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The Lived Experience of Faculty Members of Academic Freedom at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad

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Abstract

This study aimed to describe faculty members lived experiences of academic freedom at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad and to identify the major dimensions shaping these experiences. A qualitative descriptive phenomenological approach was employed. The participants were 18 faculty members selected purposively from different academic disciplines and academic ranks. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted until data saturation was reached. The interview data were analyzed using Strauss and Corbin's coding procedures, and the trustworthiness of the findings was assessed based on Lincoln and Guba's criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. The analysis identified five main themes: educational freedom, research freedom, individual freedom, cultural freedom, and organizational freedom. Educational freedom reflected participants' experiences of autonomy and restriction in selecting teaching methods, organizing course content, managing classroom activities, and making educational decisions. Research freedom concerned opportunities and constraints related to choosing research topics, conducting and publishing research, obtaining financial support, and complying with institutional evaluation requirements. Individual freedom represented faculty members' personal understandings of academic freedom and the influence of professional experience and individual characteristics. Cultural freedom highlighted the effects of social and political conditions, organizational culture, interpersonal relationships, and freedom of expression. Organizational freedom encompassed university autonomy, centralized governance, institutional regulations, promotion policies, job security, and disciplinary differences. Overall, academic freedom emerged as a multidimensional and context-dependent phenomenon shaped by individual, disciplinary, cultural, and organizational conditions. Strengthening university autonomy, revising restrictive policies, and fostering scholarly dialogue may contribute to a more supportive environment for academic freedom.

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Academic freedom is widely regarded as a fundamental principle of higher education because it supports knowledge production, scientific inquiry, intellectual exchange, and responsible academic practice. It provides faculty members with opportunities to teach, conduct research, express scholarly views, and participate in academic discussions with a reasonable degree of professional autonomy. However, academic freedom is not experienced uniformly across higher education systems. Its meaning and scope are influenced by institutional regulations, governance structures, disciplinary traditions, organizational culture, social expectations, and broader political and cultural conditions. Faculty members may therefore experience different opportunities and limitations in areas such as teaching, research, publication, professional expression, and academic decision-making. In Iran, much of the existing literature has addressed academic freedom from legal, philosophical, or policy perspectives, while fewer studies have examined how faculty members themselves experience it in their everyday academic lives. Understanding these lived experiences can provide a more contextualized picture of the factors that support or constrain academic work. Accordingly, this study aimed to describe the lived experiences of faculty members at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad regarding academic freedom and to identify its main dimensions.

Method

This study used a qualitative research design based on descriptive phenomenology. The study population consisted of faculty members of Ferdowsi University of Mashhad. Eighteen participants from different academic disciplines and academic ranks were selected through purposive sampling as key informants. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit participants' perceptions and experiences of academic freedom in educational, research, individual, cultural, and organizational contexts. Interviews continued until data saturation was reached. The data were analyzed using the coding procedures proposed by Strauss and Corbin, including open, axial, and selective coding. Initial concepts were identified, related concepts were grouped into categories, and broader themes were developed. To strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, Lincoln and Guba's criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were applied. Member checking, peer review, prolonged engagement with the data, and systematic documentation of the analytical process were among the strategies used.

Results

The analysis yielded five overarching themes: educational freedom, research freedom, individual freedom, cultural freedom, and organizational freedom. Educational freedom reflected faculty members' experiences of autonomy and restriction in selecting teaching methods, organizing course content, managing classroom activities, interacting with students, and making educational decisions. Participants reported varying levels of freedom, alongside constraints related to predetermined curricula, centralized policies, extensive teaching responsibilities, and limited authority in some educational matters.

Research freedom concerned the selection of research topics, conduct of research, publication of findings, access to financial support, and compliance with institutional regulations and evaluation criteria. Participants generally reported a degree of autonomy in pursuing research interests, but they also identified limitations associated with funding, publication procedures,

research priorities, and formal evaluation systems. These concerns were more pronounced among some faculty members in the humanities and social sciences.

Individual freedom referred to personal interpretations of academic freedom and the ways in which professional experience, academic position, disciplinary background, and personal attitudes shaped participants' perceptions. Cultural freedom highlighted the influence of social values, political conditions, organizational culture, interpersonal relationships, and freedom of expression on academic life. Organizational freedom encompassed university autonomy, centralized governance, institutional regulations, promotion policies, job security, disciplinary differences, and organizational commitment. These organizational conditions significantly influenced how faculty members perceived and exercised academic freedom.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings show that academic freedom is a multidimensional and context-dependent phenomenon shaped by the interaction of individual, organizational, disciplinary, cultural, and structural factors. Faculty members experienced both autonomy and constraint across different areas of academic practice, and their perceptions varied according to discipline, professional experience, employment conditions, and personal interpretations. Centralized decision-making, limited institutional autonomy, restrictive regulations, and some research and promotion policies emerged as important challenges. The findings also suggest that disciplinary context matters, particularly because participants from the humanities and social sciences reported greater sensitivity to restrictions in some areas of teaching and research. Strengthening academic freedom therefore requires attention to institutional structures as well as organizational culture. The results further indicate that formal guarantees of academic freedom may be insufficient unless faculty members experience those principles in routine educational, research, and administrative practices. Policies should therefore be evaluated in terms of their practical consequences for faculty autonomy, scholarly participation, and the ability to engage openly with academic questions. This perspective can help universities translate formal commitments into everyday academic practice. Enhancing university autonomy, reviewing restrictive regulations, improving fairness across disciplines, supporting scholarly dialogue, and fostering a climate that values professional responsibility and freedom of expression may contribute to a more supportive academic environment.

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