Academic freedom despite contingency:
Working under the supervision of Professor Ryōko Niikura

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有期雇用教員における学問の自由
―新倉涼子教授のもとに働く―

ガイタニディス・ヤニス

Abstract

Debates on academic freedom most frequently concern the growing number of non-tenured academic positions and the ensuing deprofessionalisation of university education due to the insecurities associated with contract-based employment. On the occasion of the retirement of my senior colleague and supervisor during my three years of work as project assistant professor at Chiba University, Professor Ryōko Niikura, this research note aims to consider the possibility of academic freedom despite contingency. Of course, the objective is not to deny the fact that only tenure affords complete academic freedom, but to examine how management and advice from senior professoriate can build "pockets" of academic freedom that make contingency temporarily bearable. To demonstrate my argument, I use correspondence and conversations that I had with Professor Ryōko Niikura while being affiliated with Chiba University's Center for International Research and Education from 2013 to 2016.

要旨

学問の自由を課題とするほとんどの議論は、非常勤講師の増加とその不安定な状況から生まれる高等教育の非プロフェショナル化を訴えることが珍しくない。確かに、完全な「学問の自由」を可能としているのは終身在職権のある職のみであるに違いない。しかし、任期付の学職には「学問の自由」がありえないだろうか。本研究ノートは、新倉涼子先生の退職を機に、著者が非常勤助教として新倉先生のもとに働いた三年間を振り返って、先生が作ってくださった「学問の自由の空間」を分析する。ノートの目的は仕事の内容の評価よりも、学問の自由を語った文献を通して、先生との関わりがどのように見え、非常勤職の場合の上司の質がいかに大事か議論することである。抽象的議論でありながら、私を含め、いずれ上司となる若手研究者へのヒントとなれたら嬉しい限りである。

Academic freedoms

My mother always used to advise me before taking any examinations or job interviews, that ‘you have nothing to lose; people will either disagree with you and you would have learned something, or they will agree with you and you would have gained something.’ The purpose was, I guess, to prevent me from worrying about things that I could obviously not control or that it was too late to change, and to also suggest that I was free to make the best I could of the results of my efforts. This is the advice I had in my head when I first met Professor Niikura during the interview for a position that I ended up not getting at Chiba University. A couple of months later, having applied to a different job advertisement at the same institution, far closer in content to my interests than the one I had previously failed to obtain, I found myself again in front of Professor Niikura, for a second interview that felt like a *déjà vu* situation. This time perhaps I was more relaxed, yet, this time also, I felt I really needed this position, which seemed perfect for me. One month later, I heard that my application had been successful and that I was to start work from 1 March 2013 on a yearly contractual basis (for maximum four years), at Chiba University’s Center for International Research and Education.

It is perhaps no secret that today a growing number of doctoral graduates who choose to pursue a career in higher education, spend several years, if not their entire careers, in adjunct positions. These offer a relatively good pay (although rates can vary between universities) for a minimum of time spent teaching, but they are often based on a semester-based contract, which is, in the majority of cases, automatically renewed as long as there is a budget for the position and a minimum number of students attending the class. Before joining Chiba University, I was working as an adjunct at six different institutions, sometimes commuting as long as ninety minutes to go to teach a class that lasted the same amount of time. By the second year of being in that situation, I had already heard from colleagues about the various scenarios awaiting me in the next years, some sounding positive, and others less so. Interestingly, it seemed that the discourse on the adjunct professoriate in Japan swung between an “academic freedom” that adjunct positions with a decent salary and plenty of time for research and writing allowed, and another “academic freedom” which was associated with the stability of a tenured affiliation to one single university throughout one’s career. Both sides noted, of course, the downside of each of these situations: the adjunct professor had less legitimacy and institutional protection when he/she conducted research, whereas the tenured professor had less time to do his/her research because of the enormous amount of administrative

work that accompanies permanent contracts.

My new project-based position at Chiba was, in a sense, alleviating me from some of these downsides. First, it offered me a better salary than all my previous commitments together, and for at least the next four years, I did not have to worry about my employment as long as I was doing my job properly. It was perhaps a sort of contingent stability: I was affiliated full-time with an institution that covered my insurance and enhanced my academic legitimacy, but the project-based nature of my work, did not require me to attend faculty meetings or be involved in administrative work other than that related to the project. I was indeed "free" to focus on the tasks (but not necessarily my own research) for which I was hired to perform.

