

EXPLORING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' VIEWS ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN RUSSIAN UNIVERSITIES

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This article is based on the research author conducted in 2022 for her thesis in the Master of Science Programme in Comparative and International Education at the University of Oxford.

The study explores students' understanding of academic freedom and the scope of academic freedom limitations at Russian universities. Through 20 online in-depth semistructured interviews, the study participants, third- and fourth-year undergraduate students in social sciences at four Russian universities in Saint Petersburg and Moscow, were asked to share their perceptions and ways of exercising academic freedom. The findings show that students predominantly defined academic freedom as freedom of research, discussion, and speech. While most students reported that they enjoyed a relatively great scope of academic freedom, the study identified implicit limitations imposed by other members of the university community. Explicit limitations, such as administrative guidelines for changing research topics and avoiding discussion of sensitive subjects, were also reported in a few cases. Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of academic freedom limitations in Russian higher education.

Keywords: Academic Freedom; Russian Universities; Undergraduate Students

Investigating academic freedom has recently attracted considerable interest. However, there are very few empirical studies that explore this topic from the students' perspective. Academic freedom is often discussed in relation to academics, as the right to pursue truth in teaching and research without fear of punishment for violating political, social, or religious orthodoxy (Berdahl 1990:171). Although this definition may also apply to students, their own conceptualizations and understandings of academic freedom are largely overlooked (Bissell 1969).

This article contends that it is no less important to explore the notion of academic freedom from the perspective of students. As Article 13 of the General Comment of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states: "The right to education can only be enjoyed if accompanied by academic freedom of staff and students" (ICESCR 1999). In addition to their academic pur-

pose, universities serve as a space for socializing, establishing networks, and developing critical and autonomous thinking (Biesta 2008). Therefore, students' academic freedom affects their overall experiences, as their learning never occurs in an isolated space.

This article explores undergraduate students' perceptions of academic freedoms in Russian universities in 2022. Russia was chosen as the focus of this study for several reasons. Firstly, universities in Russia operate in an environment of increasing state control, targeting social sciences in particular (Dubrovskiy 2017). According to the indicator of democracy V-Dem, academic freedom in Russia has declined since 2007 (V-Dem 2024). The infringements on academic freedom create an atmosphere of uncertainty and self-censorship (Dubrovsky and Meyer 2021; Kaczmarek 2020), and students, who make up a significant part of the university population, may be particularly affected by these limitations. Secondly, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine that began in February 2022 has resulted in increased state control over public discourse and academic institutions, impacting both academics and students (Gerber and Chapman 2022). Many academics had to leave Russia due to their antiwar views; some students were expelled from their universities for expressing antiwar views inside or outside academia (Meduza 2022). Many of those who left Russia were labeled "foreign agents," and anonymous groups appeared on social media to harass students and university staff for their antiwar statements. Thus, researching the state of academic freedom in Russia has become increasingly relevant due to the impact of internal and external political processes on the academic environment. Scholars remain the primary target of increasing state control, yet it is important to consider how the current academic environment affects students and their learning. Studying at the university shapes students' development as citizens and thinkers. However, having no agency to choose "controversial" research topics can impact development of their independent research skills. This can lead to self-censorship and impact their overall academic journey and potentially shape the future of intellectual discourse. This research aims to fill that gap by exploring how students define and experience academic freedom, providing valuable insights into the consequences of a restricted academic environment.

The study aims to answer two research questions. The first is: How do students perceive academic freedom in Russian higher education? Through this question, the study aims to explore the students' perspectives on and experiences with academic freedom. The second question is: How much academic freedom do students have in practice? This question investigates the extent of academic freedom that students can exercise within academic institutions and whether it affects their academic experience. By exploring students' perspectives through in-depth interviews, the study seeks to uncover the current state of academic freedom for students in Russia. This analysis will be enriched by examining existing literature on the concept of academic freedom, its variations across geographical contexts, and its relationship to both scholars and students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic freedom is claimed to be one of the fundamental rights (Akker 2002; Berdahl 1990; Matei and Iwinska 2018) without which the university cannot function (Altbach 2001). There has been much debate over the definition of academic freedom. In the nineteenth century, the Humboldtian model of higher education, first developed in German universities, introduced the foundations for academic freedom, which were based on three essential concepts: *Lehrfreiheit*, *Lernfreiheit*, and *Freiheit der Wissenschaft* (Metzger 1987–1988). *Lehrfreiheit* means the freedom to teach and research without the state or church interference. *Lernfreiheit* refers to the freedom for students to learn independently. Lastly, *Freiheit der Wissenschaft* advocates for the autonomous university's right to self-governance (Commager 1963; Metzger 1987–1988). With time, the Humboldtian view on academic freedom turned into the “traditional” model—the model that laid the foundation for the principles of academic freedom, where academic freedom should be protected within the university space. More recently, this view has been challenged by the socially oriented model, which views academic freedom as an extension of other social spheres and should, therefore, protect freedom of speech and public engagement (Quinn 2019). The American Association of University Professors' (AAUP) 1940 document reflects this model, protecting the freedom to teach, learn, and express oneself publicly (AAUP 1940). The socially oriented model considers freedom of speech crucial for academic spaces, and public discourses cannot be separated from them (Dubrovsky and Meyer 2021; Quinn 2019).

