

Academic Freedom of Saudi University Teaching Staffers: Perspectives and Practices

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Abstract

Various definitions of academic freedom have been put forward. For many people, this concept can have several meanings. Outside the university context there is some suspicion around the idea of academic freedom, which is seldom understood even by academics. Nevertheless, to promote the growth and dissemination of knowledge the concept of “academic freedom” needs to be broadened and widely embraced. The present study assessed the practice of academic freedom in Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University. The study used a quantitative descriptive research design and applied an evaluative survey to a sample of 154 participants randomly selected from a population of 256 faculty members. The data was generated through an online survey. The study findings showed that faculty members are uncertain about their academic rights and are confused about the extent to which a moderate form of academic freedom might serve their cause. This state of confusion can often impede the smooth running of university administration. Overall, the female members of faculty believe they have greater academic freedoms than their male counterparts. When compared with older staff members, the findings revealed that younger professors and

instructors and those in lower ranks had a greater awareness of their academic rights. The results of this study have implications for higher educational institutions in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: *Academic Freedom, Practice, Knowledge, Higher Education*

Introduction

In democratic societies, universities are unique institutions tasked with conducting original research and producing knowledge that is critical to the education of students and the enlightenment of wider society. Universities provide both staff and students with a basis from which to broaden and disseminate knowledge. They act as educational contexts for the discussion of major social, economic, and political issues. Academic freedom is the main legitimizing concept of the university which denotes that these institutions should not be susceptible to powers outside themselves (Cox, 2020; Nongxa, 2020). Autonomy and academic freedom are widely recognized as central to the optimization of university activities in the majority of Arab countries. It is acknowledged that a degree of institutional autonomy is essential to achieving the historic role of Arab universities, which is to fulfil their obligations to various stakeholders, including governments.

Academic life relies on the concept and practice of academic freedom (Hedgecoe, 2016; Sultana, 2018; Al-Ahdal, 2014). The rights of teachers and academicians are predicated on the practice of intellectual freedom within the community. This is a significant aspect of the traditional university, where both students and professors are partners in the pursuit of knowledge that is the outcome of rigorous scholarly inquiry. Intellectual freedom is viewed only as a by-product of the defense of intellectual rights. Staff and students should be free to engage in critical thinking and reasoned debate around various ideas and explanations. Sultana's central argument is that such intellectual freedoms will produce knowledge that ultimately benefits the whole of society and promotes democracy (Sultana, 2018). The argument for equality of the faculty has therefore hardly been addressed adequately (Al-Ahdal, 2020).

Academic freedom provides the necessary preconditions for growth. Arab educational institutions have an economic responsibility to promote growth, encourage innovation and facilitate productivity. This study has explored the practice of academic freedom amongst the faculty members of Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, particularly from the viewpoint of

professors and lecturers. The findings of this study will be of interest to the general authorities, the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education, decision makers, and senior officials in Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University. The following section seeks to address the necessity of university independence in general terms.

Review of Literature

A fixed definition of academic freedom is difficult to conceive as a single interpretation cannot encompass the many nuances of the concept nor the various ways in which it is reasonably applied. Some scientists and researchers define academic freedom as the right of students to enjoy freedom of expression as well as to practice social and political rights. Whereas other scholars and thinkers prefer to define the concept more narrowly as the right of students to express their own ideas and views and to determine their own area of studies. For most Western philosophers and writers, a healthy environment needs to be provided to encourage students to exercise their rights. These rights, it must be made clear, often crystallize in granting the students a space to express their individuality: to speak their minds, to write bravely, to express their opinions, and to respect different points of view. Al Qarni (2009) clarified that the issue of university and higher education rights is both an old and a modern concern, as it is one of the traditions that universities around the world have upheld down the ages. This tradition ensures that in the classroom environment, the definition of intellectual freedom and its content need not be discussed to guarantee complete institutional and financial equity in universities. Each faculty member can read, share thoughts, and make crucial intellectual decisions.

