

Reimagining academic freedom through the lens of students’ experiences: reflections from the Belarusian case

Introduction

Capitalizing on a long-standing academic debate that has periodically (re)emerged since the XX century, academic freedom can be defined as a right entitled to both members of the academic community and university institutions. In terms of individuals, it is the right of the community of scholars to freely learn and inquiry, to discuss and publish results on every kind of topic and research field; in terms of institutions, it establishes the principle of institutional autonomy, according to which the governance of the university institutions must be free from external interferences and party interests, the only way to truly pursue scientific research (Altbach 2001; Fish 2014; Karran 2009; Kinzelbach 2020; UNESCO 1997).

Within this framework, however, the multidimensionality of this principle, together with its interdependence with other individual rights and freedoms (Quinn and Levine 2014), raised several issues that have been the objects of conflicting interpretations and positions in the existing literature: some of these open issues are, for instance, the right to extra-mural utterance and its limits (Haskell 1996), the relationship between academic freedom and freedom of speech (Scott 2017), and the measures needed to protect and promote academic rights (Karran 2007; SAR 2021).

Positioning this essay within such vivid academic exchange, here I argue that the contemporary debate on academic freedom presents, among others, two relevant shortcomings that cannot be ignored:

- a) the predominance of a scholars-centred discourse at the expense of a reflection on the role of higher education students (hereafter, HE students);

- b) the underdevelopment of adequate empirical tools able to explore the concrete, situated dimension of academic freedom.

In particular, the first claim criticizes the general tendency towards the prioritization of scholars' right to academic freedom, with the resulting effect of downplaying the role of students within the academic community and their right to academic freedom (Macfarlane 2011; Macfarlane 2016; Zain-Al-Dien 2016). Besides, the second claim recognizes that the academic debate remains often confined to the theoretical level, with the risk of ignoring how academic freedom is lived, experienced and redefined in the everyday of the academic community members. The drawback of this lack of contamination is that not only our understanding of the concept is partial, but also our ability to promote and protect this principle is deficient.

In light of these considerations, the essay aims at demonstrating the relevance of "reimagining academic freedom" starting from these two shortcomings, providing some preliminary reflections based on the data that I collected for my MA research thesis on the case of Belarusian HE students and their experiences of (violated) academic freedom.

The research in a nutshell

As briefly mentioned above, my awareness on the crucial importance of addressing the abovementioned shortcomings derives from the research that I conducted for my MA thesis in Sociology. The research aimed at inquiring the relationship between academic freedom, educational mobility and forced migration by looking at the concrete experiences of students coming from a context characterized by violations and restrictions of this principle. Here, Belarus was chosen as a relevant case study because of the authoritarian nature of its regime and the policy of systematic restrictions of academic freedom; in particular, both elements dramatically deteriorated after the Presidential election in August 2020, when thousands of people took the streets to protest against the fraudulent results that reconfirmed Lukashenko into power.

Following a qualitative case study research design, I collected 18 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with HE students from Belarus with an experience of past or current migration: in particular, 5 students originally left Belarus for study-related purposes, while 13 students were forced to leave the country because of their activism in the protest movement against the regime after the elections.

In analysing the phenomenon, I adopted a specific sociological perspective, which, to my knowledge, seems to be largely overlooked in the current state of the art on academic freedom. Indeed, the dominant debates around the concept have been mainly promoted by law studies (i.e., Karran 2007), philosophy (i.e., Dirk Moses, 1991), or education studies (i.e., Jackson, 2020). However, I believe that the Academic Freedom Studies (Fish, 2014) can benefit from a proper sociological approach to

critically discussed the two shortcomings addressed in the current essay: firstly, sociology can shed light on the relational dimension of academic freedom, which, by definition, finds its realization in the *community of scholars and students* (Haskell 1996; Karran 2009; Macfarlane 2011; Monypenny 1963); secondly, this discipline is particularly suitable for developing the analytical tools to link the macro dimensions of the legal and political framework with the micro and processual experiences of HE communities that negotiate meanings and practices on an everyday, situated basis.

