



Selected Aspects of Academic Freedom – Example from Slovakia by the View of University Teachers

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Abstract- Academic freedom is a very important topic in the higher education process. The main aim of this article is to identify selected aspects of academic freedom within the Slovak higher education system from the perspective of Slovak university teachers. The text briefly defines the basic aspects of academic freedom. The empirical part analyses the results of the authors' own empirical research. The aim of the empirical research was to identify how Slovak university teachers characterize academic freedom in Slovakia. The empirical research used a qualitative research methodology. Structured interviews were used as a method of data collection. The respondents in the research were 10 Slovak university teachers. The results of the empirical research show that the university teachers studied identified the aspects of academic freedom in the higher education process. In Slovakia, the university teachers studied have autonomy in selecting educational and assessment methods. Moreover, they emphasized the significance of freedom of speech during the higher education process. The conclusion of the paper defines the importance of academic freedom for university teachers during the higher education process. Academic freedom is closely related to the delivery of education, and it should be supported by university management, as university teachers are autonomous experts in delivering lectures and seminars. It is a very important factor for the continuity of the higher education process.

Keywords: Academic Freedom, Higher Education, Teacher, University.

I. Introduction

Academic freedom represents a cornerstone of the higher education process and a fundamental prerequisite for its effective implementation. In the era of modernization and globalization of higher education, however, the discussion surrounding this phenomenon is becoming increasingly urgent. For this reason, it is essential to critically examine whether academic freedom constitutes a genuine component of the university environment or remains merely a proclaimed declaration. Higher education institutions and universities have specific systems of their existence. The contributions of academics are very important for their existence. For this reason, academics should be independent in their professional activities.

Given that this is an inherently broad and multidimensional concept, a detailed analysis requires the specification of its individual dimensions—ranging from the freedom of research and teaching to institutional autonomy. In doing so, we operate on the assumption that university teachers themselves best reflect upon this issue, as they encounter it in their daily practice. Their professional activity is intrinsically grounded in scientific rigor, critical thinking, and autonomy.

The scientific and educational work of academics ought to stem strictly from free inquiry. We therefore consider free inquiry to be an essential part of the work of academics. On the other hand, it faces various contemporary threats. These include growing bureaucratic pressure, the commercialization of science, and political influences. For this reason, it is necessary to identify the perception of academic freedom by the view of academics. Their perceptions of academic freedom may influence their quality of pedagogical performance and the standard of scientific outputs. University teachers cannot work under pressure from political authorities, state, government or external stakeholders. According to the above-mentioned statements, the aim of this paper is to identify how the surveyed university teachers perceive academic freedom within their daily work and where they perceive its limits.

II. Literature review

2.1 Academic freedom

Academic freedom is a frequently used term in academic literature. Based on our research, we aim to provide a general definition of this concept. Spannagel and Kinzelbach (2023) identify academic freedom within several activities, such as scientific progress connected with the pursuit of truth, research collaboration, and a quality higher education process. We state that academic freedom is inherently linked to the university environment. Since university teachers are an essential part of this environment, academic freedom is largely characterized by their activities. Therefore, conducting the higher education process, collaborating on research, and advancing

science should be integral parts of university teachers' activities. Universities and states should protect academic freedom. However, research into violations of academic freedom has been impeded by a lack of data (Spannagel & Kinzelbach, 2023). The development of university education determines the increased interest in academic freedom research. We consider academic freedom an essential component of a university teacher's work. For university teachers, it is crucial because they are independent professionals within the university.