In the context of the Arab world, a report by Alburjus (2013) aimed to reveal the reality of academic freedom at the university level in Saudi Arabia and to establish what structural requirements would facilitate academic freedoms therein. The researcher used a descriptive analytical approach. The sample consisted of 550 students. The study suggested that there is a modest degree of academic freedom in Saudi Arabia. The research variables are attributed to the lack of statistically relevant inequalities in university-level experiences of academic freedom in the Kingdom. Moreover, a thesis by Al Burjis (2013) aimed to clarify what constitutes academic freedom in Saudi Arabian universities from the professorial viewpoint and to establish a university-level basis for facilitating academic freedom. In a different Arab context, Ennab (2014) attempts to reveal the idea of academic freedom among faculty members in three universities in

northern Jordan. This study showed the influence of a series of medium variables on intellectual freedoms. The study applied a descriptive-empirical method with 288 faculty members participating in the research. The analysis indicated that participants embraced the idea of medium-term intellectual equality, the presence of statistically significant gender disparities and the desires of male faculty members, and the substantive equalization of statistically significant differences allocated to an institution.

Beyond the Arab world, Taiwo (2012) explored the importance, materiality, and impediments to academic freedom and the reputation of higher education institutions in Nigeria. This research approach relied on previous experiments. The results indicated that intellectual freedom was not limited to higher education laws in Nigeria but was drawn from other regulations requiring nominal oversight by state universities. The relationship between political freedom and philosophy of speech in the United States was analyzed by Boland (2005). Throughout the study, the researcher used a formal interview protocol and discussed many topics related to intellectual freedom, the commitment to free expression, and their educational examination. The study concluded that international intervention in educational institutions has recently increased, as academic freedom in political circumstances is weakened.

Previous studies have indicated that academic freedom continues to be an important subject in universities (Al-Ahdal & Al-Awaid, 2014). These works highlight the crucial significance of this analysis which aims to build on the various methodological similarities. However, our goals were different from those researchers. In terms of information, data, research tools, as well as analysis procedures, their methodology was conducted through an online survey. Many of them relied on a questionnaire and interviews to accomplish the objectives of their studies. As will be discussed in greater detail below, the current investigation is essentially an analysis which covers a larger area of relevant scholarship.

Research Questions

Both inside and outside the scientific debates in Saudi Arabia, academic freedom was, and continues to be, a top priority. However, the autonomy of the university is rarely discussed and has received insufficient attention. Studies conducted in Saudi-based universities help to address this research gap by examining and exploring all aspects of academic freedom in the existing literature. Freedom of expression, freedom of choice regarding subject area, and freedom of

research are the principal aspects covered by the present study. The extent to which these three aspects of academic freedom are practiced must, therefore, be determined in Saudi universities. The following research questions were formulated in order to achieve the objectives of the study: (1) What is the level of academic freedom practiced by Saudi faculty?; (2) Are there significant differences in the levels of academic freedom practiced by faculty members when grouped according to their gender, college, and field of specialization?; (3) What recommendations can be offered to improve the level of academic freedom amongst faculty members?

Methodology

Research Design

The study used a descriptive research design and applied an evaluative survey. This approach was selected because it is helpful in describing the properties of a large population. A considerably large sample of participants can be selected, which means that even when the analysis involves several variables, the results become statistically significant.

Participants

The faculty of instruction at Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Saudi Arabia, comprises 256 members. A Raosoft sample size calculator was used with 5% margin of error, 95% level of confidence, and 50% response distribution. The sample size of 154 participants was computed. The sampling characteristics of the participants are illustrated in Table 1 and Figure 1 below

Table 1. Sampling Profile

Profile Variables	Categorical Variables	Frequency (N=154)	Percentage
Age	21-30	14	9
	31-40	76	49
	41-50	24	16

	51-60	34	22
	61 above	6	4
Gender	Male	58	38
	Female	96	62
Faculty Rank	Lecturers and Instructors	98	64
	Assistant and Associate Professor	56	36
Total		154	100%