Given the purposes of the current essay, in discussing my arguments I will provide, as an example, some of the findings related the experiences and understandings of academic freedom that emerged from my interviews with Belarusian students. Of course, the specificity of the Belarusian socio-political context does not allow for a proper generalization, especially for what concerns HE systems in established democracies; besides, the small number of interviews collected just scratches the surface of the variety of experiences of the Belarusian student community. Still, I believe that Belarus can be a fruitful starting point for supporting my arguments and stimulating further research on the topic.

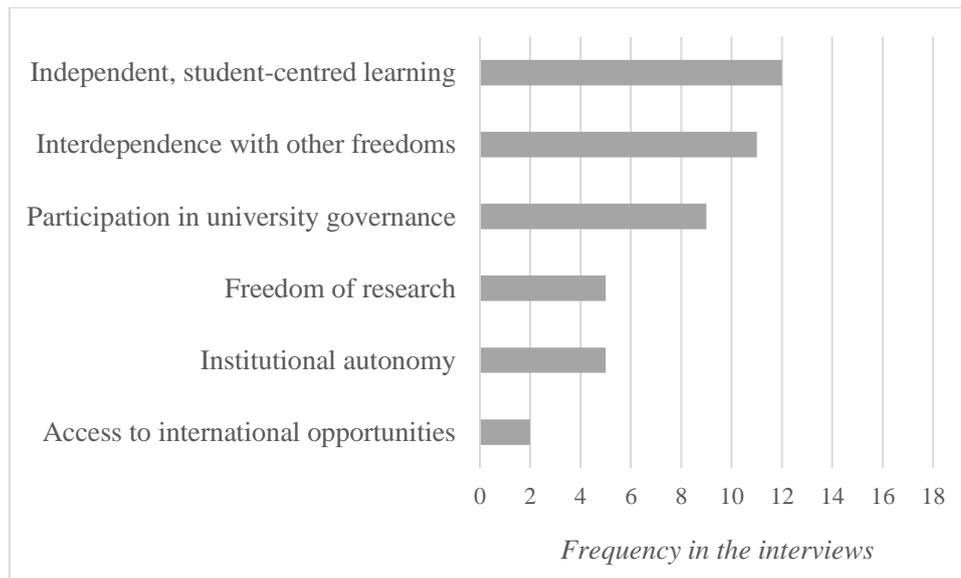
Student academic freedom is academic freedom: bringing students back in

Until recently, student academic freedom has remained quite undercurrent in the general debate: indeed, despite it is widely recognized that students are entitled to academic freedom, the definition of such academic rights is often limited to the so-called political rights, naming students' rights to engage in political activities within university campuses, such as joining marches, occupying buildings, or organizing non-violent mobilizations (Macfarlane 2016). Yet, student academic freedom is much more than that, as it consists of many elements.

According to Macfarlane, besides political rights, student academic freedom includes the “basic freedoms to have their work fairly evaluated, to be allowed to question the premises of the disciplines they are studying, to explore a curriculum that is representative of competing disciplinary perspectives, and to ‘learn the art of thinking critically within their discipline’ (Garnett 2009, 442)” (Macfarlane 2016, 22). From a more analytical perspective, students' academic rights include both negative and positive liberties, where the protection of their freedom of expression, learning and discussion is paired with the effective power of “doing specific things” and taking true responsibility within the university governance, as members of the community (Magsino 1978, 38).

This multidimensional nature of student academic freedom seems to be confirmed by the interviews with Belarusian students. Indeed, when I asked how they would define this principle, their answers did not present an clear-cut definition, but a set of recurrent dimensions that are summarized by the graph below, according to their frequency.

Graph 1: Dimensions of student academic freedom that emerged from the interviews with 18 Belarusian students, and their frequency. Author's elaboration.