Another approach to theorizing academic freedom is to view it as negative and positive freedoms (Åkerlind and Kayrooz 2003; Tierney and Lanford 2014). Political philosopher Isaiah Berlin (1969) was the one to introduce the distinction between the two types of freedom. Negative freedom refers to the freedom “from interference,” meaning that the subject can act without any constraints or external threats, and no limitations can be exerted from elsewhere. On the other hand, positive freedom is the “freedom to” or “*capacity to do things*,” fostering scholarly engagement and development.

To further understand different concepts of academic freedom, it is important to mention that it is context dependent. In the Western context, the limitations on academic freedom are mainly explored through a neoliberal framework—the marketisation of education (Boden and Epstein 2011; Marginson 1997; Tierney and Lanford 2017)—and discussions surrounding political correctness and rising tensions between right- and left-wing agendas (Kaufmann 2021; Stone 2015). In authoritarian regimes, academic freedom is often greatly restricted and controlled by the government (Altbach 2001), and the discussion is centered around ideological pressure, self-censorship, and the dismissal of academics. In authoritarian political landscapes (Altbach 2001), restrictions go beyond limitations on topics of research and teaching. Examples include severe physical consequences like the arrest of academics in Egypt (Altbach 2001; Saliba 2020), the dismissal of academics and department closure in Turkey (Ertem 2021), and further strengthening of censorship practices in China (Ruth and Xiao 2019).

There are only a few conceptualizations of students' academic freedom. Bruce Macfarlane has argued that students are often seen as a "by-product of academics' protections" (2011:720), as they are less powerful than the academics (Jackson 2021; Macfarlane 2011). Furthermore, some of the issues of students' academic freedom are explored through the lens of political correctness and indoctrination (Jackson 2021; Macfarlane 2011; Oleksiyenko and Jackson 2021; Pavela 1995). Kwadwo Appiagyei-Atua (2019) considers students' academic freedom as an important element of their right to democratic involvement and engagement, and Charlotte Kunkel and Sheila Radford-Hill (2011) view the impact of academic freedom on their learning—development of critical thinking and exposure to different viewpoints.

METHODS

This section presents the methodological aspects of the study. It explores the research design, including its philosophical underpinnings and approach to data analysis, and discusses the selection of participants and universities involved in the research as well as limitations of this study. In this research I used a qualitative case study methodology, as it aligns with constructivist principles that allow for examining multiple realities (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). The principles of constructivism provide a basis for exploring students' academic freedom through their individual experiences and interpretations (Miller and Glassner 2021). This research highlights the significance of acknowledging the variety of personal experiences that students may have around academic freedom. Exploring students' perspectives and concerns, and how they construct the students' reality, enables an inquiry into the limitations of academic freedom within Russian universities. The chosen research method for this study is interviews. Conversations with various individuals allow for a wealth of detailed and rich data that provide personal perspectives on the phenomena under study (May 2011).

The research involved conducting semistructured interviews with 20 participants from four universities in Russia. The interview format allows to explore the qualitative richness of student perspectives (Presser and Sandberg 2016). Using open-ended questions and follow-up prompts, interviews enabled students to elaborate on their experiences and investigate the "why" behind their perceptions (Gorman and Clayton 2004). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the full-scale invasion in Ukraine, for safety reasons the interviews were conducted in spring 2022 by videoconferencing. The participants were asked about their backgrounds and experiences at their respective universities and how they exercised their academic freedom: research topics, communication with supervisors, and the extent of freedom during their seminar discussions, as well as participation in student organizations and political engagement. Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic—academic freedom in an authoritarian context—snowball sampling method was chosen to recruit participants (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018). Snowball sampling allows initial participants, who may be comfortable discussing the topic, to refer others within their trusted network who might also be willing to share their experiences.