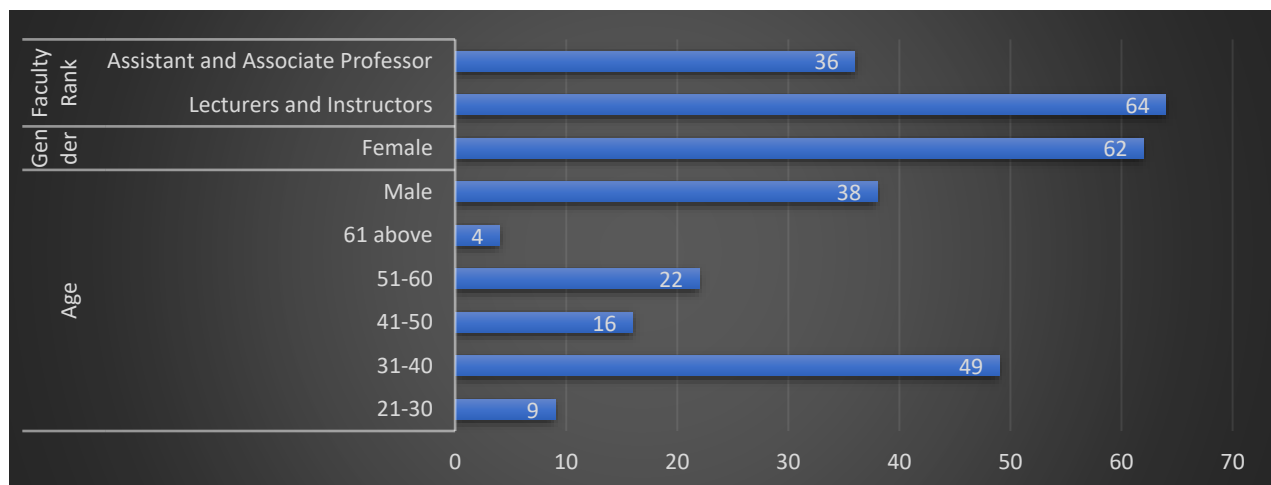


Figure 1. Sampling Procedure

Research Tool

The researcher developed a questionnaire as the primary data gathering tool alongside a detailed literature review. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. Section One required demographic information about Saudi university professors and lecturers. In Section Two, there were 28 closed items in four fields. Those statements were ranked from 1 – 5 on the Likert scale (with 5 indicating large discrepancies). The questionnaire was distributed to a total of 154 university teachers. The questions addressed Saudi Arabia educational frameworks, curricula, instruction, and assessment and review. The goal was to check the accuracy, domain value, and overall object size. After a thorough discussion with each of the faculty members certain items

were changed or removed. The final version consisted of 40 items spread across the four realms. Aside from the research group, the feasibility of the system was tested by having a minimum of 50 university students in the pilot test. The coefficient of association between domains was also calculated. The Pearson correlation coefficients ranged from 0.71 to 0.82. All ($\alpha=0.05$) coefficients were significant. Fifty Saudi students assessed the performance of the current questionnaire. The Cronbach alpha value was 0.91. In all fields and across the board, reliability was good.

Data Analysis

After gaining approval from Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, the researcher distributed the online questionnaire to professors in Saudi Arabia. Descriptive measures such as mean and standard deviations were used to explain the data. The T-test was used to assess whether statistically important variations in the total number of students in a sample are statistically significant ($\alpha = -0.05$) or not. To explain the outcomes of the current analysis, such cutoff points were required to evaluate the cumulative performance of participants. The response scale for each object ranged from 1 to 5 to define these cutoff points as follows: Very High Extent (4.20-5.00); High Extent (3.40-4.19); Moderate Extent (2.60-3.39); Low Extent (1.80-2.59); Not at (1.00-1.79)

Results and Discussion

Information from the questionnaire was also used to answer the research questions and evaluated using an SPSS educational program package. The research questions were as follows:

Research Question 1. What is the level of academic freedom practiced by Saudi faculty?

The averages and the standard deviations for the cumulative outcomes of each region were measured and listed by their mean values to answer the first research question. The findings of the first study problem are shown in Table 2 and in Figure 2.

Table 2. Level of academic freedom practiced by Saudi faculty

Domain	Mean (N=154)	SD	Interpret ation	Rank
Freedom to select the	3.27	0.14	Moderate	3

strategies of teaching				
Freedom to make decisions	3.19	0.24	Moderate	4
Freedom to do research	3.43	0.32	High	1
			Extent	
Freedom of speech and expression	3.28	0.21	Moderate	2
Grand Mean	3.29	0.22	Moderate	

Legend: Very High Extent (4.20-5.00); High Extent (3.40-4.19); Moderate Extent (2.60-3.39); Low Extent (1.80-2.59); Not at (1.00-1.79)