As we can see, the presence of a learning process based on a student-centred approach is the primary element for students coming from Belarus: according to the interviews, it includes the possibility to personalize the study plan, to criticize and freely express one's own opinion even on controversial matters. Besides that, there are two other interesting aspects. The first is that the interdependence with democratic values and personal freedoms is recognized as essential to the realization of student academic freedom: indeed, students are aware that academic rights cannot be fully granted without the protection of freedom of expression and association in the society at large. The second is that the right to participate in the university governance is considered a fundamental component of student academic freedom. In other words, students seem to claim their right to be full members of the university community not only in the classrooms, but also in the executive apparatuses of the academic institutions.

On a last note, it is worth mentioning that the different frequency of these dimensions in students' understanding of the concept seems to depend on students' direct experience in the HE system: in particular, I identified the level of tertiary education, the permanence in other HE systems abroad and the kind of violations experienced as some of the main factors of variation among participants. This shows that the experiential, contextual dimension does play a role in shaping students' understanding of academic freedom, but this element will be further discussed in the next section of the essay.

Now, once clarified its meaning, I want to move the issue a step further and argue that analysing student academic freedom has not only a relevance in itself, but it also positively contributes to the more general debate on the principle. In particular, the significance of student academic freedom lies in its power to bring the communitarian dimension of academic freedom back in the discussion.

According to the literature, the justification of this principle is built upon the idea that the need for such special protection derives from the specific goal of the academic community: the pursuit of teaching and research activities aimed at producing knowledge by applying the scientific method. In this unity of teaching and research (Karran 2009), students and academics play different roles but are both part of that “community of scholars devoted to the discovery and propagation of knowledge” (Monypenny 1963, 628). Indeed, it is also thanks to the academic exchange and the face-to-face discussions between students and professor both within and outside university classrooms that the process of knowledge production is cultivated. The consequence is that the communitarian dimension of professors-students relationships can be considered the stronghold of academic freedom and the primary space where this principle is not only affirmed, but also violated.

This argument is better clarified if we consider the Belarusian case, where the long-standing restrictions of academic freedom produced a progressive deterioration of the sense of communitarian belonging that, once the protests started, produced a general detachment of the active students from the other community members. In particular, students’ protest activities signed a deep distance with most of the professors, who generally were either unwilling to take a position or too afraid to publicly support the protests, leaving students alone to face the consequences of their opposition to the regime. The result is that, in students’ eyes, professors appeared as passive members of an authoritarian system of education, so as agency-less in this situation of violent repressions. Moreover, the interviews revealed a complete rupture of student’s relationship with university administrations, naming the people in executive positions (Rector, Vice-Rectors, Deans) and those working in the administrative offices, as they were responsible for implementing restrictive and punitive measures towards students.

At the same time, the dimension of professors-students relationships was also the space where some attempts to restore academic freedom have been made. Indeed, the interviewees provided few examples of professors who were able to sidestep the limitations of the authoritarian HE system and to engage in informal practices of academic freedom with students, for instance by discussing contemporary political matters, by suggesting readings that were not officially approved by the Ministry, or by helping students with the rigid regulations on attendance and evaluation processes. In other words, I believe that the status of the communitarian relationships in a specific context can be considered as a valid benchmark for evaluating the health of academic freedom, as both the consequences of its violations and the attempts of its restoration become visible within the academic relationships.

In conclusion, I argue that student academic freedom *is* academic freedom, as students are recognized members of the community of scholars and took part in the collective enterprise of the scientific

research and dissemination. Of course, this does not mean to cancel the structural differences between professors and students: indeed, the latter maintain a position of dependence on the former category, which is expected to guide students in the learning process in the capacity of “competent” scholars (Jackson 2020; Menand 1996; Monypenny 1963); rather, the approach I suggest wants to stress the idea of complementarity of the two categories. Therefore, ignoring or diminishing students’ role in the academic community has the effect of weakening the bases of this very principle, which finds one of its pillars precisely in the communitarian dimension of professors-students relationship.

