

Co-Construction of the Ecological Environment for University Teachers' Professional Autonomy

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Abstract

Teachers' professional autonomy is not only an important condition for their occupational professionalization, but also the core content of independent schooling, and an important guarantee to improve the quality of higher education. Teachers' professional autonomy is restricted by many factors: the national policy guidance, the internal management and the teachers' personal professional development. They jointly create the ecological environment of teachers' professional autonomy.

Key words: University teachers; Professional autonomy; Ecological balance; Strategy

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INTRODUCTION

In 1966, to apply the principle and method of educational ecology to the study of higher education, British scholar Eric Ashby raised the concept of "ecology of higher education," which opened up new vista for studies on higher education. Ecological systems of education vary with different educational structures. Due to the confinement imposed by society, universities, teachers and so forth, the ecological environment of education in universities is relatively independent. The ecological

principles of naturality, entirety, mutual restriction and sustainability apply also to the ecology of higher education, the whole ecological system of education may be affected by changes of any element within it. Despite being a key element of higher education system, teachers' professional autonomy is in itself a small system. Therefore, improving the ecology of professional autonomy, analyzing the effects of external social environment, universities' internal ecological structure and ecological elements of teachers on professional autonomy from ecological perspective and maintaining the ecological balance of education are beneficial to enhancing university teachers' professional autonomy and sustainable development of higher education.

1. THE DEFINITION OF PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY

"Professionalism," which is an inevitable result of vocational differentiation, literally refers to something connected with a type of job that needs special training or skill, especially one that needs a high level of education. The word "autonomy" means freedom from control or influence of another or others. As vocations move towards professionalization, autonomy becomes a kind of professional characteristic, hence the concept of professional autonomy. Professional autonomy, according to Hall (1969), may be defined as the ability to make decisions free from either client pressures or an employing organization. Whereas Wilensky indicated that professional autonomy refers to professionals make decisions on a basis of professional knowledge free from external pressures. Professional autonomy has three basic implications. First, the subject of professional autonomy is professional personnel. Second, an essential precondition for professional autonomy is professionalization. Third, the fundamental characteristic of autonomy is independence and freedom from external interference.

There exists an inverse correlation between external effects and the degree of autonomy.

As an important embodiment of autonomy in the teaching profession, teachers' professional autonomy is not only a basic requirement of professionalization, but also an essential condition for teachers' professional development. Teachers' professional autonomy includes four aspects: awareness, right, ability and conduct. Teachers' professional autonomy awareness requires teachers to be clearly aware of their own subjective status in professional activities, their professional responsibility, right and ability, as well as their freedom to exercise professional right without external interference. Autonomy awareness is a key indicator of the degree of professionalism. A teacher who possesses strong awareness of autonomy has clear understanding of individual and collective responsibilities of teaching profession. He or she would take the initiative to improve his or her own professional quality, consciously abide by professional ethics and make an effort to maintain the professional authority of teaching profession. In contrast, a teacher who lacks professional autonomy awareness tends to be inactive and passive in professional development and exercising professional duties, submit to arrangements made, lack personal opinions and leave things to chance. Professional autonomous right is an essential precondition for teachers' professional autonomy. Having and being able to exercise this right is a crucial symbol of teachers' professional autonomy. Professional autonomous right has abundant connotations. Viewing from the perspective of empowerment, apart from teachers' professional right recognized by laws and regulations, professional autonomous right also contains the right stipulated by the regulations of universities and other relevant organizations (e.g., education and research organizations and learned societies) as well as the right recognized by educational ethics, traditions and conventions. In terms of the subject in exercising right, there is individual and collective professional autonomy. Teachers' professional autonomous ability, which is shown in exercising professional autonomous right, affects the efficiency of professional activities through teachers' professional conducts. Teachers' professional autonomous ability is at the heart of teachers' professionalism, it contains teachers' abilities to choose, judge, monitor, implement and deny. Teachers' professional autonomous conduct refers to all the behaviors and performances that a teacher shows in exercising autonomous right. Professional autonomous awareness, right, ability and conduct are inextricably linked. Collectively, they constitute the connotations of professional autonomy. Autonomous awareness is the precondition and basis of autonomous ability development and autonomous behaviors and performances, autonomous right an important condition for autonomous ability and conduct, autonomous ability a crucial guarantee for exercising professional autonomous

right, and autonomous conduct the concentrated reflection of professional autonomy.