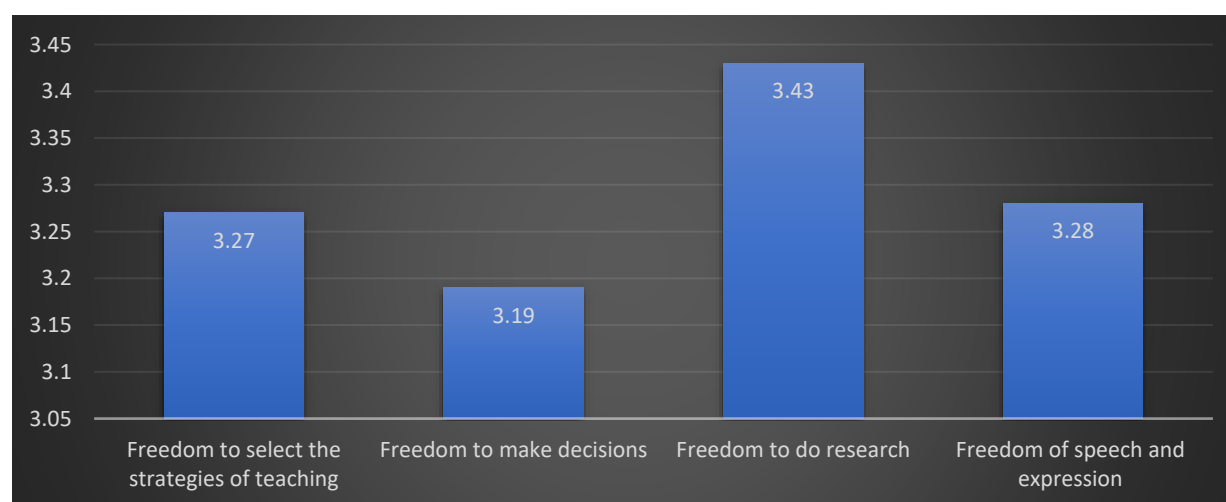


Figure 2. Level of academic freedom practiced by Saudi faculty

Table 2 shows the level of academic freedom practiced among the faculty as moderate. The total score across the four domains is generally moderate; however, the freedom to conduct research obtained the highest domain mean (3.43, $sd=0.32$). This result indicates that faculty members have a high degree of freedom when conducting research. By contrast, across the other three domains the faculty members assessed their levels of freedom as moderate. The results were as follows: selecting teaching strategies (3.27, $sd=0.14$), exercising freedom of speech and expression (3.28, $sd=0.21$), and enjoying the freedom to make decisions (3.19, $sd=0.24$). Table 2

and Figure 2 reveal that the level of academic freedom amongst the faculty at Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University is at a moderate or developing stage. This finding indicates that the university has not yet granted complete academic freedom to its faculty members. Hence, professors are not fully autonomous in their academic decision-making. Another interesting factor to note is that whilst they are given a high degree of freedom when conducting research, this freedom does not extend to purposely disclosing the findings of their investigations to the University's administration. Whilst the University supports its teaching staff to engage freely in research, there is a simultaneous requirement to address the internationalization and quality initiatives of higher education institutions to generate the knowledge necessary for accreditation and quality assurance. On the one hand, this finding is consistent with previously-conducted research which revealed most Saudi universities as having a moderate degree of academic freedom among their faculty members: a finding attributed to the Islamic culture of the people (Alamri, 2011; Al Hila, et al, 2017). On the other hand, this result confirms other research which showed that faculty members are still in danger of talking openly in academia and that the freedom of university faculty members throughout the Arab world is limited on several counts (Alkhazim, 2003; Aldhafiri & Alazmi, 2013; Salaita, 2015). Hence, the level of academic freedom identified in this study should be taken as an indication that the University needs to expand the level of autonomy that is currently granted to its faculty.

Research Question 2. Is there a significant difference in the level of academic freedom of the faculty members when grouped according to their gender, college, and field of specialization?

Table 3. Test of Difference on the Extent of Academic Freedom when grouped according to Profile Variables

	Freedom to select the field and strategies of teaching	Freedom to make decisions	Freedom to do research	Freedom of speech and expression

Sex	0.018*	0.014*	0.016*	0.014*
Age	0.03*	0.054*	0.001*	0.08*
Faculty Rank	0.03*	0.05*	0.01*	0.00*