Experiencing academic freedom in the everyday

Alongside the vivid theoretical debate on academic freedom, scholars are also increasingly discussing how to empirically assess its realization in the concrete experiences of the academic community members.

Today, scholars and international stakeholders seem interested in developing quantitative measures to assess academic freedom, such as the Academic Freedom Index and the SAR’s Academic Freedom Monitoring Project, which are mainly based on event data, legal documents and expert evaluations (Kinzelbach 2020; Kinzelbach et al., 2021). Here, the advantage is the creation of synthetic, accountable and easy-reading tools able to give a snapshot of the status of academic freedom in a specific context, but at the same time with the possibility of longitudinal analysis and comparative considerations. However, the main deficiency of this kind of quantitative approach consists of its inability to account for the non-visible violations of academic freedom, the informal practices that restore or undermine this principle, and the impact of these conditions on the life of individuals: in other words, what can be called the *mechanisms* that underlie academic freedom violations. Indeed, these elements can only be captured by the collection of qualitative, biographical narratives of the people involved (Kinzelbach, 2020).

Thus, while recognizing the importance of quantitative-based measures and expert assessments, I argue that Academic Freedom Studies would benefit from the contamination with more qualitative, experience-based data able to problematize existing labels and categories and to give back a more detailed picture of the situation in different contexts.

In the case of the Belarusian students, the combination of event-data and report-data with the narration of individual experiences revealed interesting insights.

As international organizations and scholars confirm, Belarus is a country characterized by structural restrictions of academic freedom which became open violations as a response to the protest movement in 2020. In terms of long-standing restrictions, the Soviet model is still entrenched, as the “political and ideological instrumentalization of education” and a “highly centralized state management” are

structural characteristics of the HE system (Gille-Belova 2015, 85). Concerning more recent violations, the Academic Freedom Index emphasizes a sudden and severe deterioration of the dimensions “Campus integrity” and “Freedom of academic and cultural expression” between 2019 and 2020 due to the violent governmental repressions.

Although these categories used to describe the Belarusian situation are quite informative, less can be said about what are their concrete implications for the individuals involved. Here, the direct experiences of Belarusian students that I collected can be a first starting point to unpack these categories.

Concerning the structural characteristics of the Belarusian HE system, students revealed that the political instrumentalization of education enter the universities at multiple levels, from more subtle influences to very explicit pro-government practices. The first level is the study program, and it consists of mandatory courses characterized by an ideological and propagandistic nature. The second level is the enrolment into the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, the youth governmental organization which, on paper, works to protect students’ rights, but it is actually used to control them: indeed, students are generally forced to join the organization by teachers and professors, and they are told that without this membership it would be much harder for them to enter the university, get a scholarship or a place in the dormitories. The third level refers to the common practice of the regime to force students to vote early, meaning before the actual vote day, under the threat of losing their place in dormitories; this period of pre-vote is known because of the higher risk of manipulation and falsification.

Secondly, in students’ concrete experiences, the highly centralized HE system results in the promotion of conformity over individuality in all the aspects of the learning process: study plans and course contents are decided at ministerial level and are the same for each area of study; books and materials are often old and unrevised; during the lectures there is no space for dialogue or critical thinking; the evaluation process is based on mnemonical knowledge and repetitive tasks. Due to these characteristics, students show a general low level of satisfaction with their studies, often paired with scarce motivation and disregard towards the whole educational system.

Considering now the 2020 academic freedom violations, students’ experiences confirmed what international reports have already outlined: university administrations worked closely with the Belarusian police leaking information about the active students and calling the police to enter the university campuses; the government nominated new loyal Rectors in the most active university, and KGB agents in disguise assumed the role of Vice-Rectors for Security in many institutions. All these measures complemented the numbers of expulsions, detainment or administrative fines targeting students.

