing them for the free and responsible activity, seems to be required.

The process of overcoming alienation is often associated with the development of internal human freedom or autonomy, which implies, first of all, a change in the person's structure of values, acceptance of human responsibility, initiative, his/her personal involvement in the activities and a broad socio cultural context. Acceptance of responsibility by the teacher, development of her "personal involvement" in the educational process will allow her to act more consciously and rationally, considering the control of her activities not as a limitation of her own freedom, but as an important element in stimulating self-esteem and promoting improvement of work quality. This touches upon the problem of relations between teacher autonomy and control of teaching practice and teacher performance management (Gavrilyuk et al., 2014).

That is exactly why modern education researchers speak with increasing frequency about the problem of managerialism in education (organization of management and control in educational activities by business corporation type) which is considered as "a serious challenge for the institutional autonomy of the university and for the teachers' professional autonomy as well" (Dim, 2004; Zhurakovsky, 1995). With regard to solving the problem of managerialism teacher professional autonomy has a particular potential. Having a complex character, it assumes not only a set of skills ensuring autonomous activity, but also some definite (first and foremost, democratic and high-toned) purposes and values. This means that teacher professional autonomy has a capacity to rebuild the entire system of higher education organization by shifting the focus from operational aspects of teachers' activity to its value-meaningful grounds.

This conclusion is confirmed by the studies of domestic and foreign scientists who consider the academic autonomy to be "a special case of professional autonomy related to the institutional organization and self-organization of academic and university community" (Abramov, 2009:49) and associate this type of autonomy not with hierarchical but peer review control system (Freidson, 1994). Under this assumption, academic autonomy "refers to boundaries of the scientific community power and legitimizes claims of the university intellectuals on a special expert position relating to the production and evaluation of knowledge" (Abramov, 2009: 49).

Another factor that reduces the space of academic autonomy and undermines the manifestation of the teachers' professional autonomy is "massification of education" (Abramov, 2009; Pryamikova 2012; Henkel 2007) which "forces the teacher to rationalize her activities to match the large scale format of educational services (Abramov, 2009:85). On the one hand, the *global tendency to standardization and universalization of education* (for example, within the framework of the Bologna process) considerably expands the academic freedoms in the Russian universities which are included now in a

new multilevel system of training. On the other hand, it inevitably" changes the existing order prevailing indifferent national cultures" (Pryamikova, 2012:16). This trend manifests itself, in particular, in a massive, not always rational use of tests as a form of control in higher education. Meanwhile, many scientists (Bacon, Erich Fromm, M. Foucault and others) associated readiness for professional autonomy with the rational behavior of an individual, who is able to prevent a situation of "thoughtless copying of the samples" and to provide a rational approach to introduction of innovations with respect to the national and cultural identity and specific context.

Another serious problem is the so-called "*falsification and imitation of education*" in which academic freedom of the educational process receives a declarative character and becomes symbolic (The future of higher education in Russia ..., 2012). Unfortunately, with regard to the implementation of academic freedom in the modern Russian higher education the following situation is often observed: Students pretend to exercise free choice; teachers pretend to make decisions and provide the students with an opportunity to do the same. The attempts to solve the problem of falsification and imitation by upgrading education systems are not always successful and often lead to an additional "layer" of falsification and imitation. There is imitation of reforms, imitation of development management: "administrators pretend to direct the modernization; teachers pretend to upgrade research, educational process, etc." (ibid:19), although often under taken innovations" are reduced to issuing additional prescriptions and regulations, without affecting the actual quality of learning outcomes" (ibid: 20). In contrast to this tendency, professional autonomy of the teacher will allow her to make an independent and responsible choice, guided by expediency of this choice in a particular educational context. After all, A. A. Verbitsky fairly notes that "reforming of education in terms of competence must lean on a complex of human sciences, consider psychological, social, cultural etc. patterns of development of his personality and identity" (2011:2).

Often the problem of falsification and imitation of education is caused by insufficient competence of teachers in the field of new technologies, means and methods of training and their own professional self-development. In turn, such situation is due to a serious gap" between the needs of the labor market and professional qualifications received at the universities" existing today (Gimpelson, 2009). Attempts to solve this problem by developing the detailed State Standards with multiple competences are definitely positive. But in the ever-changing conditions of activity, it is important for a teacher to gain new competences. The teacher's readiness for professional autonomy ensures a teacher's constant self-development as it is one of the generic competences a teacher should possess.

