

Task 1 – Interview to Terence Karran

- Selected speaker: Terence Karran (University of Lincoln · School of Education)
- Conducted by: Federica Mancini, Giulia Coseani, Magda El Assri (November 2022-revised December 2022)



Terence Karran is Professor of Higher Education Policy in the School of Education at the University of Lincoln in the UK. He is also a Docent Professor in Educational Technology in the Faculty of Education at Oulu University in Finland. From 2005-07, he worked as a Visiting Professor at the Universidad Autónoma de Guadalajara in Mexico, where he was Director of the UAG's Distance Learning Centre and also the Mexican National Co-Ordinator of the World Bank Institute's Global Development Learning Network for Latin America and the Caribbean.

His more recent work has looked at academic freedom in Europe and Africa, funded through two EU Marie Curie Fellowships. In 2017, he undertook a study of academic freedom in the UK for the University and College Union, which was the basis for an ongoing appeal by the UCU to UNESCO, that legislation in the UK does not protect academic freedom sufficiently. In 2019, he was commissioned to draft an Expert Report on "Threats to academic freedom and autonomy of universities in Europe", for the Council of Europe's Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media, which was a major contribution to the development of a new policy initiative by the Council to create a new convention on academic freedom. [1]

Questions

Introduction:

Good afternoon, Professor Karran, we thank you for giving us the possibility to interview you. It's a pleasure for us to discuss with you about academic freedom. We've prepared some questions about this topic. Now we start with the first question.

Question:

We have seen through lectures and papers that academic freedom can be identified with a long definition, but then each scholar outlines the most relevant aspect to identify it. For example, some define academic freedom as a goal to be achieved, others such as Barnett, a freedom to study without racial bias and discrimination or the condition in which one is protected by a university that makes you study in a safe place. We know that academic freedom, being a vast and complex subject, cannot be summed up in a single sentence, but if you had to emphasise the most relevant point about academic freedom, which one would you choose?

Answer: The most relevant and important point about academic freedom is that it enables fulfillment of the “truth function” by academics and universities. Academic freedom is necessary to allow the pursuit of the truth and the advancement of knowledge. Without academic freedom many important discoveries which have improved the lives of millions of people across the globe would not have taken place.

For example, if we look at the discovery of the structure of the DNA, which is probably one of the most important discoveries of the last 50 years, a revolution of genetics and medicine. We used fingerprints to get information about people, but we know due to the discovery of the structure of DNA, that every person has an individual profile of DNA. John Dewey, the American educationalist and philosopher, made the point: “To investigate truth; critically to verify fact; to reach conclusions by means of the best methods at command, untrammelled by external fear or favor, to communicate this truth to the student, to interpret to him its bearing on questions he will have to face in life—that is precisely the aim and object of the university. To aim a blow at one of these operations is to deal a vital wound to the university itself. The university function is the truth-function”. [2]

Question:

Referring to this definition, in your opinion, why should the concept of academic freedom be part not only of the academic discourse, but also of the political and social one?

Answer: Academic freedom promotes the idea of discussions about knowledge. You mention the academic discourse, but it also affects outside the academia. Again, John Dewey made the point that “Since freedom of mind and freedom of expression are the root of all freedom, to deny freedom in education is a crime against humanity.” The pursuit of the truth, which academic freedom allows, has social and political consequences.

For example, After the Second World War, across Europe there was a shift towards governments setting up support organizations like the World Bank (established in 1944), the United Nations (established in 1945), and the OECD (founded in 1948) and increasing the size of the state in order to repair the damage of the war, but also improve peoples’ health and social mobility. However, in the 1980’s the dominant global economic policy shifted, and the idea of cutting taxes, shrinking the state, and giving tax cuts to the wealthy became dominant in most Western countries. The theory was that as these wealthy people got more money from tax cuts, they would invest more, and their wealth would “trickle down” to the general population. In fact, what happened is that even more wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few individuals, and there was no “trickle down”. [3] The case is that Academic freedom does have economic consequences. The other point is that Academic freedom advances knowledge by criticizing the existing state of knowledge and by wishing to critic policies, academics are more lively to come up against a collusion which we say ‘ the kings of the past are the politicians of now’.