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.00$

ns = not significant

Across the four areas and for the general scale due to sex, the mean and standard deviation were used to answer the second research question. A T-test and ANOVA were used, as shown in Table 3. The findings show that academic freedom is statistically significant when sex or gender is taken as a variable in each of the four areas of academic freedom: freedom to select the teaching strategies ($p=0.018^*$), freedom to make decisions ($p=0.014^*$), freedom to do research ($p=0.016^*$), and freedom of speech and expression ($p=0.014^*$). The t-test showed that female faculty members believe they have greater academic freedoms than their male counterparts. In other words, female professors enjoy more intellectual rights when compared with male professors (Corlett & Brillon, 2020; Ruan, 2020; Wight, 2020). This could indicate that men in Arab universities are more audacious than women who are more sensitive to rights-related problems (Martin, 2020; Karimullah, 2020). It may also be that, although undertaken in the same institutions, the research topics did not address the same issues. Although people in Arab Muslim cultures are brave and willing to defend their rights, women are subject to specific restrictions on their freedoms and equality rights. It should be noted that these restrictions on women are not drawn from Islam itself; they derive from the cultural practices of local societies in Arab communities. This finding coincides with other research that did not reveal a gender difference in academic freedom (Said, 1994; Zeleza, 2003; Altbach, 2007; Salaita, 2008; Aldhafiri, & Alazmi, 2013; Austin et al., 2014; Zain-Al-Dien, 2016).

The ANOVA findings also revealed that the degree of intellectual freedom varies considerably when clustered according to age. The results of the post hoc Tukey test showed that faculty members in the older group (41-50, 51-60, and above 60 years old) had lower levels of academic freedom when compared with those in the younger group (21-30 and 31-40 years old). The results were consistent across all four domains: freedom to select strategies ($p= 0.03^*$), freedom to make decisions ($p=0.053^*$), freedom to do research ($p=0.001^*$), and freedom of speech

and expression ($p=0.08^*$) were practiced more by the younger group of faculty members than the older groups. This finding implies that younger professors and instructors are more aware of their academic rights when compared with older staff. This finding also suggests that older faculty members tend to be more obedient and tolerant and less likely to speak out than their younger counterparts. Such a finding agrees with the conclusions of previously-conducted studies which identified age as an effective factor on the practice of academic freedom (Brown & Kurland, 1990; De George, 2003; Braxton, et al, 2020; Finn, 2020; Garcia et al., 2020).

Rank emerged as an important factor. The data showed a significant difference in the extent of academic freedom that was practiced when participants were grouped according to their position in the faculty. The faculty rank was divided into two categories: the group of instructors and lecturers and the group of assistant and full professors. Using a t-test, it was found that that the lower ranking group of faculty members are more engaged in practicing their freedoms across all domains: freedom to select strategies ($p=0.03^*$), freedom to make decisions ($p=0.05^*$), freedom to do research ($p=0.01^*$), and freedom of speech and expression ($p=0.00^*$). This result indicates that professors in lower positions are bolder than full assistant and full professors when it comes to exercising their intellectual freedom. This finding suggests that faculty members in assistant or associate professor ranks are manifesting higher compliance with the University authority if they want to obtain a full professorship. They are deliberately restricting their academic freedoms to avoid conveying the wrong impression to the University administration. Staff members who are viewed as compliant will be promoted to higher positions. Such a finding agrees with the studies previously conducted in different university contexts and countries (Rogers, 2008; Neumann, 2016; Williams, 2016; Hertzog, 2017; Karran, Beiter, & Appiagyei-Atua, 2017; Mirah, 2017).

Conclusion

Academic freedom ensures that all teachers and students can participate in intellectual debates without any potential threat of censorship or reprisal from the university. The present study assessed the extent to which academic freedom is practiced in Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University. The research is based on a descriptive study design and an evaluative survey with a sample of 154 respondents randomly selected from the population of 256 faculty members. Data were generated through an online survey. This research has demonstrated that faculty members doubt their intellectual freedoms. This situation creates uncertainty and inconsistencies that place

the University leadership at fresh risk and reveals that the degree of academic freedom granted to faculty is modest. Overall, the female members of the faculty believe they have greater academic freedoms when compared with their male counterparts. The younger professors and instructors and those in lower ranks showed greater awareness of their academic rights when compared with older ones.

Recommendations and Implications

The findings indicate that the faculty members at Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University should generally expand the practice of academic freedom by providing support to the University administration. The researcher presents the following recommendations following from this study. All faculty leaders, minorities, young educators, and teachers equal in the practice of intellectual freedoms ought to pay more attention to their academic rights. The University should allow its faculty members to build external relationships with other well-established foreign universities to create a shared research base. A culture of openness should be encouraged amongst faculty members to create a sense of shared leadership in the institution. Moreover, there is a need to grant greater academic freedoms to professors, particularly freedom of speech, which will serve to improve professional development and build confidence. This aspect is crucially important in relation to specialization in teaching and research activities, and enhanced benefits to community services.