Academic freedom is characterised „both as a set of rights that secure institutional and individual autonomy and as a worldly practice that assumes responsibility for how knowledge production participates in the making of shared worlds. It is, in this framing, an ethical–political practice as much as a legal status – fragile, contested, and paradoxical, requiring continual political rearticulation and renewed public judgement. “ (Brögger-Dillabough & Petö, 2026, p. 5) The above-mentioned definition of academic freedom provides a comprehensive characterization of its professional definition. According to this definition, we state that a detailed scientific discussion about academic freedom is essential. This issue should be discussed not only within the academic community but also as part of a global dialogue. “Academic freedom has always been subject to explicit and implicit pressures. In recent years, however, these have been mounting in a societal and political context characterised by extreme polarisation and challenges to democratic systems. This has not gone unnoticed. Over the past five years, legislative and regulatory initiatives in support of academic freedom have proliferated. On the one hand, it is a type of free speech which can be justified from the general reasons for free speech and on the other hand, as some might argue, it has a particular importance of its own since it is a freedom that applies to a specific category of people; scholars and researchers; who are entitled to almost unlimited free-speech rights.” (Kabasakal Badamchi, 2022, p. 620 We state that the existence of academic freedom is not a new phenomenon (Svrček, 2025). Academics frequently discuss this topic within the context of their work at universities and other higher education institutions. It includes not only freedom of speech, but also the freedom to engage in all academic activities.

Based on the general characteristics of academic freedom, its definition needs to be elaborated upon from several perspectives. Brögger, Dillabough, & Petö (2026) states that academic freedom is related with scholars' autonomy to research, teach and produce knowledge. Mentioned autonomy in defined areas should be without political or economic interference. We consider these attributes to be the core characteristics of academic freedom. Reichman (2021) identified three basic characteristics of academic freedom for teachers:

1. Freedom in research, publication of the research results,
2. Freedom in discussion about subject of education,
3. Freedom in speaking or writing as citizens

Vrielnik, Lemmens and Parmentier (2010) identify the following aspects of academic freedom:

1. It is an individual right of the academic community members (both staff and students) – for example, freedom of opinions, freedom of association;
2. It is a collective (institutional right) of autonomy for the academy in general or subsections thereof (for example, faculties, research units, etc.);
3. It is a corresponding obligation for the public authorities to respect academic freedom, to take measures to ensure an effective enjoyment of this right, and to protect it.

We consider academic freedom to be the right to hold individual opinions within academic environments. Work within higher education should be based on autonomy regarding the perspectives of all faculty and staff members. This autonomy should be integral to the organisation of the educational process.

Spannagel & Kinzelbach (2023) characterize the new index of academic freedom by five following indicators:

1. Freedom to research and teach. Academics should have an autonomy to choose their research topics. They should not be limited in the teaching methods they use in higher education;
2. Freedom of academic exchange and dissemination. Academic freedom should be related to free discussion and dissemination of academics' research findings among both academics and non-academics. It is a prerequisite for knowledge exchange;
3. Institutional autonomy of universities. A university can be financed by a third party but it must remain independent in its decisions, finances, administration, research topics and its findings and related issues;
4. Campus integrity. The university campus is defined as all university buildings as well as digital research and teaching platforms. It provides an open learning and research environment, which must be free from any deliberately, externally induced climate of insecurity or intimidation;
5. Freedom of academic and cultural expression. Usually, freedom of speech relates to expressions of the political situation. Academics participate in the elections, and they should have a right to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the political situation in their country.

Above-defined characteristics of academic freedom are considered as a background for the empirical investigation of the mentioned issue.

2.1 University teacher

The role of a university teacher in the academic environment relates to the educational process. For this reason, we briefly characterize what is important in teaching. „Good teaching is characterised by teacher enthusiasm and passion; is learner-focused; is experientially based, participative and designed to develop critical thinking, reflection and problem-solving skills; helps students to shift their conceptual understanding; is premised on a soundly designed, relevant curriculum that aligns outcomes, teaching and learning strategies, and assessment; develop student competence through constructive feedback and involves on-going teacher reflection“ (McMillan & Gordon 2017) The above-defined process of teaching emphasizes the role of teacher in general. The role of a university teacher is specific because it relates to various activities. Močinić, Lazarić & Gortan-Carlin (2022) categorized the activities of university teachers into two stages:

1. Activities in the scientific area. These activities contain ability to formulate questions in the research, ability to apply knowledge in practice, ability to learn continuously, ability to work within an interdisciplinary environment, ability to understand and use IT tools,
2. Activities related to teamwork, communication and language skills, team and project management, ability to share research results within specific communities.