Once acknowledged this, in my opinion what the interviews can add to the picture is the concrete impact of this violation of campus integrity on students' lives after August 2020. In this regard, a first interesting aspect refers to the change in the way students lived campus spaces. Indeed, several students admitted that, after August 2020, the university was not a safe place anymore: they were always in a state of alert, checking the presence of police near the campuses or the actions of members of the administration; some of them used to enter the university from specific entrances which were considered safer; others, especially in the days of the peak of the repressions, decided to never leave the university buildings alone, and to communicate to the other activists once arrived at home. Furthermore, the violation of academic freedom impacted on students' lives in another way: indeed, the biographical narratives revealed that this situation of risk in the university campuses was one of the factors that heavily impacted on their decision to leave Belarus, which made them *de facto* displaced. This aspect, not reflected in the categories adopted, is instead a crucial consequence of these violations and cannot be ignored if we want to produce a reliable assessment of the situation in a specific context.

To sum up, I argue that the situated, the contextual elements of academic freedom have the irreplaceable value of “giving life and blood” to the categories we often see in reports and quantitative data analysis; moreover, they allow us to better grasp the complex implementation of this principle and the mechanisms behind its violation. Lastly, as discussed in the previous paragraph, these experiences also shape the understandings individuals have of the principle, providing valuable contributions to the process of “reimagining” the concept.

Conclusion

According to the report “Free to Think 2021” published by the international network Scholars at Risk, between September 2020 and August 2021 332 attacks have been registered against the academic communities of 65 countries and territories, pursued by many State and non-State actors (SAR, 2021). These attacks range from different forms of physical violence to a variety of measures aimed at restricting individual freedoms, such as travel ban, wrongful imprisonment, criminal prosecutions. Furthermore, data shows that almost half of these incidents involved students who were peacefully exercising their freedom of expression, and this situation “underscores the importance and vulnerability of student expression around the world” (SAR 2021, 31).

In front of this dramatic picture, the urgency to critically address the two shortcomings discussed so far appears with even more clarity: the first was the understudied nature of student academic freedom; the second was a still insufficient attention towards the individual experiences of academic freedom in its day-to-day, situated dimension.

Drawing from my research experience on the Belarusian case, here I claimed that the contemporary debate on academic freedom can greatly benefit from student-centred studies and empirically oriented contributions. Indeed, as I tried to demonstrate throughout the essay, engaging in a critical discussion on these aspects is not an end in itself; rather, they can be a fruitful starting point to look at the challenges and the threats that academic freedom is facing today from different and thought-provoking perspectives.

Concerning the first aspect, I argue that bringing HE students back in the debate on academic freedom is a crucial step to develop a more inclusive and effective understanding of academic freedom, whose justification lies in the very idea of academic community as the union of scholars and students. In more general terms, giving voice to the students' perspective can help to assess the "health conditions" of academic freedom in a more comprehensive and plural way.

Concerning the second aspect, the status of academic freedom worldwide urges us to develop more adequate tools to empirically analyse and explore how academic freedom is concretely realized and from what it can be threatened. Indeed, event-based data and experts report are useful but not sufficient to produce an accurate picture of the experiential dimension of this principle; rather, the integration with the collection of direct experiences of individuals is crucial to better frame quantitative information and to give valid meanings to categories such as "violation of campus integrity" or "political instrumentalization of education", also in order to reflect the peculiarities of the different socio-political contexts.

This effort, however, cannot come only from one discipline: the example I provided here referred to the sociological field, but the multifaceted nature of academic freedom and its violations in the contemporary era calls for the development of a collective enterprise in which social science, law studies, economics, philosophy, pedagogy and many other disciplines must engage in a structural dialogue on this principle. Indeed, I strongly believe that this cross-fertilization between disciplines and methods is a necessary step to critically discuss academic freedom, which is not only a set of rights, but also the foundation of the scientific enterprise and of the academic institutions, as "every practice of academic life we take for granted [...] derives from it" (Menand 1996, 4). I hope that the current essay can be a small step in this direction.

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