The participants were undergraduate students in their third and fourth years. The reason behind focusing on this group is that during the last two years of their undergraduate studies, students tend to have more opportunities to reflect on their academic experiences and research interests. It is also during these final years that they are expected to narrow down topics for their senior research project with their supervisors. Participants were also selected based on their study area, namely social sciences and humanities. The reason for these criteria is that social sciences are more vulnerable to restrictions on academic freedom due to ideologically driven political agendas (Dubrovskiy 2017). As the universities are state funded, social sciences are under pressure regarding their freedom to research and discuss various topics. Social science are disciplines often related to government policies and ideologies, which exposes them to a higher risk of limitations placed on research and discussion compared to other fields. This relative distance from political agendas can offer a buffer against direct censorship compared to social sciences, which often involve interpretation and analysis. Students were selected from a range of social science disciplines including international relations, political science, sociology, and international law. The full table of all participants' details can be found in the appendix.

The following institutions were selected for the study: Saint Petersburg State University (SPbU), Higher School of Economics (HSE), Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), and Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences (MSSSES). The reasons for selecting these universities are that they are some of the most reputable institutions of higher education in Russia, as well as certain historical factors of social science development in Russia. For this study, interviews were conducted with approximately five students from each of the aforementioned universities.

SPbU is one of Russia's oldest universities, with rectors appointed directly by the country's president. It hosts the Smolny College of Liberal Arts and Science ("Smolny"), a joint project between Smolny, SPbU, and Bard College (US), as well as an independent faculty of liberal arts. However, there have been tensions between SPbU and Smolny since 2010. In 2021 the Russian Prosecutor General's Office shut down all Bard College projects (Gerber and Chapman 2022). Later, in July 2023, the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences (Smolny) eliminated liberal arts and sciences from its curriculum, removing the opportunity for students to choose subjects independently (Sever.Realii 2023). This case is an illustration to a broader trend (also reflected in the other cases) that highlights the importance of further exploring the issue of academic freedom at SPbU.

Established in 1992 as an applied research institution, HSE has grown into one of Russia's leading social science research universities. Its unique position allowed it to maintain a relatively high degree of academic freedom, largely due to the former rector's strong connections with the State Duma, which helped shield the university from some governmental constraints. However, recent government subsidies and political restrictions have led to the dismissal of politically active academics and a ban on students and staff expressing their political views (BBC News 2020). More re-

cently, personnel changes at the university, including the resignation of Yaroslav Kuzminov as rector, the position he held since 1992, and the appointment in his place of Nikita Anisimov, have been accompanied by controversy. Anisimov supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the university began sacking professors who protested or publicly spoke out against the war (Meduza 2023).

The third university selected for the study, the MSEES, is a private educational institution established in 1995 with a focus on promoting liberal education. Despite its private funding and prestigious status, the state has restricted MSEES's academic freedom. In 2018 the government revoked the accreditation of MSEES's educational programs, which was not reinstated until 2020. The dean of MSEES is currently facing a politically motivated criminal investigation.

The last university in this study is MGIMO, a government-run institution that primarily trains future foreign service specialists. Founded in 1944, it has historically been linked to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is known for training diplomats and government officials. This close relationship with the government has influenced its academic culture, aligning it more closely with state policies and perspectives. This is an interesting contrasting example, as the academic tradition of this institution has inherited much from the Soviet tradition of social sciences (Belkina 2022).

This study used audio recordings of interviews conducted in Russian, as it was the most comfortable language for the participants. For the data analysis, thematic analysis was used to structure the data into relevant categories, utilizing Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's (2006) approach. This approach involved reading the transcripts several times and searching for patterns to identify recurring themes. Codes were initially derived from interview questions and further refined through iterative review. This process yielded three main categories: definitions of academic freedom, explicit limitations (direct restrictions), and implicit limitations (indirect pressures). The interviews and the data analysis were conducted entirely in Russian, and quotes selected for the findings were later translated into English.

