A Study of the History of Students’ Independent Seminar Activities as a Form of Engagement in Academic Research:
Focusing on Independent Student-Led Seminars at the Faculty of Education at Tohoku University

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the history of students’ independent seminars from the viewpoint of voluntary engagement in academic research.

Independent seminars provide important opportunities for students to voluntarily participate in the world of academic research, and in the past, many students had experiences of participating in independent seminars. Such experiences have great significance in subjective learning for Japanese students who often engage in passive learning during high school education. In that sense, independent seminars can be said to have played a role as an initial engagement in academic research practice.

Therefore, it can be said that the birth and decline of such independent seminars are significant in terms of the change in the engagement of students in research. However, due to the diversity of independent seminars, instability of the organizations, etc., there are not much data available. Therefore, full-fledged historical research is yet to been done.

This paper presents a study on the development process of independent seminars, focusing on the independent seminars of the Faculty of Education, Tohoku University. In this study, conducting interviews of the participants of independent seminars is the main method of research.

Keywords: Independent Seminar, Engagement in Academic Research, History of Student Education

1. What is an independent seminar?

Independent seminars are voluntary research activities organized by student groups and organizations. It is based on the voluntary intention of the student and is an activity that is autonomously carried out without management of teachers and universities. In Japanese it is called “Jishu Zemi.” "Jishu" in Japanese means spontaneity, autonomy, or independence. "Zemi"
means seminar in Japanese. As a voluntary student-led activity, its form and contents are quite diverse, but in many cases, it follows the seminar format.

The most typical form of independent seminar reports on specific literatures and subjects, and discussions based on them. However, there are various other forms of independent seminars besides this. Instead of reporting by the students themselves, there were also independent seminars that external researchers were invited by the group to conduct lectures. There were also independent courses (Nakano Minoru Kenkyūkai, 2005) that university teachers voluntarily introduced, called "Jishu Koza." Other voluntary student research activities included the circle activities. Some of these activities were treated like independent seminars, but it was often the case that independent seminars were placed in a separate category from activities like the circle activities.

Even from the viewpoint of their relationships with universities, independent seminars are diverse. In many cases, students autonomously form study groups and carry out activities without involvement of universities and teachers. In some cases, university faculty members act as advisors. Independent seminars are sometimes officially recognized by universities and incorporated into the regular curriculum. For example, at the College of Arts and Sciences at Tokyo University, two types of seminars are held, the "Zengaku Zemi" (Specialized Seminar) and the "Jishu Zemi" (Independent Seminar), which involve the student community association. While the "Jishu Zemi" is not recognized as a credit, "Zengaku Zemi" is certified as a credit. "Zengaku Zemi" is organized by the College of Arts and Science. Therefore, it is nothing less than one of the university’s regular courses. The student community association is responsible for the recruitment of seminar lecturers, and it is necessary to conduct a "Jishu Zemi" at least once in order to apply for a "Zengaku Zemi" (according to the description on the homepage of the Student Community Association of the University of Tokyo College of Arts and Science).

2. Independent seminars in universities after the Second World War in Japan

In the past, independent seminars existed at many universities. Although not as widespread as they used to be, they are still ongoing. It is difficult to grasp the full range of independent seminars because too many of them have existed in various forms. However, there is no doubt that the independent seminar’s most prominent period was from the 1970s to the 1980s. Students who attended university in this era knew about independent seminars and have experience participating in them.

For example, when Hajime Kawamura joined the Tokyo University in 1979, there were numerous independent seminars on Komaba campus. Kawamura has stated that almost all the
classrooms of the Daiichi Honkan (main building of that campus) hosted independent seminars, some of which he participated in himself. He said that he learned of their existence through leaflets and signboards.

According to Kawamura, at Tokyo University’s College of Arts and Sciences, both the faculty and students established their own curriculum committees. The two curriculum committees negotiated and decided on which courses were to be taken. This seems to have been the predecessor of the “Special Seminar,” currently being managed by the student community association of the College of Arts and Sciences.