University teachers' professional autonomy means university teachers exercising autonomous right, completing professional mission and protecting professional interests within the profession. It is an embodiment of university teachers' professional spirit and an important guarantee for producing professional achievements. Due attentions should be paid to university teachers' professional autonomy.

2. THE VALUES OF UNIVERSITY TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY

2.1 University Teachers' Professional Autonomy Is an Embodiment of Academic Spirit

Academic spirit is a unique spiritual and cultural achievement developed in the growth of a university. The core of academic spirit lies in criticism and innovation. Teachers' professional autonomy plays a fundamental role in developing academic spirit. The spirit of criticism is mainly reflected in teaching and research process, during which university teachers overcome the negative effects of external interference, deal with traditions and realities in a scientific attitude, reject unscientific content, break down blind faith and conservatism and build up scientific system of knowledge. The spirit of innovation is fundamental to the existence of a university. Since Humboldt put forward that teaching and research are an inseparable process, scientific research has been valued as universities' basic function. Today, achievement in scientific research is an important criteria for evaluating a university or a teacher. Criticism and innovation are mutually dependent. It is necessary to eradicate the old in order to foster the new.

2.2 University Teachers' Professional Autonomy Is an Essential Requirement of the Professionalization of Teaching Profession

Professional autonomy is one of the characteristics of occupational professionalization. According to Hoy and Miskel, professional work mainly involves five aspects: requiring skills and capabilities developed from long-term training; providing impartial services by adhering to professional norms; having autonomous right to make professional decisions; giving full consideration to counterparts' opinions; and carrying out self-management based on knowledge and special standards (Wu, 2002). In terms of teaching profession, professional autonomy is an important criteria for occupational professionalization and an essential condition for the development of other professional characteristics. The absence of professional autonomy will restrain the acquisition of professional knowledge and the improvement of professional ability. University teachers shoulder the responsibility of cultural transmission and innovation. Without professional

autonomy, it is impossible for teachers to carry out the work of cultural criticism and innovation.

2.3 University Teachers' Professional Autonomy Is a Crucial Part of University Development

In 2007, China's Ministry of education officially launched the "Undergraduate Teaching Quality and Teaching Reform Project," making clear that professional certification and improving the quality of teachers is a significant part of the project. The quality of education is the measure of a university. Without highly-qualified teachers, it is impossible to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The professionalism of university teachers is reflected in systematic and in-depth study and research, innovative and inclusive approaches, the pursuit of truth, devotion to science, exploration and innovation. Without such spirit, university teachers would be other-directed or pedantic and universities would be valueless and soulless.

2.4 University Teachers' Professional Autonomy Is Important to the Promotion of Political Democratization

Democracy and freedom are inseparable. When Humboldt founded the University of Berlin, he explicitly set forth the principle of academic freedom, creating a free environment for university teachers' autonomy in scholarship and other aspects. With the development of China's political ecological environment, it has become imperative for university teachers to promote their sense of social responsibility, perform political duties, put into teaching practice modern philosophy of democratic politics, and contribute to the further promotion of democratic politics through education. Since the reform and opening up policy were initiated in 1978, China has made remarkable economic achievement. Today, China's political restructuring has entered a critical period. The fact that politics has influence on everyone's life makes people pay attention to it. Since public opinion is a basis of the top design, deepening reform and opening up requires great wisdom of the leadership as well as the involvement of the people all over the country. A university teacher who is professionally autonomous must be erudite and well aware of his or her responsibility in contributing to the promotion of political democratization.