This brief description of my situation 4 years ago should already hint perhaps at the elusiveness of the concept of "academic freedom." As Michael Bérubé and Jennifer Ruth (2015, 88) argue in the context of the United States, academic freedom may be considered from the perspective of individual freedom to, for example, decide on the content of one's classes, or it may be viewed from the perspective of the freedom held by the scholarly community which is, for example, free to set up academic standards. On the individual level, academic freedom is also often associated with the freedom to do research and seek to understand and explain what one chooses to investigate, and also, in many cases, the freedom to make one's research available to the public. Despite the various degrees of "academic freedom" that are observed within the above understandings of the term (and which often depend on local regulations and the ethical guidelines of one's disciplinary community), the common presumption of all these "academic freedoms" is, as Bérubé and Ruth note, that scholars have the authority and independence to determine institutional goals without fear of being disciplined. This presumption, however, remains anathema to adjunct positions, because of these, as I briefly mentioned above, almost always excluding the adjunct from the decision-making processes of the institution which employs them. Adjuncts are usually hired on a course-based or project-based contract that frequently set up strict limits to the degree to which they can contribute to changing, updating or improving the status quo. Allowing this degree of participation would imply a certain degree of freedom to criticise one's employer and this, of course, remains unthinkable for non-tenured faculty. But maybe not in all cases, as I want to show in this short research note.

Indeed, as I plan to demonstrate below, the content of my work at the Center for

International Research and Education (currently Center for International Education) and the working conditions under Professor Ryōko Niikura who supervised most of my efforts during those years, allowed for an unprecedented degree of academic freedom, perhaps unthinkable in other adjunct situations. The objective of writing this note is not, of course, to undermine the criticism against non-tenure track academic positions. I am fully aware that I am able to see back to those years in such a positive light because that adjunct position has led now to a tenured one, at the newly opened College for Liberal Arts and Sciences of the same university. I am also entirely conscious of the significant role that the collaboration of other faculty members too, who worked with me (and continue to be precious collaborators today), played in permitting that level of academic freedom. Yet, I would like to take the opportunity of Professor Niikura's retirement this year, to consider how (tenured) senior faculty can make a difference in the professional lives of adjuncts. The argument is perhaps obvious: a good boss is always better than a bad one. But, contrary to the usual disinterest shown by senior faculty who tap your adjunct shoulder with such empty words of encouragement as 'it is really tough, isn't' (大変ですね) or 'don't worry, something will come up one day,' Professor Niikura's attitude made a difference. Below I explain why.

Methodology

The most easily accessible pool of information related to my professional exchanges with Professor Niikura was my email inbox, which I proceeded to filter so as to show only messages mentioning Professor Niikura by name (in Japanese or English). This allowed me to cancel all search results that returned the messages which only included Professor Niikura's email address, the number of which was of course much larger, but which did not necessarily concern her (or me) directly. The 269 correspondences that appeared then on screen were turned into PDF versions and combined into one single file, the content of which was copy-pasted into EKWords. EKWords is a software developed by (and freely accessible on the website[i] of) DJ SOFT, a company based in the city of Fukushima. The software allows the user to extract from a large amount of text written in Japanese and/or in English, words that are then listed by their frequency of appearance in the original text. From this list, I ignored email addresses, names of people or places, dates, greetings, and other words and expressions that would commonly be used in electronic correspondences among university employees or, more specifically, faculty staff involved in work with Professor Niikura. I then selected the four top words from the remaining list; these were 修正 - correction (used 235 times),

アンケート - questionnaires (216 times), 相談 - advice (188 times), グローバル - global (165 times)[ii].

Considering that I cannot reveal specific details of the electronic conversations in which these words were included, I shall rather treat them as thematic keywords that will allow me to frame my description of my professional relation to Professor Niikura and weave this description into an abstract discussion of what I call 'pockets of academic freedom.' The core argument of this short research note is that academic freedom in my case revealed itself through a process of negotiation, which was composed of small pockets of time in which I (and my colleagues) was allowed to develop and establish original ideas into institutional practice.