According to accounts in Todai Hyakunenshi Tsushi 3 (Tokyo Daigaku, 1986), accrediting independent seminars as regular courses was a matter determined during the student movement after 1968. According to the same book, in February 1969, the faculty curriculum committee started to formulate a curriculum revision proposal, which it discussed with the newly established student curriculum committee along with issues such as the bolstering of the general educational seminar and the recognition of the independent seminars credit (p.1013). The contents of these discussions were announced at a press conference on June 6 of the same year as follows. “The faculty curriculum committee decided to cooperate with the student curriculum committee on seminars established at the students’ request and on public offering (themes/lecturers) by the student curriculum committee” (p.1013)

The seminar thus revised has been called the "General Education Seminar" since 1970 (p.1014). It seems that the independent seminar certified as a credit, which Kawamura mentioned, was also set up in this way, and as mentioned above, is still being run by the Student Community Association of the College of Arts and Science at Tokyo University.

There was also a voluntary learning movement with different tendencies that arose from the independent seminar called the Independent Course (Jishu Kōza) Movement. The most representative of such independent courses was the Kōgai Genron or The Principal of Environmental Pollution established in 1970 by Jun Ui, an assistant professor at Tokyo University’s Department of Urban Engineering (Jun Ui, 2016). Ui also started an independent public course entitled "Daigaku-Ron“ or “University Theory“ in 1974. According to a brochure for this course, the whole theme was "ask about the existence of the university". The venue was classroom 82 at the Faculty of Engineering Building No. 8, from 6 pm to 9 pm, and the fee for admission was two hundred yen (Toshihiko Yoneda, p.31). Unlike general independent seminars, a university faculty member was to lecture. Subsequently, a course management committee was formed by the students, which then campaigned to establish other independent courses. Therefore, it can be said that this was connected to students’ voluntary learning activities.

Minoru Nakano, who joined Rikkyo University in 1970, also made an effort to establish an
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independent course. Nakano wrote about the independent course in the summer special issue of “Shingaku Zemināru” July 1976 as follows. “The independent course was supported by students’ intellectual desires and pursued a new university statue and academic view in the struggling process. It also explored the political and social meaning of the struggle”. (See Han Daigaku-Ron to Daigaku-Shi Kenkyū p.175). According to Nakano, this exercise originated in an independent course retracing the struggle to change Yokohama National University School’s name in 1966. After that, it expanded to Meiji University, Chuo University, Tohoku Welfare University, and Nihon University etc. (See Han Daigaku-Ron to Daigaku-Shi Kenkyū, pp.175-176).

In this way, a variety of independent seminars developed at universities in the 1960s and 1970s.

3. Faculty of Education Tohoku University and the independent seminar

(1) Emergence of the independent seminar

In the past, the Faculty of Education at Tohoku University had many independent seminars. When were these independent seminars founded, and when did they decline? Unfortunately, it is difficult to accurately trace the process of formation and decline of these independent seminars. However, thanks to a survey of people who participated in these independent seminars at the time, and some data investigation, the existence of the following independent seminars was confirmed.

1. Study Group for Textbook Issues (Kyōkasho Mondai Kenkyūkai)
2. Study Group for Children’s Culture (Jidō Bunka Kenkyūkai)
3. Study Group for Educational Law (Kyōiku Hōgaku Kenkyūkai)
4. Study Group for Japanese Education (Nihon Kyōiku Kenkyūkai)
5. Study Group for the Future of Teacher (renamed Study Group for the Future of Education in 1996) (Mirai no Kyōshi Kenkyūkai)
6. Seminar on Defectology (Shinshin Kekkan-Gaku Zemi) (Shōgai Zemi)
7. Seminar on Individuals with Disabilities (Shinshin Shōgai-Gaku Zemi) (Shōgai Zemi)
8. Seminar on Educational Psychology (Shinri Zemi)
9. Youth Subcommittee of Seminar on Educational Psychology (Kyōiku Shinri-Gaku Zemi Seinen Bunka-Kai) (Shinri Zemi)
10. Clinical Subcommittee of Educational Psychology Seminar (Kyōiku Shinri-Gaku Zemi Rinshō Bunka-Kai) (Shinri Zemi)
11. Seminar on Life Composition Education (Seikatsu Tsudzurikata Zemi)
12. Independent Seminar History of Education (Jishu Zemi Kyouikushi)
13. Study Group for Education (Kyōiku Kenkyūkai)

It is believed that the Study Group for Textbook Issues was not merely a seminar of undergraduate students of the Faculty of Education but encompassed the whole university as well as the Study Group for Children’s Culture. However, they also had a strong relationship with the independent seminars of the Faculty of Education, which will be noted here. According to Kazuhito Noguchi, who joined Tohoku University in 1980, an independent seminar that was commonly referred to as “Shōgai Zemi” changed its formal name from “Shinshin Kekkan-Gaku Zemi” to “Shinshin Shōgai-Gaku Zemi.” It has been confirmed in the document that the so-called "Shinri Zemi" had two subcommittees, namely the youth group and the clinical group (as described later). Here, all confirmed names are written.