This study will add to the existing body of knowledge regarding the practice of academic freedom in a specific university in Saudi Arabia. The findings of this study should be taken seriously by curriculum planners and the University administration. Following the COVID-19 pandemic it is vitally important for the University to improve its global ranking initiatives by responding to the demands of internationalization.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Academic freedom applies to the right of a university to decide its own educational purpose without political interference thereby ensuring the intellectual independence of the university. The concept of academic freedom is often defined as a professor's right to have his or her program uncontrolled and unrestricted by the university authorities. It is the right of independent scholars. The survey designed and used by the researcher is limited to this study; hence it will not rely on

the accuracy and precision of the analysis to explain the results. The research was conducted at Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University in Saudi Arabia, which restricts the generalization of results. Regarding the suggestions for future research, there is a need for a succeeding study based on a mixed methods design to validate the findings of the present study. The inclusion of a larger sample comprising students, teachers, and administrators should be considered. There is also the need for additional personal variables including participants' years of service, level of training, highest level of educational achievements, civil status, and cultural background. These variables would add considerably to the present study by providing richer data, which in turn, would allow for a more in-depth and informative analysis of the results.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Personal Profile:

Name _____ (optional)

Sex:

_____ (Male)

_____ (Female)

Age: 21-30 _____

31-40 _____

41-50 _____

51-60 _____

60 above _____

Faculty Rank:

_____ Lecturer

_____ Assistant Professor to Full Professor

Questions on the Academic Freedom

Directions: Please answer the following statements using the scale which applies to you on the practice of academic freedom in your university:

Scale	Description	Range
5	Very High Extent	(4.20-5.00)
4	High Extent	(3.40-4.19)
3	Moderate Extent	(2.60-3.39)
2	Low Extent	(1.80-2.59);
1	Not at	(1.00-1.79)

Freedom to select the strategies of teaching

No.	Item					
1	The University allows faculty members to choose their teaching strategies according to their preferences and skills.	5	4	3	2	1
2	The University allows faculty members to share in the delivery of the instructional materials.	5	4	3	2	1
3	The students and faculty of the university are provided with techniques for gaining skills.	5	4	3	2	1
4	In deciding extracurricular events for students, faculty members are involved.	5	4	3	2	1
5	The faculty members allow students to speak about elements of their learning and preferred teaching strategies.	5	4	3	2	1

6	The faculty members encourage students to select the subjects of the course.	5	4	3	2	1
7	The recommendations of faculty members are taken into consideration when deciding the dates of the exams.	5	4	3	2	1

Freedom to make decisions

No.	Item					
1	The University encourages faculty members to become leaders of qualified organizations.	5	4	3	2	1
2	The University gives faculty members the chance to engage in different workshops.	5	4	3	2	1
3	The faculty members assist in the administration of different operations.	5	4	3	2	1
4	The University offers faculty members ample incentives to make their own choices at the University.	5	4	3	2	1
5	The University takes into account faculty members' recommendations to address its own problems	5	4	3	2	1
6	The faculty members' perspectives on the advancement of education are taken into consideration.	5	4	3	2	1
7	The faculty members are interested in the explanation of courses.	5	4	3	2	1

Freedom to do research

No.	Item					
1	The University encourages communication with faculty members in conducting research.	5	4	3	2	1
2	The University allows faculty members to choose their research topics and subjects.	5	4	3	2	1
3	The University allows faculty members to secure the effects of its papers.	5	4	3	2	1
4	The University allows faculty members to invite students to write their papers.	5	4	3	2	1
5	The professor calls on students to meet with the ethical principles of doing research.	5	4	3	2	1
6	The University offers faculty members ample time to comment on study.	5	4	3	2	1
7	The University encourages faculty members to share their course-related work.	5	4	3	2	1

Freedom of speech and expression

No.	Item					
1	The University allows faculty members to deliver classes to their colleagues.	5	4	3	2	1
2	The University grants faculty members the right to have unlimited access to information.	5	4	3	2	1
3	The University requires faculty members to raise questions about the topic of the lecture.	5	4	3	2	1
4	The University grants faculty members unlimited freedom to share their values.	5	4	3	2	1
5	Throughout the lecture, the University promotes dialog and debate among the faculty members.	5	4	3	2	1
6	The University addresses community problems with faculty members.	5	4	3	2	1
7	The University gives faculty members the freedom to discuss various social issues that are related to the content of the course.	5	4	3	2	1

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