3. THE STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING UP THE ECOLOGY OF UNIVERSITY TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY

University teachers' professional autonomy is at the heart of independent schooling. Creating a favorable ecological environment for university teachers' professional autonomy is essential to safeguard teachers' rights,

promoting the development of teaching profession and improving the quality of schooling.

3.1 Vigorous Promotion of the Establishment of Modern University System at the State Level

University teachers' professional autonomy is inevitably confined to the political ecological environment of a country. Undoubtedly, since the inception of universities, they have carried national responsibility. On the one hand, the development of a university is politically and economically restricted by its country. On the other hand, its development has influence on a country's politics and economy. Therefore, it stands to reason that universities should be subject to national regulation. China has always attached great importance to national management of universities, which, however, are strict and rigid and results to serious constraints to universities' autonomy. According to Max Weber, governmental interference in professorship is a significant reason leading to universities' loss of autonomy. In China, as part of modern national system, modern school education system has always been subject to governmental regulation; government exerts deep influence on the establishment of development of universities through its hold of social resources. For a long time, the development of the ecological environment for university teachers' professional autonomy has not been given enough attention. The objectives, administration and finance of universities have to be recognized and supported by the government. Universities and their teachers are in fact without school-running and professional autonomy.

Since reform and opening up, China has adopted effective measures to maintain school-running and professional autonomy of universities and their teachers, enacted a series of laws such as *Education Law of the People's Republic of China*, *Higher Education Law of the PRC*, *Provisional Rules on Implementing the Regulations on Academic Degrees* and *Common University Student Management Rule*, and energetically promoted the president responsibility system under the leadership of Party committee, improving the degree of universities' autonomy in teaching, research, personnel administration, finance, enrollment and other aspects. The above measures, however, are general and unclear. Although these measures are intended for promoting universities and teachers' autonomy, the result proves to be the opposite. Meanwhile, as China's economic system proceeding into a transition period, society and market are having growing influence on universities. Facing the temptation and pressure of market, universities lose their way and their teachers are anxious to achieve quick success and get instant benefits, which leads to their academic misconducts that are against the academic spirit.

Seen from a systematic and educational ecological perspective, universities are to some extent a kind of ecological system that constantly communicates with

external ecological environment on information exchange. The external ecological environment of higher education is determined by national political system, guidelines and policies. To enhance the ecology for university teachers' professional autonomy, efforts must be made in four aspects. First, providing legal guarantee for universities' schooling autonomy and their teachers' professional autonomy by applying the rule of law to universities and formulating and improving relevant laws and regulations. Second, strengthening macro-guidance over universities and giving them more power to decide on specific matters through the establishment of reasonable power system and balance the relationship between government and universities. Third, giving full play to the coordination role of social intermediary organizations and building bridges between universities and government and between universities and society; bringing into play the evaluation and guidance role of professional associations and societies in universities' professional activities to stress professionalism over administrative factors. Fourth, phasing out administrative ranks and raising academic standards. Instead of paying due attention to teaching and research personnel, the current system focuses on administrative personnel whose work should be providing services for the former; administrative personnel dominate over universities, holding the power of command and appointment (Qin & Huang, 2003). University teachers' professional autonomy is replaced by "professional heteronomy" that pleases the administrative personnel. Following the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, universities have become increasingly vocal about de-administration. Whether or not university teachers' professional autonomy can be achieved depends largely on cutting the cost of bureaucracy in universities and establishing an ecological environment based on academic standard.

3.2 Establishing Management System That Focuses on Teachers at University Level

University teachers' professional autonomy is confined not only by national management system for higher education, but also by the educational philosophy and administration of their universities. Over years, favorable ecology for university teachers' professional autonomy has been badly needed. On the one hand, under strict administration system, university teachers are subject to administrative instructions, devoid of objective attitude in academic pursuit and craving for awards and promotion. On the other hand, university teachers' share of academic resources is in some degree determined by their administrative ranks. With higher administrative rank comes greater academic discourse power, which eventually leads to academic hegemony. Without professional autonomy, many teachers choose to shirk principled struggle so as to protect their personal interest and keep themselves from incurring troubles.