We state that university teachers have an important role in the university educational process. They are not merely educators as they actively contribute to scientific development in their respective research areas.

III. Materials and Methods/ Methodology

The main aim of this article is to identify selected aspects of academic freedom within the Slovak higher educational system from the perspective of Slovak university teachers. According to the main aim of the article, we define the research question: How do interviewed university teachers in Slovakia perceive academic freedom within the higher educational process? The main aim and research question determine following partial aims of the research:

1. The analysis of researched university teachers' application of autonomy in the educational process - How do the researched university teachers exercise their autonomy in the university educational process?
2. The analysis of freedom speech during the university educational process - How should freedom of speech manifest among the researched university teachers?

Our research of the analyzed issue was realized by qualitative research. Qualitative methodology has its advantages and disadvantages. The first advantage of the above-mentioned research methodology is an in-depth and detailed analysis of the researched issue. Usually, researchers do not record and analyze frequencies of respondents' responses in qualitative research (Hendl, 2023). We consider qualitative research methodology as an in-depth and detailed analysis of the researched issues. According to the aims of our research, a more detailed analysis was required. For this reason, a qualitative methodology was chosen. We do not aim to verify the theories of existence of academic freedom but rather we identify how academic freedom is perceived by the university teachers in our sample. Qualitative research provides a space for more extensive investigation.

We have chosen in-depth structured interviews as a method for data collection. Gavora (2010) defines interview as one of the appropriate methods of data collection in qualitative research. The interview contains pre-planned questions for respondents. The researcher is asking questions to the respondent. Structured interviews are based on the prepared questions in advance. In our opinion, the advantage of using structured interviews as a data collection method is that they are less time-consuming. Preparing the interview questions in advance eliminates the need to generate follow-up questions.

We have used open coding as a method of transcript analysis. It is the first stage of qualitative data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1999). We consider the open coding of obtained data from the interview as a background for the next analysis. In the next step of the qualitative data analysis, we used thematic analysis. It is a systematic framework used for coding qualitative data. It enables researchers to identify the existence of patterns across the analyzed data. Finally, results of the thematic analysis answer the research question (Cooper et al. 2012). Thematic analysis is an adequate qualitative data analysis method for answering our research questions. Its use is a prerequisite for detailed data analysis.

The research sample was 10 university teachers. They were working at the selected university in Slovakia. The youngest respondent was 32 years old, followed by three teachers aged 35, two aged 43, one aged 44, two aged 48, and one aged 53. The first respondent had 2 years of experience, the next two had 3 years, another two had 5

years, and the remaining respondents had more than 7 years of experience in academia. Convenience sampling was used to select the respondents.

IV. Results and Discussion

According to the use of thematic analysis, we identified three main themes in our empirical research:

- 1) Autonomy in educational methods
- 2) Autonomy in assessment
- 3) Public expressions

Firstly, we would like to answer the first research question. The first research question should be answered by two main themes in our results of thematic analysis. Researched university teachers exercise their autonomy in the university educational process by autonomy in educational methods and autonomy in assessment. Results of coding provides the following table (Table 1).

Table 1: Results of coding: How do the researched university teachers exercise their autonomy in the university educational process?