Academic freedom: four issues

Lynch and Ivancheva, in their critical ethical analysis of academic freedom, remind us that the term originated in Bologna in the 11the century and was ratified as part of the Magna Charta Universitatum in 1988 (Lynch and Ivancheva, 2015,73), which has since been signed by 805 Universities from 85 Countries[iii]. As already discussed, academic freedom is 'most commonly understood to refer to the freedom of individual teachers and students to teach, study and pursue knowledge and research, without unreasonable interference, institutional control or public pressure' (ibid.). However, various issues arise as to how the concept is interpreted, applied, lived and located. Indeed, despite its universal appeal, academic freedom is not without its contradictions as they are reflected in the history of, and politics surrounding it, as well as in the history and politics of the locus where it is discussed. In their analysis of these issues, Lynch and Ivancheva, in addition to the aforementioned increasing adjunct-ification of the academic workplace, identify four further challenges facing academic freedom today. In the rest of this short research note, I will use the four keywords stemming out of my correspondences with Professor Niikura, to describe vignettes that illustrate these challenges and how they were sometimes successfully overcome during my years working under her supervision.

Autonomy vs freedom: the significance of "correction" (shūsei)

As I was recently reminded by a colleague, many of us who choose an academic career, cherish the autonomy that usually accompanies the job. The concept of individual

freedom is in fact based on the high level of individual autonomy that is available in this type of profession, but as Lynch and Ivancheva remind us, this individualization of the concept of academic freedom comes often in conflict with institutional autonomy and the essentially common ownership of scholarship (ibid. 74); 'because the university as a corporate entity, especially as represented by its managerial elite, may be more aligned with state and multilateral agencies … (and) [s]enior academics can and do become co-opted into the elite governance structures of science and higher education (ibid. 73). Although tenured posts may allow for some resistance in case scholars are asked to correct, revise or align their work or opinion with an official position, adjuncts do not usually possess that advantage. Yet, one conclusion that can be drawn from the multitude of instances in which Professor Niikura asked me to revise my work (hence the keyword 修正 - correction coming at the top of list), may that have been an advertising pamphlet, a template for a student questionnaire, or a research paper, is that I was almost always certain that her demands never mirrored the institutional decision-making machinery.

Remembering now all these meetings that populated my weeks during at least the first two years at Chiba University, I can safely say that perhaps what characterised them all was their length, regardless of the agenda. Indeed, it became obvious very quickly that Professor Niikura was ready to discuss the minutiae of every task she had entrusted us with for as long as it was necessary. Consequently, we could easily spend one hour talking about one single paragraph that was meant to advertise one of our educational programs or collaboratively thinking about the best way to approach the use of one single picture during student guidance sessions. Although it may have at times felt that no final decision was made at the end of our discussions, and that further work was in need on our behalf in order to make our issues more concrete and easier to receive advice upon, I believe now that in hindsight, the degree at which time was so generously spent, allowed for a certain academic liberty. Instead of rushing into aligning our work with what she or the governing body of the university were expecting from us to do, Professor Niikura seemed to be allowing for space for us to both criticise official directives and also creatively employ them to construct something of a higher educational quality. At the same time, she also made sure to be the voice of the university when she felt it necessary, without however cutting through our hopes that change may come at a later point. In this sense, and this was quite important for me, she allowed us to own our work, to be invested in both drafting original content and correcting it while understanding why our autonomy does not always have to be in

conflict with that of the institution.
In this process where correction was not simply a necessary step drawing us closer to having our opinions accepted by and integrated into the required institutional format, but an attempt to negotiate a third alternative based on neither "our" nor "their" ideas, proved that despite my adjunct position, I was in a sense free to make institutional decisions while also learning about how to make them. And this was achieved in part thanks to the way Professor Niikura diplomatically enhanced our autonomy while protecting these same institutional interests.