It is important to acknowledge that this study has a small sample size, consisting of only five students from each of the four universities involved. This is due to time constraints and the specific nature of the study. Unfortunately, due to the unstable political situation in Russia following the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, it was not possible to conduct face-to-face interviews and reach a larger number of students. Additionally, expressing certain opinions publicly has become more difficult, and many students were afraid to take part in the study due to concerns about their personal safety. It should also be noted that the choice of universities was limited and that there is a need for more regional representation in Russia. This would provide a valuable opportunity to study academic freedom, particularly in universities with established liberal arts programs. Comparing these programs with traditional university curricula could offer insights into the state of academic freedom in Russia.

RESULTS

DEFINITIONS OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

When talking about academic freedom, students mentioned three topics: freedom to choose research topics, freedom to discuss, and freedom to express opinions. Freedom to choose research topics implies having an agency in choosing any subject for senior theses or course essays. Some students mentioned that this freedom could be restricted if the topics were deemed "sensitive." This includes topics that involve political or social issues that contradict ideological narratives of the current government.

Another aspect identified by the students is the freedom of discussion. Academic debate should be free, which means that students should be allowed to defend any position in class discussions. Some students included freedom from indoctrination as an element of freedom of discussion. According to the students, professors teaching classes should be equal participants in academic discussions and should not be politically engaged while leading the seminar or discussions. Academic freedom, in this case, means that students should be able to engage with all points of view, and professors should not merely state their position but should engage with all possible points of view.

The third most frequently mentioned is freedom of speech (which could also be seen as a subtheme of freedom of discussion). The interviewees highlighted freedom of speech as the freedom to express one's opinions and viewpoints without fear of negative consequences, both inside and outside the university. The main difference between this freedom and freedom of discussion was that academic exchange at university does not take place only in the classroom. The university is a shared space for students to exchange ideas and initiatives. Therefore, one of its functions is to provide a space for diverse opinions, including different political discourses. Some students linked this freedom of speech with the freedom of political expression. According to them, the university can also be a place of informal exchange, and political views should be discussed and shared. Academic freedom can also mean sharing like-minded political opinions among students without harming the university community. When these students mentioned this freedom of speech, they also implied the risk of potential consequences.

Other single definitions of academic freedom included the freedom of student associations and organizations, freedom for self-development, freedom for opportunities outside the university without political boycotts, and freedom to influence the learning process. One student from HSE mentioned that the freedom of student associations and organizations could be considered one of the functions of the university. University is not just about academic knowledge and skills but also about students developing a sense of community. As elaborated further, "universities have a broad role and significant influence in many area; when freedoms in student organizations are violated, it is a clear indication of a lack of academic freedom." Another student mentioned the importance of academic exchange between universities. Due to general boycotts of Russian universities, many students face difficulties participating in international academic activities. It was stressed that academic freedom

means an opportunity for scholarly communication through conferences and for sustained interactions with the international academic community. Students and scholars should not be considered “an extension of their country if the government and political state elite are pursuing policies the academic community does not support.” Lastly, one student emphasized the need to be able to influence education and its programs. Some students felt powerless to complain about teaching staff, seek help for mental health problems, or receive support in situations involving conflicts of interest.

EXPLICIT LIMITATIONS

The second part of the findings focuses on the conceptualization of academic freedom restrictions. The restrictions on academic freedom, as mentioned in the interviews, come in explicit (direct) and implicit (tacit) forms. Explicit restrictions are violations of academic freedom in a direct form, that is, restrictions directly imposed by the university administration or a state governing body, taking the form of restrictive measures. They are not prevalent across all universities in Russia, but they contribute to the overall understanding of the current environment of academic freedom in Russian universities. These explicit restrictions were identified as limiting the freedom of discussion and choice of topics, as well as political participation.

Restrictions on the freedom of discussion and choice of topics occur in both written and verbal communication. Written limitations are evident in the recent increase in the “verification” of dissertation titles by state authorities. There is a particular emphasis on topics related to the current political agenda, that is, those related to opposition organizations and leaders in Russia, such as “smart voting” (*umnoe golosovanie*) or Alexei Navalny.¹ Limiting choice of topics means removing triggering phrases from titles while preserving the content of theses and dissertations. Recently, due to the war in Ukraine, there has been particular caution regarding military-related topics. One student reported that their supervisor advised them to change their dissertation topic, which involved writing about political or military issues. As mentioned by another respondent, changes to titles are recommended so as not to attract attention of the authorities but to leave the body of the text intact:

I researched the humor of the president of the Russian Federation, and I saw an interest in this topic. It may not be super safe, but I have never been dissuaded from anything. The only thing that will probably be useful to say is that when I applied to [present at] a conference, my supervisor advised me to censor myself, not mention the name of [Vladimir] Putin and simply write: “The Russian president’s jokes.” That is, writing without any surnames, just so as not to attract any attention.