Respondent	Citation	Open code	Category
R2	"...the department management doesn't interfere, as long as student course evaluations... are positive."	evaluations as a prerequisite for freedom	conditions of autonomy
R3	"...the accreditation file and syllabus... are rigid, but I adapt the topics on the fly..."	flexible content modification	autonomy in educational methods
R6	"...the university pushes for unified multiple-choice exams, but I insisted on oral examinations because it's the only way to test critical thinking..."	insisting on pedagogical agency	autonomy in assessment
R9	"...I integrated AI tools and virtual labs into my lectures this year, even though the official curriculum doesn't mention them at all..."	pedagogical innovation	autonomy in educational methods
R10	"I let the students co-create the grading criteria during the first week. It gives them ownership over their learning process..."	co-creating assessment criteria	autonomy in assessment

Source: own research

According to data in the table above (Table 1) we state that freedom of pedagogical choices depends on students' satisfaction with university teachers. If students are satisfied with a university teacher, the department management provides teachers freedom in their pedagogical choices: "... I have experience with departmental management. The departmental management evaluates my activities. the department management doesn't interfere, as long as student course evaluations... are positive." Academic autonomy in the university educational process depends on positive students' evaluations. We identified autonomy in educational methods and autonomy in assessment as a way of academic freedom of researched university teachers. "We have the accreditation file and syllabus of the subject. Sometimes, they are rigid, but I adapt topics on the fly. Then, I adjust the course syllabus in the following academic year." Moreover, pedagogical innovations are very important: "...I integrated AI tools and virtual labs into my lectures this year, even though the official curriculum doesn't mention them at all..." Autonomy of assessment is the second aspect of academic freedom presented by researched university teachers. "We have various possibilities for evaluation of students. The university pushes for unified multiple-choice exams, but I insisted on oral examinations because it's the only way to test critical thinking..." The university teachers under our research insist on pedagogical agency. Regarding the autonomy of assessment, the university teachers in our study view student participation in co-creating assessment criteria as a key benefit. "I let the students co-create the grading criteria during the first week. It gives them ownership over their learning process. In my opinion, university students need to participate in the evaluation of their peers' presentations." University teachers create a university educational process, and he or she is responsible for its assessment.



In the next step of our research, we answered the second research question. The second research question analyzed freedom of speech by the view of university teachers in our research. The results of open coding are presented in the following table (Table 2).

Table 2: Results of coding: How should freedom of speech manifest among the researched university teachers?

Respondent	Citation	Open code	Category
R1	<i>"Teachers shouldn't be penalized for expressing their private political or social opinions outside of school on their personal social media accounts..."</i>	separation of professional and civic identity	civic expression
R2	<i>"I need to be able to publish research findings that contradict the current political narrative or the interests of commercial sponsors without losing my job."</i>	absence of commercial and political censorship of academic speech	independence
R6	<i>"I signed a petition against government reform as a private individual, and my dean called me to say it looks bad for the faculty. That is a direct breach of my civic rights."</i>	separation of professional and civic identity	civic expression
R9	<i>"Young researchers on short-term contracts simply keep their mouths shut during department meetings. Freedom of speech is an empty phrase if you are worried about your contract renewal next month."</i>	vulnerability of early-career academics	own opinion
R10	<i>"Freedom of speech means we don't self-censor our research topics out of fear that a specific grant agency will reject our funding..."</i>	financial funding as a constraint on research selection	independence

Source: own research

Based on the data in the table above, we state that freedom of speech is related to separation of professional and civic identity. *"Teachers shouldn't be penalized for expressing their private political or social opinions outside of school on their personal social media accounts..."*, *"I signed a petition against government reform as a private individual, and my dean called me to say it looks bad for the faculty. That is a direct breach of my civic rights."* A teacher has his or her personal life and he or she can express opinions about various topics in society. The next aspect of speech freedom identified the absence of commercial and political censorship. *"I am doing research on many topics. Some of them are part of societal discussion. I need to be able to publish research findings that contradict the current political narrative or the interests of commercial sponsors without losing my job..."* Freedom of speech is important for young academics, especially during the departmental meetings. *"Young researchers on short-term contracts simply keep their mouths shut during department meetings. Freedom of speech is an empty phrase if you are worried about your contract renewal next month."* Young researchers can feel vulnerable when their recommendations for the educational process, research, or departmental development are ignored. Moreover, if they present alternative viewpoints or criticisms, they fear being dismissed from their jobs. Freedom of speech relates to research topics. Researched university teachers fear that if they do not censor their expressions regarding their research interests, they will fail to secure research funding. *"Freedom of speech means we don't self-censor our research topics out of fear that a specific grant agency will reject our funding because of inappropriate focus."* Freedom of speech should be characterized by independence of academics.