Mikio Sato, who joined Tohoku University’s Faculty of Education in 1970, said that there was already a Study Group for Textbook Issues, a Study Group for the Future of Teacher, a Seminar on Individuals with Disabilities, and a Seminar on Educational Psychology when he arrived. Therefore, it seems that these groups had already been formed in the 1960s.

Sato joined the Study Group for Textbook Issues and participated in activities such as their efforts to support plaintiff Saburō Ienaga in the so-called “Textbook Trial”. This was a case filed by Ienaga, the author, challenging the Ministry of Education’s rejection of textbook certification. According to Sato, the members were predominantly students of the Faculty of Arts and Letters; a few of them were from the Faculty of Education.

The 5th National Student Symposium on "Education in Japan and the Textbook Trial" was held at Tohoku University from June 2 to 4, 1972. This was hosted by the National Student Liaison Committee in support of the textbook trials, and the executive chairperson of this meeting was Sato. The executive committee issued a report on this symposium entitled Kyōkashō Saiban no Shōri o Mezashite (Towards Victory in the Textbook Trials), which was extremely fruitful and included contributions from Yoichi Higuchi, Saburo Ienaga and many other famous people.

During his involvement in the textbook trial, Sato formed the Study Group for Educational Law, with the aim of studying these educational problems from a more theoretical perspective. He was a third-year student when it was established in 1972. This is one of the few examples that the establishment era was able to identify in this survey. According to Sato, the intention was to invite students to participate in the textbook jury trial support campaign, in order to establish the Study Group for Educational Law. The Japan Educational Law Association, founded in 1970, was also an influential factor. Sato said that there was opposition to administrative educational law research until the establishment of the society. It is against this backdrop that
Sato is said to have established the Study Group for Educational Law.

Kenji Kasama who joined the Faculty of Education Tohoku University in 1972 also said the same thing. Kasama felt that the name — "Study Group for Educational Law"— was critical to the administration’s philosophy. This criticism was a major incentive for Kasama to participate in the Study Group for Educational Law.

Kasama was recruited by Sato and joined the Study Group for Educational Law. Kasama talked about the state of the study group at that time as follows:

“Students of the Faculty of Arts and Letters Tohoku University and other university students also participated in the Study Group for Educational Law, and they were only doing supportive movements for textbook trials fighting. It was impossible to distinguish between the activities of the Study Group and the support movement” (by the interview with Kasama).

However, there seems to have been some confusion between the Study Group for Textbook Issues and the Study Group for Educational Law. Kasama says that the Study Group for Education Law had the room in the circle building. According to Sato, the Study Group for Education Law did not have such a room. It was the Study Group for Textbook Issues that had the room and was involved in supporting the textbook trial. However, this testimony is valuable as it shows that the relationship between the two groups was so deep, that the students who participated in their activities were confused as to which group’s activities they were participating in. It also shows that the Study Group for Educational Law was formed with the support for the textbook trials as an important motive.

The Study Group for Education is also an independent seminar that the establishment era was able to identify. This seminar issued a collection of essays called Hitotsubu no Tane (One Grain of Seed). The first issue was published in 1977, the second, the following year. Both were written in ballpoint pen on stencil paper. Sato still has copies, which I had the opportunity to borrow and browse. In the first issue published on February 21, 1977, it is written as follows, “it has been two years since the birth of the Study Group for Education; this year will be the third year of its birth”. As a result of this statement, it is clear that the Study Group for Education was established in 1975.