Insufficient teachers' understanding of the need to "innovatively self-change" for the implementation of academic freedom also leads to negative consequences (Tareva, 2013). Among such consequences in the Russian higher education there is development of the "*elite*" approach to understanding the essence of academic freedom, which contradicts the democratic approach (Bourdieu, 1997; Volosnikova, 2006). Under the "elite" approach, academic freedom is reported to "degenerate into academic reaction", becoming the pretext for the "negative manifestations of academism" in the form of the stubborn resistance to practical orientation of education "for the prosperity of Logos and the destruction of Praxis" (Bourdieu, 1997:119). Following this idea, L.M. Volosnikova speaks about the negative impact of this approach on the development of democratic processes, in this sense "the university is not democracy; it is the aristocracy of the educational spirit" (2006:105). Teacher's readiness for professional autonomy suggesting awareness of the educational problems and high level of professional responsibility is capable to minimize the risk of the elitist approach, which poses a threat to the democratic way of the education development.

Another problem Russian education faces today is *commercialization of university research and education*: the amount of research sponsored by private companies is growing, scientists' academic identity is being transformed, academic freedoms are in danger, and the emphasis shifts from the scientific and intellectual autonomy of universities to the economic one (Bogdanova, 2010; Gal, Sulye, 2009; Pryamikova, 2012). Labeling this problem as the *commodification of education*, E.V. Pryamikov talks about the danger of "transformation of education into goods and services" which "destroy the prospects of the advanced development of education in the information society" (2012:16). This problem is closely related to the "*devaluation of professional and ethical patterns of university scientific and educational activity*" which provokes, according to M.V. Bogdanova, "the internal conflict of teachers" concerning the definition of the nature of their professional activities (Bogdanova, 2010).



The study of the philosophical bases of autonomy confirms its close connection to the development of spiritual and moral potential of a person, to the understanding of the inner significance of moral standards and ethical values for the person. (I. Kant, N. Berdyaev, S.N. Bulgakov, S. Frank and others.). In psychology, autonomy is also associated with individual values and meanings (A. Maslow, J. Marshall). This is consistent with the modern understanding of autonomy as one of a specialist's core competencies, which are based on "universal values and the relationship between individual and collective goals" (The Bologna Process ..., 2009: 176].

The problem of teacher autonomy is closely related to the problem of *the fall of the prestige of teaching profession* (Lyubimov, 2009). The solution of this problem requires the activity of both external social and economic forces and such an internal factor as the development of professional autonomy. Teacher autonomy involves the development of her self-confidence and the ability to "take such positions as: 1) an organizer of communication and students' independent educational activity; 2) a professional, demonstrating the highest standards of professional activity, participating in discussion, facilitating research and development, 3) "the master of the game" capable of designing a game imitating the real life, training on a simulator, etc." (Lyubimov, 2009:67). Acceptance of these positions by the teacher (in contrast to a traditional role of the lecturer as a deliverer of knowledge) could promote students' respect of the teacher and increase the prestige of teaching profession.

#### 4. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

In the modern legislation and educational practice we observe promotion of an idea of university autonomy and academic freedom. In modern conditions neither the university autonomy, nor the academic freedoms are absolute. As a rule, they are restricted not only by the state legislative acts, but also by external social and economic, intra university and intrapersonal factors.

In particular, widely promoted institutional autonomy of universities cannot appear without relevantly trained educational process subjects. To master a higher level of provided autonomy the educational process subjects need a qualitatively and quantitatively increased readiness for autonomy. In the modern context teachers' readiness for professional autonomy is of particular importance because it is a factor that can minimize risks impeding the development of institutional autonomy of universities and academic freedom. The solution of this problem requires transformation of a blinkered vision of academic freedom into its consideration in the broader context of academic autonomy. This involves its viewing as a special mode of existence of the university and the educational process subjects. The cornerstone of this new autonomous paradigm of the higher education comprises two elements:

- a complex of the interconnected, interdependent and not contradicting each other rights and opportunities given to students, teachers, and universities which take into account the responsibility of everyone for educational results (actually, the academic freedom);
- a "positive" (based on the sense of social responsibility) type of readiness for autonomy of teachers and students, allowing them to master certain levels of the academic autonomy.

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