¹ Smart voting is a strategic voting plan presented by Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny’s team in 2018 to prevent the ruling party United Russia from winning votes in regional and national elections.

The verbal form of limiting the discussion space is expressed in direct discouragement from talking about certain topics in the classrooms by professors or course instructors. The recent war in Ukraine provoked even further restrictions, as students reported direct censorship of discussions of the ongoing war.

Lastly, restrictions on political participation have a significant impact on the academic environment of Russian universities. Student activism has been present in many forms of student engagement. Currently, university management, under the sanction of state authorities, restricts students' political participation, including student organizations. Students reported several cases of restrictions on political initiatives at HSE: In 2019, after an HSE student was detained for participating in unsanctioned political protests, HSE proclaimed itself "a university beyond politics" and banned any use of HSE affiliation in political movements, withdrew student organization status for a student-run social media channel DOXA, and introduced new code of ethics that bans political topics in student media outlets. MGIMO respondents reported consistent administrative control over student participation in protests or expression of antiwar sentiment. Students from other universities face similar pressures. SPbU students mentioned that since 2015 SPbU's policy on student protests had changed significantly, and students can now face administrative consequences, including expulsion, for participating in protests (for example, antiwar protests).

Overall, there are restrictions on academic freedom for students at Russian universities, but they are not yet widely enforced. Students' understanding of academic freedom is influenced by these limitations. Most students feel they have a great deal of academic freedom at university and have no issues choosing a research topic or voicing their opinions during seminars and discussion groups. However, limitations arise when the topic of research or discussion seems politically charged and involves criticism of the current political climate in Russia, including military topics. Nevertheless, most students reported that limitations were not directly imposed but were instead presented in subtle, tacit forms of suggestions. In the following section, we will explore the various implicit limitations on students at Russian universities.

IMPLICIT LIMITATIONS

The rest of the examined restrictions can be conceptualized as implicit restrictions. In contrast to the first section on direct infringements, this section discusses the limitations on freedom of discussion in different "tacit" forms. These can manifest through subtle forms of limitations or self-censorship practices, impacting both academic staff and students.

Avoidance practices is one of the mostly exercised forms of implicit limitations. Students tend to practice self-censorship by refraining from researching certain sensitive topics. They believe that there is a list of subjects that are not available for them to research. For instance, students express that "they would never let me research this" or "everyone understands that it would be impossible to pursue such a topic." Avoidance practices are also widespread among academic staff. Many course instructors tend to avoid discussing sensitive topics, especially related to politics. If

students do bring up political topics, instructors may stop them and advise them to discontinue the discussion. For example, “if someone starts talking positively about Alexei Navalny, the teacher will likely intervene.” Teachers also use discourse substitution as a way to avoid discussing sensitive topics. In the limited field of critical discourse on Russian political reality, teachers prefer to move the attention to a different and unrelated topic. One student explained that while there is a lot of freedom for research in political science at their institution, students cannot study Russian politics because “any topics related to official position on politics and . . . corruption in the highest ranks, they definitely will not pass.”

Other examples of avoidance practices include not mentioning current affairs, even if they relate to the academic field of studies. Students have raised concerns that many teachers avoid discussing their views on the ongoing war in Ukraine. Some students from the department of international law have reported that professors justify avoidance of the topic of the war in Ukraine and don’t mention the conflict before or during seminars: “We don’t discuss [the topic of war] in class; you have to take exams on other topics.”