As mentioned above, independent seminars already existed in the 1960s, and it has been confirmed that even in the 1970s, independent seminars were being created one after another.
(2) “Tohoku Zemi (Tohoku Regional Education Students Seminar)” and independent seminars

Before taking the Faculty of Education’s independent seminar into consideration, one must investigate its relationship with the education department’s nationwide student seminar (Zenkyō Zemi). Zenkyō Zemi was a nationwide research platform that was run by students at the Faculty of Teacher Training and the Faculty of Education who helped facilitate independent seminars at each university. In addition to the national convention, conventions for each district were also held in places such as Tohoku, Kanto, Kinki, Hokushinetsu, etc.

According to “Mirai no Kyōshi” (Igasaki & Tsuchiya, 1978), the first Zenkyō Zemi was held at Kobe University from December 17 to 20, 1954. The “Nihon Kyōiku o Meguru Kyōiku-Kei Gakusei no Tsudoi (Meeting of Educational Students on Japanese Education)” that was held at Tohoku University from October 21 to 23 of the same year was another important step towards the Zenkyō Zemi (“Mirai no Kyōshi”, p.39). This was the first meeting of educational students nationwide. This description shows that the practice of convening national independent seminars such as this existed in Tohoku University at that time, though the details remain unknown.

The Tohoku regional education student seminar (Tohoku Zemi) was first held in 1955, the year after the first Zenkyō Zemi. The venue was Yamagata University (“Tohoku Chihō Kyōiku-Kei Gakusei Zemināru Hirosaki Taika”, 1980). According to this material, 170 students participated in the first Tohoku Zemi. Several materials, including this, related to Tohoku Zemi are in the Yamagata Prefectural Museum. This paper examines the relationship between Tohoku Zemi and the independent seminars conducted at Tohoku University’s Faculty of Education.

Many students from Tohoku University participated in the 19th Tohoku Zemi held in Yamagata Prefecture in 1973. In the “Dai 19-Kai Tōhoku chihō kyōiku-Kei Gakusei Zemināru Sōkuhō 3 (1973)”, the number of participants for each subcommittee is stated. According to it, participants from Tohoku University to each subcommittee were as follows, three participants at the Children’s Culture Subcommittee, one or more (number of people is unknown) at the History of Education Subcommittee, and one at the Foreign Language Education Subcommittee. Apart from this, contributions from Tohoku University students were also posted in the column of remarks about the subcommittees—one for the Teacher Issues Subcommittee and one for the Personality Subcommittee. In addition, one Tohoku University student made a comment about the memorial lecture. Overlaps may have occurred, but a total of eight Tohoku University students appear in this breaking news.

The Yamagata prefectural museum also has a report from Tohoku University that was submitted to the nineteenth Tohoku Zemi. It is a report entitled "History of Postwar Education" submitted by the Independent Seminar History of Education, which seems to have been produced by the same History of Education Subcommittee participants who were mentioned in the
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breaking news. The existence of this independent seminar has not been confirmed by previous interviews. In that sense, this can be said to be valuable historical material.

The Yamagata Prefectural Museum also has a set of bags that was distributed at the twenty-sixth Tohoku Zemi, which was held at the Hirosaki University in 1980. In it, the following three volumes of reports submitted by Tohoku University independent seminars are included.

1. “Tōhoku Zemināru Seinenshinri-Gaku PART II (Tohoku Seminar Youth Psychology PART II)” (Seminar on Educational Psychology, Youth Subcommittee, Tohoku University)
3. “Yutori”no Kentō (Study of “Yutori Education”)” (Faculty of Education Tohoku University, Study Group for the Future of Teacher)

The Seminar on Educational Psychology seems to be an independent seminar that was later renamed "Shinri Zemi" and continued to be called so. At this point, the Psychological Seminar had two subcommittees, a youth subcommittee and a clinical subcommittee. As mentioned earlier, the Study Group for the Future of Teacher already existed when Sato joined Tohoku University in 1970, and lasted until about 2000.

The name of the seminar Mirai no Kyōshi is the same as the "Mirai no Kyōshi" that was issued by the Secretariat of the Zenkyō Zemi (from the twenty-third seminar pamphlet “Kyōiku to Daigaku no Mirai o Tomoni Katarou”). It was also published in a report collating seminars three to ten (“Mirai no Kyōshi”, p.52). The title of the book written by Iagasaki and Tsuchiya, who were deeply involved in the seminar at that time, was also “Mirai no Kyōshi”. This name seems to have been a slogan in the Zenkyō Zemi. Therefore, it is thought that the independent seminar "Mirai no Kyōshi Kenkyūkai" at Tohoku University was deeply connected with the Zenkyō Zemi.