Question:

Moving to a future prospective, according to you, and considering the current situations such as the Ukrainian and Belarus ones, what will be the evolution of academic freedom and the challenges that will come with it? And for the Russian case, what would be the legacy of the Soviet Past in the present of academic freedom?

Answer: There are some nations in which academic freedom is protected actually in the constitution. For example, Article 16.1 of the Greek constitution says: “Art and science, research and teaching shall be free, and their development and promotion shall be an obligation of the State. Academic freedom and freedom of teaching shall

not exempt anyone from his or her duty of allegiance to the Constitution.”. So, because academic freedom is protected by the constitution in Greece, it’s likely that academic freedom will continue to thrive in Greece.

Having said that, in other countries, academic freedom is not protected in the constitution, but freedom of speech is protected. And the best example of this is the

US. Academic freedom is not protected directly, it is protected as being a special kind of freedom of speech (which itself is protected by the 1st Amendment of the US Constitution).

In other countries, academic freedom is not protected in the constitution but is protected in law. So, In Spain, for example, the Ley Orgánica, the Law on Universities specifies: “ The activity of the University, as well as its autonomy, are based on the principle of academic freedom, which is apparent in the freedom of university chairs, of research and study”. So, it’s obviously easier to change a law than to change a constitution. So, those countries in which academic freedom is protected in the constitution, are unlikely to see changes in the academic freedom that they enjoy. Having said that, conversely, in countries like the UK, which does not have a constitution or a guarantee of protection for academic freedom, it is likely that this could diminish.

Some researchers now see universities as “knowledge factories”, that produce knowledge to enable the economy of different countries to thrive, and if academics continue to see universities as “knowledge factories”, it is likely that protection for academic freedom will decline.

Now, you mentioned Russia: I had a student who came to study at Lincoln, Elisabetta, who was undertaking a Ph.D. on academic freedom in Russia. She attended for her ViVa last May, and got the thesis, and then of course after the invasion of Ukraine she then emailed me and said:” My thesis is now worthless because, although there are laws on academic freedom in Russia, they have been much ignored, and quite a large of academics have actually been put in prison”.

In fact, at the start of the invasion, there were articles in the print and social media by academics in Russia who condemned the invasion.[4] Having said that, there has been an exodus of academics and students from Russia. And, In March, a new law was drafted by Putin, threatening up to 15 years in prison for virtually any criticism of the war, which was passed by the Russian Parliament. The law essentially ended not only any semblance of a free press but the concept of academic freedom in Russia. So, it is very likely that academic freedom in Russia will be suppressed until Vladimir Putin is removed from power and that may take some time.

Question:

Going back to the present, one of the main problems with academic freedom today is the lack of consciousness that students and academics have on their rights and more specifically on academic freedom, staying on the students’ level. What is the best teaching method to enable students to develop their critical sense and defend their right to academic freedom?

Answer: This is a difficult question, for which there is no real easy answer. When students first start their degree courses, as part of their induction to university, their universities should provide them with detailed advice about their rights as a student. If the universities are not able (or willing) to perform this function, then maybe relevant information could be provided by the individual students' unions at each university, or by their national union (e.g. the Sindicato de Estudiantes in Spain), or by the European Students' Union.

Otherwise, we could argue that universities should make it obligatory for all students to be given some training with respect to their academic rights while they are in university. And, in that sense, this particular model that you're studying, is very useful in doing that. And I'd think that if any of you then go forward to become academics yourselves, you are more likely to try to protect academic freedom because you know what it is and why it is important.

Question:

Professor Karran, addressing the right to academic freedom requires not only the involvement of professors and students, but also a community representing the students themselves. How has student representation changed over time?

