The Protection of Academic Freedom by Leadership in the Process of Higher Education Modernization

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Abstract: The essence of academic freedom lies in scholars' autonomy in the pursuit of knowledge, free from external coercion and internal constraints, encompassing various aspects such as freedom of research, teaching, and learning. Leadership plays a crucial role in safeguarding academic freedom. Drawing on Macfarlane's conceptualization of intellectual leadership, this article examines faculty-based agency protection, as well as institutional, cultural, and resource-based protections at the university level.

Keywords: Higher education; Leadership; Academic freedom

1. Introduction

Since the formation of higher education systems, institutional autonomy and academic freedom have been two core propositions, permeating all stages of higher education development and profoundly influencing its forms and quality [1]. Current research on academic freedom, both domestically and internationally, is extensive, yet scholars exhibit significant divergence in their perspectives regarding its conceptual definition, essential components, inherent value, and boundaries. Philip G. Altbach asserts that "academic freedom means professors are free from external control in their professional fields, enjoying the right to teach freely and the freedom of student learning" [2]. Other scholars have distilled academic freedom into four core issues: who teaches, what is taught, how it is taught, and who gets admitted [3]. Academic freedom, as a privilege for university faculty, researchers, and learners [4], carries multifaceted significance. On one hand, it minimizes the influence of external factors—such as administrative, capital, religious, and societal norms—on academic research and talent cultivation. On the other hand, it maximally stimulates the creativity of academic actors [5]. Currently, China's higher education is undergoing modernization, with the national level placing high importance on academic freedom. Articles 35 and 51 of the Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of China stipulate

that "(universities) independently conduct academic research" and "provide favorable conditions for faculty's academic research" [6], providing legal safeguards for academic freedom. However, in practice, academic freedom faces multiple challenges, including excessive administrative interference in academic affairs such as discipline establishment, curriculum design, project approval, and professional title evaluation, significantly narrowing the space for academic decision-making [7]. The prevalence of performance-oriented culture has distorted the academic evaluation system, pressuring faculty to choose "low-risk, high-output" research directions and exacerbating inequities in academic resource allocation [8]. Furthermore, the involvement of capital and the infiltration of public opinion also impact academic freedom from various angles. Safeguarding academic freedom is an essential path to advancing higher education modernization, and leadership plays a crucial role in this protection. Leadership, as defined by White and colleagues' research, refers to "a collective pattern where all members share leader influence within same-level or cross-level systems when addressing complex environments" [9], its essence being the behavioral capacity for influence, change, and transaction between leaders and followers [10]. Leadership's protection of academic freedom manifests across multiple dimensions: agency-based, institutional, cultural, and resource-oriented.

2. Agency-based protection by university faculty

University faculty (professors) are both the subjects of academic freedom and the agents of its protection. In his 2012 publication *Intellectual Leadership in Higher Education: Renewing the Role of the University Professor*, Bruce Macfarlane argues that faculty play the role of intellectual leaders in modern higher education, and proposes four orientations of intellectual leadership: knowledge producers, academic citizens, boundary crossers, and public intellectuals—providing a comprehensive framework for faculty to safeguard academic freedom [11]. From the perspective of knowledge producers, knowledge creation is faculty's core responsibility, requiring them to maintain an innovative spirit, advancing disciplinary frontiers as their goal while consciously resisting utilitarian tendencies in knowledge production, ensuring the authenticity and originality of their work. As academic citizens—a legal concept combining rights with responsibilities—faculty enjoy academic freedom while bearing civic responsibilities, whose active fulfillment itself constitutes a vital aspect of protecting academic freedom. Currently, academic life is unprecedentedly close to social life, emphasizing application and collaboration between researchers and practitioners [12]. Faculty must engage deeply in academic governance—from disciplinary development to societal impact—by actively participating in curriculum committees, journal peer reviews, and other services to defend academic norms against plagiarism, data fabrication, and similar misconduct, while fostering inclusive cultures within institutions to create favorable environments for knowledge production. From the perspective of boundary crossers, university teachers should transcend their own disciplinary backgrounds, break down academic barriers, and engage in interdisciplinary research to innovate knowledge production models. Industry-education integration is the only path to achieving high-quality development in higher education, encompassing three dimensions: macro, meso, and micro. At the macro level, industry-education integration refers to the integration of the two major systems—industry and higher education—by determining the direction of higher education development based on the current state and transformation trends of industry, and strengthening the role of higher education in serving industrial development. At the meso level, industry-education integration refers to the collaboration between key players in industry (enterprises) and higher education institutions. This involves bridging the gap between industry and education through school-enterprise cooperation, leveraging enterprise resources such as human resources, equipment, and facilities to optimize the talent cultivation mechanisms of universities, while also

enabling higher education institutions to contribute to enterprises in areas such as technological innovation and management reform. At the micro level, industry-education integration refers to the integration of production and teaching, embedding educational content into real production scenarios. By relying on a practice mechanism that combines theory and practice, it aims to cultivate students' practical skills and promote their professional development. Teachers should start from the role of higher education in modern societal development, act as a bridge for knowledge transformation, and promote the integration of industry, academia, government, and research. As public intellectuals, faculty combine quintessential intellectual traits—specialized expertise and academic rigor—with distinct "public" characteristics: actively engaging in public affairs, offering societal critiques, and upholding ethical convictions [13]. As core members of the intelligentsia, faculty should evolve into public intellectuals by guiding values, democratizing knowledge dissemination, and critically engaging with social issues to steer societal progress.