From the above, it is clear that the independent seminars at Tohoku University’s Faculty of Education contributed to activities closely related to the Tohoku Zemi from the 1970s to the 1980s.

(3) Development of the independent seminar

Independent seminars at Tohoku University's Faculty of Education continued into the 1990s. According to Tetsuji Kamiya, who joined the Faculty of Education in 1990, seven independent seminars were held on designated days of the week. The allocation was as follows.
Monday: Seminar on Life Composition Education
Tuesday: Study Group for Educational Law
Wednesday: Study Group for Japan Education; Study Group for the Future of Teacher
Thursday: Seminar on Educational Psychology; Seminar on Individuals with Disabilities
Friday: Study Group for Education

These seminars were held mainly in the lounge on the third floor of the building of Faculty of Arts and Letters and Faculty of Education from 5 pm onwards. Kamiya has said that he heard that these independent seminar activities started in the 1980s. He has also stated that while both the Study Group for Educational Law and the Study Group for Education existed for a long time, the Study Group for Japan Education and the Study Group for the Future of Teacher were only very recently established. This is interesting, showing student perception of the history of the independent seminar. As previously mentioned, it is thought that the independent seminar activities of the Faculty of Education already existed in the 1960s. The Study Group for the Future of Teacher is believed to be one of the oldest independent seminars. It is clear from Kamiya’s statement that the history of the independent seminar was not well recorded.

Taketoshi Goto who joined in 1994, talks about how new students were recruited by members of the independent seminars. According to him, student-made pamphlets were enclosed in the admission packages and mailed to each new student. The pamphlets stated that New Students Welcome Orientation, conducted voluntarily by the students, would be held at the civic center (public hall) the day before the entrance ceremony. Almost all new students participated in the program, as they had all received the pamphlets along with their admission papers. At the orientation, students were introduced to all the independent seminars, after which they attended a dinner party at a restaurant. Most of the new students also attended this dinner party. As a result of these recruitment efforts, more than half the student population participated in a variety of independent seminars.

Independent seminars established in the 1960s and 1970s were successful even in the 1990s.

(4) Disappearance of independent seminars

As of 2018, there are no independent seminars in the Faculty of Education at Tohoku University. Independent seminars that once thrived, have disappeared. So, when and how did independent seminars decline?

The history of this decline can be traced, in part, from interviews with people who joined Tohoku University in the 1990s.

Kamiya who joined the university in 1990 had this to say about the process of decline for
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each group: that the Seminar on Life Composition Education began to wane in the early 1990s, the Study Group for Education in the mid-1990s, and the Study Group for Educational Law in the late 1990s.

According to Goto, the Seminar on Life Composition Education did not exist when he joined in 1994. However, he said that he had heard that the seminar existed until several years prior. This is also consistent with Kamiya's statement. From these inputs, it appears that the disappearance of the Seminar on Life Composition Education occurred in and around 1992.

In light of this information, it is apparent that the decline of the independent seminars at the Faculty of Education began in the 1990s, only to rapidly escalate by the end of the decade. This claim is generally corroborated in other interviews. Masatoshi Saito who joined Tohoku University in 1994 and belonged to the Study Group for the Future of Teacher said that when the students of their generation were in charge, the number of students enrolling in the independent seminars began to decrease. Additionally, Goto who joined the university that same year and belonged to the Study Group for Educational Law said that around 1998, as the number of participants in the group began to dwindle, their activities came to a halt. Various measures were taken in an attempt to reverse the slowdown, such as changing the name of the seminar, but it was impossible to prevent.

Noguchi pointed to the restructuring of the Faculty of Education, a process that began in 1998, as a deciding factor in the decline of the independent seminars. By 2000, the Faculty of Education had been reorganized into five new course tracks. This reorganization rendered the student’s contribution ambiguous, and cost the independent seminars their support. Noguchi also suggested that the relocation of the Faculty of Education to a new building in 2002 deprived them of a place to hold independent seminars, which was another major reason for the seminars’ decline.