3.2.1 Establishing Favorable Ecological Environment for Professional Autonomy and Rebuilding Academic Spirit

Robert Maynard Hutchins, former president of the University of Chicago, said, "There is only one justification for universities, as distinguished from trade schools. They must be centers of criticism (Boggs, 2002)." What is academic spirit? When Humboldt founded the University of Berlin, he explicitly set forth the principle of academic freedom. Today, academic freedom is still a fundamental condition for academic prosperity, development of knowledge and pursuit of truth in universities. Academic freedom is not a privilege, but a prerequisite for universities' fulfillment of responsibilities and the development of academic spirit as well as a core value of universities. Without academic freedom, there would be no criticism, innovation and unswerving pursuit of truth.

3.2.2 Establishing and Enhancing Regulations for Maintaining University Teachers' Professional Autonomy

At present, although the regulations of universities are intended for promoting teachers' autonomy, the result proves to be the reverse. Teachers have no autonomy in such affairs as major setup and course evaluation. Some universities even put down specific stipulations on how teachers go over exam papers. Such "standardized" measures have almost turned teachers into machines. To concentrate on institutional improvement is to abolish irrational regulations and rules that impose constraints on teachers, give professional autonomy to teachers and create a free environment for teachers to "think independently and express their mind" as said by China's former Premier Wen Jiabao.

3.2.3 Creating Humanistic Environment for University Teachers' Professional Autonomy

Professional autonomy is conducive to teachers' individual development, which will eventually bring prosperity and diversity to academic circle. Nonetheless, without tolerant attitude and inclusive environment, with diversity will also come disputes, conceit and arrogance and it will be impossible to reproduce a free thinking and all-embracing atmosphere like in Peking University in the past. In order to create a humanistic environment for university teachers' professional autonomy, we need to persist in the pursuit of truth, abandon sectarianism, uphold the values of diversity, openness, cooperation, competitiveness, mutual support and sharing, learn from each other and adopt a progressive and inclusive approach.

3.2.4 Strengthening Guidance Over and Management of Professional Autonomy

University teachers' professional autonomy is mainly reflected in teaching and research. Teaching autonomy refers to university teachers' autonomy in curriculum setup, determining teaching approach, expressing

academic opinions and choosing examination and assessment methods. Meanwhile, teachers who have research autonomy can select research topics based on their own expertise, carry out independent research and publish research results freely. Teacher's autonomy does not mean their thought, words and deeds are without any restraint at all. Teachers' rights have both private and public natures and must be subject to public supervision. Unbridled autonomy will inevitably lead to liberalism and anarchism. Because of the special strategic role that higher education plays in national and social development, university teachers' professional autonomy should be rationally restrained. "The relationship between higher education and society makes it necessary to view the former in a political perspective. Just like war is much too important to be left solely to generals." (Brubacher, 2002) Universities should not and can not be separated from government and society and university teachers shall not have privileges. University teachers' professional autonomy and academic freedom must be based on the values of academic prosperity, the pursuit of truth, serving the nation and cultivating talents. Only in this way can individual autonomy and national demand be highly unified and the value of education for individuals and society be realized.

3.3 Cultivating Independent Personality and the Spirit of Freedom at Individual Level

Professional autonomy has abundant connotations. It involves both non-personal factors and personal efforts. Apart from favorable external environment, professional autonomy also demands for teachers' autonomous awareness and ability. However, over years, under strict bureaucratic and rigid management, university teachers have been used to "obeying" management, teaching activities are arranged by administrative personnel, research project application should be based on relevant guides and so forth. As long as teachers strictly follow the regulations and rules, they can meet all assessment requirements and make headway in winning awards and promotion. Over time, teachers gradually become indifferent to autonomy and lose autonomous ability. Anyone who dares to stand on his or her own and seek to be different will be left out of assessment system no matter what accomplishment he or she has made. To truly achieve university teachers' professional autonomy, Efforts must be made in the following aspects.