Skepticism and critique: questions, questionnaires …and further questions

Perhaps, one reason why this attitude of Professor Niikura resonated with my (arguably still developing) way of working was the space it allowed for critique, an essential element of scholarly work. Indeed, again as Lynch and Ivancheva argue, '[s]cientific and scholarly work is also characterised by its "disinterestedness", its detachment from vested interests, whatsoever their origins, and its internal norms of "organised skepticism", where all truth claims are subject to critique and investigation by other scholars, no matter how sacred they may appear or how powerful the proponents' (ibid., 75). In this specific case, it became very clear from the start of my work at the Center for International Research and Education that I should seek third party opinions on the majority of my tasks, especially when these concerned students. Indeed, student feedback became a crucial component of legitimising the value of my work and the originality of the curricula that I and my colleagues were asked to develop.

As a result, another series of long sessions and electronic correspondences with Professor Niikura and other senior colleagues dealt with the writing up of questionnaires (アンケート) that were specific to our pedagogical goals. Criticism and critique ensued, first from the writings of my students, and then from the mouth of colleagues, including Professor Niikura, who arranged to visit my classes and listen to presentations of the pedagogical methods I follow in my teaching. This environment pushed me to look for evidence for my argumentation, which should be of course a prerequisite in every professional field, but it also allowed space for something more: it allowed space for skepticism. Spending hours and hours debating on the appropriateness of a question and on the numerous ways it can be interpreted by a student, allowed me to not only become conscious of my position within academia, within this university and in my classes, but encouraged me to critique practices that I

had experienced throughout my student life, when I had been on the other end of these course evaluation tasks.

Professor Niikura could have, if she wanted, asked us to tweak some feedback questionnaire that was already implemented in this or another university. She could have even used those questionnaires to strictly evaluate our accomplishments, without having to attend our classes herself or organise presentations on our teaching methods in and outside the campus. After all, we were not there originally to stay, and all she had to do was to make sure the project was brought to fruition. Yet, this did not happen, because it seems that Professor Niikura shared with me and some of my colleagues a certain scepticism about top-down decisions which often ignored what happened on the ground. Simultaneously, she also refused to entirely rely on student feedback to evaluate us, because she perhaps was convinced that something new and innovative could spring out of this constant questioning from all sides, to would prove the worth, originality and potentiality of our project.

I think it is thanks to this constant questioning, and the questioning of that questioning, that a balance of arguments can be achieved. And I am not talking here of the often falsely objective balance that is claimed by those who feel satisfied if they have simply shown consideration to all points of view, even those they know to be wrong. I am talking about the balance in the academy which ‘is nothing other than a synonym for the idea that we must look at all the evidence before coming to our convictions’ (Bilgrami, 2015, 16). Indeed, what is a more appropriate objective of questioning, than the provision of evidence?

Advice and the limits of autonomy-based freedom

Certainly and unsurprisingly, the word advice（相談）comes third in my correspondences with Professor Niikura. Who, indeed, would not seek the advice of senior colleagues on a regular basis, especially when they are in an adjunct position as I was? Although most of those discussions had to do with practical tasks and decision-making, at times I (and colleagues) sought advice on matters concerned more with the nature of our work and our work ethic. Indeed, academic freedom often fails to account for the relational aspects of our job. Freedom is frequently evaluated against the degree to which political pressure and invested interests challenge it, but it rarely considers the negative role played by emotions, personal conflicts and all that makes

working with other people more complex than we wish it to be (Lynch and Ivancheva, 2015, 80). On my part, I usually feel comfortable with the asociality and careless-ness that is stereotypically associated with my profession. There is no doubt that the requirements of my work have interacted with my personality, and I am now entirely convinced that this career fits my aspirations. But, in the instances when the relationality of everyday life returned back to the surface and could not be ignored, Professor Niikura's advice was liberating.

By liberating, I do not mean that Professor Niikura always agreed with me. This would be far from the truth. I use the word 'liberating' to note that her advice often freed me from the hierarchies of emotional well-being that characterise today's society and which sociologist Eva Illouz describes as 'the capacity to achieve socially and historically situated forms of happiness and well-being' (Illouz, 2007, 73). I am not perhaps alone in sensing that we live in a world that is more and more inclined to accept certain types of emotional reactions over others, and that it immediately associates these with certain social and cultural characteristics, codifying and simplifying thus the unfathomably complex nature of a human being. Giving advice in those situations simply resumes to established reactions patterned on types of personality rather than individual persons. To this day, I have no way of confirming Professor Niikura's intentions, but I can say that on the rare times that I sought her advice on such matters, I received no patterned reaction, but rather a space to express my concerns and leave her office with an alternative explanation for my discomfort. One regret may, therefore, be that I should have sought her advice more often.