Answer: This is an interesting point. In the very first universities established in the city states in Italy (at, for example, Bologna and Padua), the students played the primary role, as they employed the teachers, and also appointed the Rector (who was normally a student) and it's not like that today. By contrast, at the University of Paris, the masters, rather than students were in the ascendancy. The University of Salamanca in Spain followed the University of Bologna, in which students had an important role to play in the running of the university. This Bologna/Salamanca university model was then transferred to new universities in Latin America. Even today, university students in (for example) Mexico have a much greater role in university governance than their counterparts in Europe. In Mexico, universities students play a significant role in the management and governance of the university and may be included on interview panels appointing new academic staff, it would be very unusual in the UK for example.

In the newly established University of Berlin, which was designed according to Wilhelm von Humboldt, students were encouraged to claim *Lernfreiheit* that is 'learning freedom' under which students had control of their choice of courses of study apart from those modules that they needed to prepare them for state professional examinations. Students were free to find their own lodgings and diversions, liberated from course grades and classroom roll calls, free to move from place to place sampling academic wares, as mature and self-reliant scholars. In the UK until 1969, when it was reduced to 18, the voting age was 21.

Similarly, in the USA the 1971 26th Amendment to the Constitution lowered the voting age from 21 to 18. However Before this legislation, university students aged

18 to 21 were not legally adults, but children. During this period of time, the university had the role of “in loco parentis” (in the place of the parents) for students' moral welfare and personal conduct during university term times. This meant that students had very little personal autonomy or freedom. It is the case of many European states, where the voting age is 18 and the students in the universities are considered to be adults, but it wasn't always the case.

Question:

Talking about universities, Another important concern is about the external funding for university and research. If “marketisation” of universities is something that limits academic freedom and considering that we live in a capitalistic world characterized by neoliberal policies, from your point of view will there be a worsening of this problem and eventually how can we avoid it?

Answer: That's a very good question. Most economists now agree that “trickle down” economics does not work. As a consequence, the effectiveness of neo-liberal policies are also becoming questioned. It is clear that neo-liberal policies will be unable to stop global warming, which threatens the welfare of everyone. Hopefully the decline in the adoption of neo-liberal policies and the need to come up with new solutions for dealing with global warming, will lead to greater academic freedom for university academic staff and also for students

Question:

To conclude, I'd like to talk to you about your personal experience. Have you ever experienced both as a student and as an academic any form of limitation of your academic freedom or have you ever had to deal with someone who experienced it?

Answer: I used to work in a university Department that had a very dictatorial Head of Department. On one occasion I went away on my summer holiday for two weeks. On my return, I found that the Head of Department had arranged for the builders to come into the building and construct a new brick wall which divided my room in half. My books and other possessions were stacked outside my room in the corridor. This was a clear sign to me that I wasn't going to flourish in that department so as soon as possible, I left the department and obtained a job elsewhere in the university.

When I was a PhD student, I had some problems, with respect to my supervisor, I was doing research for a professor and I showed him [my work] and he said that verbal A didn't have an impact on Verbal B, but it had quite an huge impact on Verbal C and he ignored the fact that verbal A had a big impact and he deliberately misreported this which is an abuse of academic freedom. You should not falsify your results and that's what it was done.

I've had quite a large number of students from Saudi Arabia, female students, and of course, in Saudi Arabia women and male are completely segregated. I was asked to give a presentation at a University in Saudi Arabia. I went there, gave a presentation in a room and downstairs there were the male members of staff and upstairs there were the female members of staff. And the university itself was an all male university. It's quite unusual to walk around a university and only see men, because we're used to see women doing various tasks, lecturing and other things too. And It's evident that in Saudi Arabia academic freedom still doesn't exist in a meaningful way. There is a worry that in places like Hungary it is gonna get worse instead of improving.

Conclusion:

We thank you for having given us some of your time, and your helping hand has been fundamental in order to improve our knowledge in terms of academic freedom. Have a nice day, goodbye!

Bibliography:

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