

CHE Colloquium

Institutional Autonomy, Academic Freedom and Public Accountability Towards Conceptual Clarification: A Thought Experiment

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Background statements:

1. Higher education systems and institutions the world over come in a striking variety of forms and mixes including their basic relations to the state and the political economy:

- * there are (still) societies where access to public higher education is considered a right while in some others the only effective higher education is provided by private universities or seminaries;
- * while some leading and familiar systems feature a clear division between effectively self-governing higher education institutions and the state (USA) others feature a large degree of centralised state control (France);
- * in some contexts academic life and institutions of higher education are organised around well-developed notions of collegiality, strongly entrenched tenure systems, disciplinary peer-review, professional organisations etc while in other contexts there is little effective sign of any of these; etc.

Problem: terms like “university”, the “state”, “academic freedom”, “institutional autonomy” and “accountability” tend to be used across the full range of these variations as if they have constant meanings irrespective of the particular contexts of application.

2. The South African higher education system is characterised by its own distinctive institutional formations and mix derived from its colonial and apartheid history and its current developmental/transitional stage.

3. Current South African debates and discourses about the specifics of institutional autonomy, academic freedom and public accountability is characterised by a strong tendency to invoke these as general *principles* or fundamental *norms*

- e.g. list of specific examples of the state deciding *what* can be taught in universities, *who* can be taught, *how* students will be taught etc (Jansen, T.B.Davie Lecture 2004) as so many violations of the *principle* of institutional autonomy.

Problem: in the absence of rigorous conceptual clarification there is a danger that this may amount to hypostatizing the particularities and contingencies of local circumstances into general principles.

4. Similarly South African discussions of the role of the state in higher education tend to abstract from relevant differences in social and political contexts and to generalise across these as if the relation between the state and higher education is a constant

- e.g. parallels drawn between interference by the apartheid state and by the post-apartheid democratic state as similar violations of institutional autonomy / academic freedom (Higgins, Jansen)

Problem: what, if any, difference does it make to the assessment of similar attempts at government interference / steering of higher education if this is undertaken by a legitimate and democratic state rather than an illegitimate and authoritarian state?

Towards conceptual clarification

I propose consideration of a range of relevant *ideal-typical* variations in a *thought experiment* aimed at clarifying some basic concepts. Note that it is the point of these ideal types that in their “pure” form they do *not* correspond to any actually existing institutions of higher education. They are to be considered as

aides to clarify our thinking.

Thought experiment: relevant ideal types of higher education institutions

A: In relation to the principle of public accountability

- 1: a completely *commercialised* enterprise of higher education run for profit;
- 2: a *fully funded* institution/university supported and controlled by a church or other civil society organisation;
- 3: a *private* university, fully endowed and not state-subsidised (but in a context where tax breaks encourage donations to education);
- 4: a *public* university funded by a mix of state subsidy, student fees, independent fundraising and endowments;
- 5: a *state* university entirely dependent on public subsidisation.

Question: in which of these cases, and to what extent would the *principle* of public accountability apply (and what is the role and responsibility of the state in this regard)?

B: In relation to institutional autonomy

1. A *functional* institution with an *inwardly oriented* and management-focused system of governance and a well-developed capacity for administration and the delegation of authority;
2. A *functional* institution with *democratic representivity* in governance system ensuring contact with civil society and societal needs along with capacity for administration and the delegation of authority;
3. A *dysfunctional* and internally and externally contested institution with *limited representivity* in governance and poorly developed systems of delegation liable to internal autocratic control and endemic crises;
4. A *dysfunctional* institution with *democratic representivity* in governance system but poorly developed capacities for administration and the delegation of authority.

Question: which of these cases would qualify for institutional autonomy (= conditional autonomy – Hall?) and what is the role and responsibility of the state i) when they do and ii) when they don't?

C: In relation to the principle of academic freedom

1. (Traditional German) *professorial autonomy*: the professorial chair as definitive seat of academic authority;
2. (Cambridge) system of *collegial* academic self-governance;
3. *Discipline-based* practice of academic freedom with strong and entrenched tenure system, effective peer review and professional organisations;
4. Dual system: (*Professorial*) *Senate* with responsibility for, and limited to, academic sector and (*representative*) *Council* with responsibility for management and administration;
5. *Managerial paradigm*: academic teachers and researchers accountable for performance to line-managers in terms of defined managerial objectives ;
6. *State regulation*: academic teachers and researchers as qualified and certified functionaries in general public service administration.

Question: in which of these cases can the principle of academic freedom be justified i) internally in relation to academic life and ii) externally in relation to society and the state?

D: Versions of the state (in relation to institutions of higher education)

1. An *authoritarian* state ruling by coercion and decree without any legitimate democratic mandate;
2. A *totalitarian* state centrally managing all aspects of the economy and public life including higher education (and claiming a basic democratic mandate);
3. A *liberal constitutional* state recognising the independence of civil society and the private sector generally, and the principle of academic freedom in the sphere of higher education specifically;
4. A *democratic* state in which the ruling party derives a broad electoral mandate for policies affecting the higher education sector;
5. A *developmental* state taking responsibility for putting in place the framework conditions for qualitative improvement of the higher education system in the longer term?

Question: What difference, if any, does it make to the legitimacy of state interference in / steering of higher education matters if it is a authoritarian / totalitarian / liberal constitutional / democratic / developmental state?

Provisional conclusion: re-stating the problem

It may assist in conceptual clarification to work through the above thought experiments one by one, e.g. to establish the application of the principle of public accountability to cases involving public funding but *not* otherwise, or to relate the principle of institutional autonomy to certain qualifying thresholds etc.

In practice, though, things are much more complex: application of different principles overlap while both the state and higher education institutions are interactive moving targets. With a clearer conceptual grasp of the relevant principles it may be possible to make some progress in their concrete applications.