Unspoken communication rules are another implicit practice to mention. In academic discourse, certain sensitive topics are avoided by adhering to unspoken communication rules. Students perceive these “rules” as a type of self-censorship. The use of “coded phrases” creates an environment where everyone assumes that particular sensitive topics are off-limits. A common phrase used by students to describe situations during seminars where choice of topics for discussion is relatively limited was “everyone just gets it” (*vse vsë ponimaiut*) (Belkina 2022). One way of expressing unspoken communication rules is through using hints (indirect references) or jokes, as mentioned by many HSE students, as well as one MGIMO student. Some students shared that this was done through jokes as a way to ease tension in the classroom. For instance, in a political science class, one student observed during a seminar on political economy right after the start of the war in Ukraine that the teacher’s “joke” was to “build a model where it can be argued that it is profitable to start a war.” At that moment, it was clear to everyone in the classroom that the teacher was against the war. Furthermore, students mentioned the use of “hints” and how through hints students could infer the opinion or standpoint of the university staff. For example, some academics wear pins saying things like “Everyone has the right to freedom of speech,” which serves as a subtle way of showing that it might be possible to raise certain politically sensitive topics with them. Another way of introducing the position in a subtle form was through indirect references such as quotes from books that relate to current realities. This allows professors’ opinions to be revealed in a subtle way. It also encourages students to read between the lines to grasp what professors might not be able to express openly, so the students knew that certain sensitive topics could be discussed with a particular academic.

Beyond traditional activities such as lectures and seminars, university is a shared space for other activities. For all respondents, student community plays an important role in Russian universities (Belkina 2022). Most respondents also mentioned that political activities and solidarity have become a part of students’ activi-

ties. Thus, one can observe unspoken rules of communication in the university space concerning “institutional versus individual practices.” Particularly, it is possible to perceive how the university administration coexists with students’ activities. Almost all students at HSE noted that the university is pursuing a “dual policy”: On the one hand, the student council actively supports students at protests and helps them in general. There was solidarity between students and teachers, and the university did not interfere with these initiatives. On the other hand, political affiliation is prohibited, and students are sometimes given verbal warnings about the consequences of political participation in protests. As one respondent explained, unspoken practices are visible in the university’s double politics. Students are able to assist each other during protests and detainments. However, at the same time, the university can maintain an image of being above politics and prosecute any political activity at the university.

Implicit restrictions can sometimes be imposed by the university, yet they are also a common practice among students themselves. As self-protection remains the main reason to justify these practices, students mentioned some other reasons behind them. For instance, fear seems to be the main reason behind implementing these practices. The students view their cautiousness as a means of self-protection, while also acknowledging that it serves to protect the teachers as well. When elaborating on fear, many students brought up the issue of safety.

For this reason, universities’ measures can be seen as protective. Safety and protection measures can be implemented in different ways. For instance, supervisors can be concerned about students’ safety, especially when they are researching sensitive topics, and the potential consequences that may arise. Furthermore, concerns regarding university security were raised by students. They acknowledged that universities cannot be held solely responsible for the restrictive measures in place as they are not the ones in power. According to students, the lack of university autonomy and government-funded institutions are the primary reasons for such measures. Since universities rely on government funding, they must abide by “the rules of the game.” As there has been an increasing level of control over universities by authoritative bodies, students believe that the limitations placed on academic freedom are ways of avoiding potential issues and protecting the university.

To conclude, students in Russian universities perceive academic freedom as freedom from external threats and constraints. The freedom to choose research topics and freedom of discussion are two primary conceptualizations of academic freedom. Most students reported that they have academic freedom at their universities, but they expressed concerns about implicit or internal limitations. Direct limitations are not widespread and are often related to governmental agendas and narratives that universities are also bound to follow. Implicit limitations include tacit suggestions to avoid sensitive research and discussion topics. The unwritten understanding that certain topics cannot be chosen for research is one form of tacit limitation. Universities’ receipt of government funding and their willingness to protect themselves and their students were the reasons students gave for these restrictions.

DISCUSSION

Students' own definitions of academic freedom correlate with definitions from existing literature but with some context-dependent nuances. Freedom to research was the first definition to be mentioned by the interviewees, and it is also one of the fundamental principles of academic freedom (Åkerlind and Kayrooz 2003; Altbach 2007; Berdahl 1990). Freedom to research lies in the Humboldtian principle of *Lehrfreiheit* (Metzger 1987–1988). In this case, context-dependent nuance lies in the freedom to research to mean the ability to choose any topic, even if it is controversial and leads to critical analysis of the current political agenda in the country. The sensitivity of these topics is determined by the extent of controversy and critical analysis of the current political agenda in Russia. Some of the sensitive topics mentioned by students include military groups in Russia, corruption, the rise of opposition movements, civic protests, and Russian invasion of Ukraine. This argument is also supported by a study highlighting specificities of social science research conducted in authoritarian contexts. Guzel Yusupova argues that in countries with authoritarian regimes the research agenda is heavily influenced by the state, which is “the main client of this research” (2019:1464) due to state funding and limited institutional autonomy. Furthermore, authoritarian governments seek to legitimize their power by supporting certain discourses and silencing others.