We can compare the results of our research with the findings on the issue of academic freedom in a global context. Finley & Tiede (2025) researched experiences and perspectives related to academic freedom. One of their conclusions shows that almost a quarter of the faculty at the researched higher educational institutions feel pressure to conform their political views to align with those of the administration and other faculty members at their institution. On the other hand, it is specific to the research institution in the research of above-mentioned authors. According to this, pressure in various forms and of varying intensity is a part of the activities of academics all over the world.

Moreover, the research carried out by Romanowski & Nasser (2010) was based on three aspects of academic freedom: the general understanding of the concept, the role of responsibility, and self-censorship. In the general understanding of academic freedom, researched university teachers need to have the freedom to choose their



research topics but must present their results in an appropriate way. We consider freedom of research topics to be essential for the academic freedom of university teachers. Independent research can advance science across various fields but there should not be pressure for research topics or findings. We identified partial similarities to our own research findings, as we consider this issue to be an inherent part of academic work.

V. Conclusion

Academic freedom is considered an important topic in scientific areas. Its brief characteristics emphasize the freedom in various activities of academics. It relates to the autonomy of research, choosing teaching methods, and publishing findings without institutional or political interference. We defined the role of a university teacher as an independent professional in the university educational process. The work and activities of a university teacher should be highly scientific because these educators have knowledge and experience in their field of science, and they are able to transform them into new recommendations for everyday societal interactions.

The main objective of this paper was to analyze how university teachers identify academic freedom. Based on the data in our empirical research we state that the above-mentioned research goals have been successfully and thoroughly achieved. The findings offer views of researched university teachers into their experience with academic freedom. Autonomy in the choice of teaching methods and freedom of expression are important for researched university teachers. These two aspects are important for enhancing academic freedom, as didactic independence protects the educational process from external ideological or institutional pressures. At the same time, freedom of expression creates a safe environment for open critical discussion, plurality of opinions, and the pursuit of truth, which constitute the core pillars of independent democratic education. Rigorous protection of academic freedom must therefore focus on eliminating administrative and managerial pressures from within institutions, as well as ideological and political influences from the outside. Only by minimizing these two factors can universities remain spaces for open scientific discourse, where critical thinking is guided neither by managerial metrics nor political agendas.

Based on these findings, we recommend practicing strengthening the self-governing character of academic institutions and reviewing the competences of university management so that they do not predominantly tend toward restricting didactic freedoms. Furthermore, it is essential to legally anchor protective mechanisms that guarantee the stability of academic staff regardless of their political or ideological stances expressed within scientific discourse. University teachers must feel supported by institutional leadership in their scientific and academic pursuits, given that they are regarded as autonomous professionals.

Finally, academic freedom is vital to fostering an appropriate educational environment for university students. We need to have university teachers in the university educational environment, who feel supported in their activities and research. Only then can they inspire students to think critically and engage in meaningful academic discourse. At the same time, university teachers must be allowed to pursue their academic work without being subjected to external pressure.

We consider this issue to be highly relevant for further research, we propose expanding both the sample size and our thematic analysis to include other foreign countries. A comparative study of several countries worldwide will help design methods to eliminate, above all, political pressure on academic freedom.

VI. Ethical Approval

We obtained ethical approval for this study from the Ethical Commission of University of ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava.

Consent requirements: *Studies involving humans require written informed consent, which includes consent to participate in the research and consent to publish any identifiable data. Both forms of consent are necessary to meet ethical and legal standards.*

VII. Data Availability

Date Availability Statement:

Extended data

figshare: Research on perceiving academic freedom – Question for interview.

<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.33249525>

This project contains the following extended data:

- Academic Freedom – Questions of Interview to Participants.docx

Data are available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY 4.0).

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