3.3.1 Cultivating Professional Autonomy Awareness in University Teachers

Professional autonomy awareness indicates that teachers are clearly aware of their dominant role in professional activities and freedom to exercise professional autonomous right. Autonomous actions are guided by autonomy awareness. Only when teachers have established autonomy awareness can they have autonomous ability and exercise autonomous right. To establish autonomy

awareness, university teachers must first develop professional awareness, have clear understanding of their duties and be committed to learning and the pursuit of truth; they must establish subjective consciousness, be responsible, have no blind faith to any authority and stand up for themselves and their beliefs without succumbing to external pressure; they must also be self-motivated, have a pioneering spirit, exert their professional advantages and strive for new achievements besides completing their work; and they must establish critical awareness, take a separate stance from the herd, dare to challenge convention and authority and unceasingly improve themselves.

3.3.2 Improving University Teachers' Professional Autonomous Ability

Weber said,

Only by strict specialization can the scientific worker become fully conscious, for once and perhaps never again in his lifetime, that he has achieved something that will endure. A really definitive and good accomplishment is today always a specialized act. (Weber, 2006)

Professional ability is of great importance to professional autonomy, like commanders must exert their commanding ability to win battles after they get the commanding right. University teachers' professional abilities are seen in teaching activities, organizational management, teaching reflection, practical operation, criticism, research and sustainable development. It is a long and arduous process to cultivate professional ability, which can be made possible through continuous in-service training, regular academic exchanges, commitment to educational practices and scientific research.

3.3.3 Enhancing Professional Autonomous Ethics Among University Teachers

Professional personnel, if not restricted by professional ethics, would be unscrupulous and reckless, which will also have negative effects on society. To enhance autonomous ethics, teachers should improve their spirit of pursuing truth. Without wholehearted dedication to science and the pursuit of truth, university teachers may be tempted by personal interest and engage in disgraceful misconduct. Autonomous ethics contain the spirit of devotion. The dignity of teachers consists mainly in their devotion to academic career, as nobility and dignity only comes with wholehearted dedication to science (Weber, 2006). Autonomous ethics require university teachers to set strict demands on themselves, respect science and truth, have explicit understanding of professional autonomy, be true to university teachers' values and refrain from acting recklessly under the pretext of academic freedom.

In addition, establishing teacher's professional organizations is also helpful for realizing and maintaining university teachers' professional autonomy. So far, many countries have set up teachers' professional organizations,

such as National Educational Association in the U.S. and National Union of Teachers in the UK. Most of these professional organizations and associations represent the interests of teachers and aim to promote the professional development of teaching profession, safeguarding teachers' professional interests, strengthening the bonds between teachers and between education and society as well as help to boost the coordinated development of education and various social causes. Now, in China, various professional academic societies and teachers' associations are playing an important role in promoting academic exchanges and carrying out further training for teachers.

The production of an ecological behavior involves various elements within the ecological system, which is a reflection of the overall effect of ecological environment. To maintain the ecological balance of higher education, ecological principles and approaches are needed in ensuring harmonious development of internal and external environments of higher education. In terms of the external environment, government and society need to create favorable political ecological environment for teachers' autonomy based on relevant policies and regulations. Whereas a favorable internal environment for teachers' autonomy must be created through the introduction of advanced management concept, legal system and rational regulations and rules. The key to

university teachers' professional autonomy also lies in their personal efforts, that is to say that teachers must establish professional autonomy awareness, improve professional ability and enhance professional ethics. A favorable ecological environment for university teachers' professional autonomy can only be created through the joint efforts of government, universities, organizations and individuals.

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