Freedom of discussion is the second definition of academic freedom raised by students. The existing literature supports this, emphasizing students' academic freedom as the freedom to have active discussions, as part of their active learning, and the freedom from indoctrination (Jackson 2021; Macfarlane 2011; Pavela 1995). In the context of this study, however, several concerns were raised about how much and how safely students can actually reveal in university discussion spaces. Limiting discussion topics could refer to both explicit (direct topic avoidance) and implicit (subtle topic censorship) restrictions.

Many of the students emphasized the importance of academic freedom that includes freedom of speech. It can be argued that freedom of discussion covers this. However, some students considered freedom of speech as a freedom to participate in discussions outside of academia or classroom spaces. A small group of students believed that expressing opinions outside of the university is a separate issue from academic freedom. For them, academic freedom protects academic discussions and ensures they can be conducted without external threats or concerns. The remaining respondents did not distinguish between these definitions and simply spoke about the freedom to have any type of discussion within the classroom space as well as other university spaces. This debate echoes the study of social science scholars in Russia that mentions two existing models of academic freedom (Dubrovsky and Meyer 2021). These models derive from divided views on what academic freedom should protect. Some Russian academics believe that freedom of speech should be a part of academic freedom, which aligns with the socially oriented model of academic freedom. This view is commonly held by academics who are politically active outside of university. On the other hand, others believe that academic freedom should only protect activities within the university space, which

aligns with the traditional model of academic freedom. However, identifying the boundary between academic freedom for purely academic discussion and freedom of speech has become challenging.

Lastly, students expressed their opinions about the freedom of student organizations. These opinions align with Appiagyei-Atua's (2019) argument on democratic participation and civil engagement of students in universities, which is an important aspect of academic freedom. The mentioned definitions of academic freedoms can also be viewed through the lens of Berlin's (1969) division of freedom into positive and negative. The majority of students' definitions of academic freedom fall into "negative" freedom, or "freedom from" constraints. Only two respondents saw academic freedom in terms of "positive freedom," which refers to the freedom to do something; in this case, students mentioned freedom to enjoy the learning process, participate in extracurricular activities, and study abroad. The rest of the respondents viewed academic freedom as freedom from external threats and control. They believed that research topics should not be limited, discussions should not be censored, and engagement in academic discussions should not be accompanied by a fear of external surveillance.

LIMITATIONS ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM

While discussing explicit limitations, students highlighted specific limitations on discussions related to certain topics and political engagement outside the university. However, it is difficult to differentiate between direct and indirect limitations because universities tend to articulate their actions vaguely, which allows them to interpret their restrictive measures differently. Self-censorship is one of the most commonly utilized implicit forms of restrictions. Self-censorship can be categorized into various groups. One form of self-censorship mentioned by students is discourse substitution. This means that topics for discussion are chosen avoiding those that may have sensitive political agendas. Some academics avoid discussing certain topics altogether, while others use hints, jokes, and subtle language to frame them. Existing literature suggests that social sciences in Russia have recently become subject to increased state and university control, limiting academic freedom (Dubrovsky and Meyer 2021). One study found that teaching in Russian universities has also become uncertain, as many academics are unsure how to handle sensitive discussions with students out of fear of provoking them to protest and risk arrest (Kaczmarska 2020). Recent events further intensified this fear, as many academics had to resign due to their expressed opinions about the current war in Ukraine (Talanova 2023). Excessive control and ideological pressure from the government create an environment of caution among academics, ultimately affecting students. At the same time, blurred boundaries between implicit and explicit restrictions of academic freedom leave room for exercising consequences. Dmitry Dubrovsky and Irina Meyer (2021) and Kasia Kaczmarska (2020) also mention the prevalence of universities' unspoken limitations and prohibitions. The bureaucratization of education, as well as vague legal frameworks, enable universities to repress and punish students and teaching staff.