3. Institutional, cultural, and resource-based protections by universities

Universities, as the arenas of academic life, bear the responsibility of safeguarding academic freedom and should strengthen their protection system through institutional, cultural, and resource-based dimensions. From an institutional protection perspective, the imbalance between academic and administrative power is a key factor enabling administrative violations of academic freedom [14]. Clear boundaries must demarcate academic and administrative authority, delegating academic affairs—such as discipline/curriculum design, project approvals, and promotion reviews—to academic committees and other scholarly bodies, while administrative power focuses on macro-level oversight and support services [15]. Concurrently, reforming evaluation mechanisms by implementing categorized assessment models—tailored to faculty's research orientations and scholarly aspirations—can help address these issues. Introducing diversified evaluation methods like "anonymous peer review" and "international expert assessment" can reduce administrative interference in evaluations, mitigating the negative impacts of publication- and grant-focused cultures on faculty [16], thereby fostering an environment conducive to academic freedom through evaluation reforms. Teachers' participation in university governance is also an effective way to safeguard academic freedom. At present, China's higher education is undergoing a period of transformation and reform, which places higher demands on university administration and necessitates the involvement of teachers. From a macro perspective, university management is currently shifting from traditional bureaucratic administration to a flatter management structure. The management model is evolving from command and control to decentralization and consultation, with the central role of teachers in university governance becoming increasingly prominent [17]. Therefore, from the perspective of modernizing the education governance system and governance capacity, it is essential to give full play to the role of teachers in university management. From a micro perspective, teachers are the core resource of universities and bear significant responsibilities. Whether it is program development, curriculum design, student cultivation, academic research, or university-enterprise collaboration, all these tasks rely on the work of teachers. Traditional management approaches are heavily characterized by administrative commands, often resulting in a disconnect between policy formulation, implementation, and supervision. This not only undermines the effectiveness of policy execution but can also dampen teachers' enthusiasm, weaken their sense of belonging, and ultimately contribute to talent loss. Therefore, strengthening teacher participation has become an objective necessity for optimizing university management. From a cultural protection standpoint, university culture—formed through long-term institutional practices with distinct characteristics—represents a core component of academic leadership [18]. Leaders should

fully recognize academic freedom's significance by participating equally in scholarly activities as peers, establishing positive modeling effects within institutions, while actively promoting academic communities through initiatives like scholarly salons and interdisciplinary workshops to internalize the values of academic freedom [19]. In his book *Community and Society*, German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies juxtaposed the concepts of community and society, arguing that society reflects accidental and transient relationships among people, while community represents "enduring relationships between individuals," thus initiating the study of communities. Building a new teacher community is not only an objective need for the overall professional development of new teachers, but also an essential requirement for safeguarding academic freedom. In this regard, professional collaboration should be regarded as an important approach to teachers' professional development, and by relying on teacher communities, a positive culture that upholds academic freedom should be fostered within the teaching staff and throughout the school. Academic freedom is not purely an imported concept; it also carries deep historical roots and traditional cultural foundations in China [20]. The development and application of traditional culture should be strengthened to leverage its value-guiding role in academic freedom. From a resource-based protection perspective, academic freedom relies on material safeguards, particularly funding. Sufficient financial support enables faculty to maintain independence free from external dependencies. The financial autonomy of colleges and universities should be further expanded, and a financial support mechanism integrating multiple channels, such as fiscal appropriations, social donations (without additional conditions), and school-established funds, should be established. Enable teachers to choose research directions and carry out knowledge production according to their own will. The Education Informatization 2.0 Action Plan issued by the Ministry of Education in 2018 [21] emphasizes the "core concept of deep integration of information technology with education and teaching," marking not only a new stage in the development of education informatization but also placing higher demands on mathematics education. Digital technology holds vast potential for application in education and teaching, and each breakthrough in digital technology drives the creative development of educational practices. At present, digital technologies such as big data, virtual reality, blockchain, and artificial intelligence are unleashing tremendous vitality. The application of digital technology should be regarded as an important means to promote resource sharing, facilitate collaborative academic research, and safeguard academic freedom, thereby accelerating the informatization of schools.

4. Conclusion

The protection of academic freedom is the inevitable path for higher education to move towards modernization. In this regard, we should start from the two levels of teachers and universities, with leadership as the core. An academic freedom protection system covering subjective protection, institutional protection, cultural protection, and resource-based protection should be built.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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