The geo-politics of academic freedom: the national, the global and the super global

Considering the original purpose of my job, which had been to develop a Japanese Studies curriculum and generally contribute to the internationalisation of education at Chiba University, the fourth keyword, 'global', makes sense. It is associated with most of the initiatives I came to be involved in at the university, and, as a result, it was the object of constant debate between colleagues. Definitions of the word in the context of higher education abound and still attract sufficient media attention. Professor Niikura, however, seemed to refuse to want us to abide by one definition. Here, academic freedom meant for me '*the freedom to think*,' which Jon Elster so brilliantly and polemically defends against obscurantism (Elster, 2015). And the freedom to think, once reflexively and consciously associated with freedom in academia, means the realization

that ‘students who attend universities are not academically free to learn all-there-is-to-be-known, as those who teach them do not know what they are unable to know, due to the limits of their biography, their paradigms and their culture’ (Lynch and Ivancheva, 2015, 79).

Since my arrival at Chiba University, ‘global’ progressively came to signify ‘local.’ It was as if the vagueness of the meaning of ‘global’ started an almost obsessive search for the most precise description of the ‘local’. And perhaps Professor Niikura was aware of that paradox from the beginning, hence the constant corrections and questions/questionnaires, all there for us to try to grasp the ‘local’ before imagining the ‘global.’ Yet, global was not out of the reach of Professor Niikura. As I came to observe during a business trip with her, which took us and another three colleagues to three countries in the span of 6 days, she has tremendous patience when it comes to deal with what most would consider the “out-of-reach global.” Years of experience may explain this ability to seem at ease in all circumstances, but it maybe also has to do with the conviction that we ought to doubt generalized attempts to confront the global against the local; that, perhaps, as I dare read in Professor Niikura’s behavior, the global was an amalgam of locals, some known, others waiting to be discovered.

I have written and will continue to write on the geo-politics of what I teach and what I research. I am not going to repeat or expand my arguments here. But, what I can surely confess is that the freedom to think about and criticise the ‘global’, which remains such an essential component of my work here, allowed me to devise new pedagogical methods in my classes and to frame even my own research on contemporary religion and therapy in Japan in novel ways. The freedom to think is unique in that it enables the pursuit of other freedoms while rendering one conscious about the degree to which their thinking is contingent to themselves and to their environment. In short, under the guidance and supervision of Professor Niikura, the “global” at the Center for International Research and Education, presented itself as a multilayered and relational “local” that we tried and still try to appropriately visualize and explain, first to ourselves, then to our students, and to our colleagues.

Final words

‘[A]cademic freedom is not a law of nature. It is a practical, highly vulnerable, hard-bought acquisition in the struggle for intellectual freedom’ (Stone, 2015, 7). I

could not emphasise more this observation. Many of the discussions of the last four years (and perhaps of the discussions that have yet to happen) were in some way or another associated with both positive and negative reactions to the conditions of academic freedom at my institution, as I assume may be the case for many colleagues throughout the world. It seems in fact that although we do not mention that word, a lot of our anxieties, but also successes are connected to the levels that our academic freedoms are either suppressed or encouraged.

The above rather abstract account, about the pockets of academic freedom that I was fortunate to experience as an adjunct under the supervision of Professor Niikura, are perhaps, now that she is retiring, my own responsibility. I am indeed now the one who needs to nurture them and protect them so that others in my position may benefit from the satisfaction and love for work that they allow, even if temporarily.

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[i] http://www.djsoft.co.jp/products/ekwords.html (accessed 28 December 2016)

[ii] Other words in the top ten were 参加 - participation (149), ミーティング - meeting (125), and 日本 - Japan (123).

[iii] http://www.magna-charta.org/signatory-universities/signatory-universities (accessed 29 January 2016). It is interesting to note here that from Japan only the following 9 universities are signatories of the Magna Charta: International Christian University, Keio University, Kyoto University, Kwansei Gakuin University, Osaka University, Soka University, Tamagawa Unversity, Tokyo University of Science, University of Tokyo

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