Finally, it is interesting to note how students rationalize the actions of universities. They understand that their supervisors and universities have to take certain measures, which they accept as inevitable. The justification behind accepting these measures is the safety factor. By avoiding certain phrases or topics, students feel that their teachers are taking care of them, thereby preventing any potential negative consequences in the future. Another justification is to safeguard the university itself. Most students share the feeling that their universities still preserve academic freedom, but protective measures should be accepted to save these universities from the government and allow students to study and exercise their academic freedom.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated student perceptions of and limitations on academic freedom in Russian higher education, offering insights into the students' lived experiences within the university environment. These insights contributed to a deeper understanding of the teaching and learning landscape, particularly in contexts facing limitations on academic freedom.

The gradual rise in institutional constraints has negatively impacted the overall development of the academic environment, with science becoming more closely monitored. The study highlighted the growing institutional control over various aspects of academic life, including curriculum, discussion spaces, student activities, and public engagement. Limitations on academic freedom affect students—the primary recipients of knowledge—who grapple with these restrictions, often resorting to self-censorship when navigating sensitive topics. This phenomenon illustrates how ideological pressure and excessive governmental control can create an environment where academics take excessively cautious measures, ultimately impacting students.

This study contributed to a limited body of work on student experiences of academic freedom, particularly within the Russian context. Exploring this phenomenon in authoritarian contexts like Russia helps reveal the subtle ways academic freedom is curtailed, illuminating the experiences of students and academics within a restrictive environment. Additionally, it provides a valuable comparison for understanding the dynamics of academic freedom across different political contexts, allowing for comparisons with similar authoritarian settings.

Currently, only a limited body of literature covers the impact of restricted academic freedom on scholars, and even fewer studies focus on students, especially in the Russian context. Future research could explore the implications of self-censorship, the impact of subtle limitations on research, and the long-term consequences of state control of social sciences. As academics and students become more isolated, unveiling long-term consequences of this restricted intellectual environment on critical thinking and scholarly discourse will be vital for navigating the complexities of evolving academic landscape in Russia.

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APPENDIX

List of interviewees

No.	Code	Interview date (in 2022)	University	Year, study
1	SH1	March 13	MSEES	4th year, world politics
2	SH2	March 23	MSEES	4th year, world politics
3	SH3	March 29	MSEES	4th year, sociology
4	SH4	April, 1	MSEES	4th year, sociology
5	B1	March 13	HSE	4th year, economy and politics of Asia
6	B2	March 13	HSE	3rd year, international relations
7	B3	March 17	HSE	3rd year, political science
8	B4	March 21	HSE	3rd year, political science
9	B5	March 25	HSE	3rd year, sociology
10	M1	March 19	MGIMO	4th year, international economics
11	M2	March 25	MGIMO	3rd year, international law
12	M3	March 25	MGIMO	3rd year, diplomacy and politics of foreign countries
13	M4	March 30	MGIMO	3rd year, international law
14	M5	April 7	MGIMO	3rd year, international relations
15	M6	April 11	MGIMO	3rd year, international economic relations
16	C1	March 15	SPbU (Smolny)	4th year, liberal arts
17	C2	March 25	SPbU (Smolny)	4th year, liberal arts
18	C3	March 26	SPbU	4th year, international relations
19	C4	March 30	SPbU	4th year, international relations
20	C5	April 12	SPbU	4th year, international relations, sociology

ВОСПРИЯТИЕ АКАДЕМИЧЕСКИХ СВОБОД СТУДЕНТАМИ БАКАЛАВРИАТА В РОССИЙСКИХ УНИВЕРСИТЕТАХ

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Статья основана на исследовании, проведенном в 2022 году в рамках магистерской программы Оксфордского университета «Сравнительное и международное образование».

Цель исследования – изучить понимание студентами академических свобод и их ограничения в российских университетах. В ходе 20 углубленных онлайн-интервью участники исследования – студенты старших курсов бакалаврских программ по социальным наукам в четырех российских университетах в Санкт-Петербурге и Москве – делились собственным восприятием академических свобод и способами их реализации. Результаты показывают, что студенты в основном определяли академическую свободу как свободу исследований, обсуждений и свободу слова. Хотя большинство из них сообщили, что пользуются относительно широкой степенью академической свободы, исследование выявило скрытые ограничения, устанавливаемые другими членами университетского сообщества. Так, в нескольких случаях отмечались административные руководства по корректировке тем исследований и избеганию обсуждения чувствительных тем. Предлагаемая работа вносит вклад в понимание ограничений академической свободы в российском высшем образовании.

Ключевые слова: академическая свобода; российские университеты; студенты