While these circumstances seem to have been a deciding factor in the decline of independent seminar activities, it is also true that the seminars had already begun to lose steam prior to this.

It is crucial to further investigate how widespread this trend was. It can be said that the history of the independent seminar’s growth and decline requires further input from the students’ own learning trajectory.

4. Engagement in academic research and independent seminars

Why did students participate in independent seminars? Also, what did students get out of their involvement in independent seminar activities? Given how diverse the independent seminars were, and given the eclectic nature of the era in which each independent seminar took shape, it comes as no surprise that the participants too had extremely varied outlooks. Any easy
generalization should be avoided. This paper introduces some of the independent seminar members’ thoughts, shared during their interviews.

According to Sato, because the student movement was at its peak, only a handful of general education classes were being held; therefore, students had no choice but to organize the seminars themselves if they wanted to study. At that time, classroom interference by students was also frequent. This is why many courses were not offered. Sato said that it was common to set up voluntary study groups under such circumstances, which constituted a unique moment in the history of the postwar university. This seems to have greatly influenced the formation of independent seminars because it brought about a situation in which students had to learn by themselves.

The fact that regular classes were boring, was another factor cited by interviewees as a reason for participating in the independent seminars. Such opinions applied specifically to general education classes. Unlike the present day where active learning, small group exercises, and lesson questionnaires are common classroom features, coursework in the postwar era didn’t excite much interest. Students looked to independent seminars for something different from the regular syllabus.

What was distinctive about these interviews is that they revealed the presence of senior students in the independent seminars. Goto talked about one such student. This senior student was a controversialist who discussed matters openly with all the graduate students. Goto said that this was a major reason why he was attracted to the independent seminar, and that he longed to be like that senior student. He also said that this senior student had a great influence on him, not only in terms of his participation in the independent seminar but also later on in life. It can be said that this is a case in which the model of self-formation becomes apparent, because it offers a glimpse of the impact that the academic of research can have on an individual. The availability of such a model to undergraduate students seems to have played a major part in drawing students into the world of academic research.

A critical attitude towards schools and society seems to have been a factor in students’ interest in independent seminars. This was clear especially in the 1970s, when the student movement was flourishing. In Sato and Kasama’s cases, the clear political challenge of the textbook trials presented a direct opportunity for independent seminar activities. Even in the 1990s, Goto said, it was cool to discuss social issues.

With respect to independent seminars at the Faculty of Education at Tohoku University, quite apart from the fact that they were a popular trend, a stable orientation process for new students also seems to have had an important influence on students’ decision to join the independent seminars. The fact that brochures for new students were enclosed in enrollment
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procedure documents, and that voluntary orientations were provided by existing students before the entrance ceremony was conducted, created favorable conditions for the longevity of the independent seminar. Even for students who weren’t politically aware or active, an independent seminar seems to have been accepted to some extent as an ordinary thing.

Nonetheless, by the 1990s, independent seminars were declining rapidly. As mentioned earlier, situations such as the reorganization of the Faculty of Education and the relocation of buildings played a part, but there was also a change in student consciousness prior to that.

Kamiya, who joined the university in 1990, said that he was surprised because a junior asked him when he ought to start preparing for the public service exam. This was when Kamiya was discussing independent seminars with him. It is interesting that such a topic, which has become common place today, was considered surprising at the time. Kamiya said that the collapse of the bubble economy has increased student interest in a career after graduation, and may have made academic research less attractive. Goto, who joined in 1994, stated that the feeling that they were getting together to discuss something fun, seemed to have ended with their generation. This statement shows how student consciousness was changing in the 1990s.

There was also a view that students did not have to do independent seminars because the university’s courses had improved. Criticism of regular college lessons, educationalism, or the school system itself—which were what motivated the creation of independent seminars—could now be addressed in regular classes to some extent. However, can the voluntary engagement in academic research, which is what characterized the independent seminar, be fully realized in the regular classroom? Further investigation on this may be necessary.

Conclusion

This paper sought to chart the creation, growth, and decline of independent seminars at Tohoku University’s Faculty of Education, mainly through interviews. However, it is obvious that this paper covers only a small part of the history of independent seminars. Further study will be necessary, including studies of independent seminar trends at other faculties and universities.

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