ACADEMIC FREEDOM

under

OUTCOMES BASED EDUCATION AND TRAINING

in

SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates a general perception amongst academics that outcomes-based education and training, (OBET) together with the prescriptions around the national qualifications framework, (NQF) have an inhibiting impact on academic freedom in higher education in South Africa. It proposes an alternative view: namely, that academic freedom is in fact greatly enhanced by the architectural design of OBET. This argument is built around the distinction between educational inputs and outputs, which represent the domains of academics and quality assurance agencies respectively. It acknowledges, however, that freedom should be exercised within the context of national imperatives, as long as these imperatives themselves are not educationally restrictive. These views crystallize in the recognition that the right of academics to enjoy academic freedom presupposes an obligation of discretion – a phrase coined to describe the peculiar responsibilities imposed on academics by the new educational paradigm.

INTRODUCTION

Various references to the subject of academic freedom suggest the following range of liberties (by no means exhaustive) implied by the concept: the freedom to express contradictory, even controversial views; the latitude to extend debate beyond what is generally accepted as morally, religiously, socially or politically correct; the licence to challenge policies, principles and even founding tenets of the entrenched establishment; the privilege to bend the rules (as in the case of the employment of poetic licence).

Dworkin (2002:1) emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between academic freedom and freedom of speech. His definitions of these two concepts coincide with popular opinion, namely that the former is a “privilege of certain academic institutions…” while the latter is “widely considered to be a general right”. He warns that a fine line separates freedom of speech as a desirable human right, from its application as an undesirable infringement on the rights of others. Somewhere across the blurred zone that defines the frontiers of politically- and-other-correct speech, lies the prohibited zone often encroached upon under the guise of freedom of expression. Depending on context, this area is becoming increasingly sensitive – it is the source of, amongst others, “anti-Semitism, sexism and political extremism”. (Dworkin, 2002:1)

This opinion suggests that academic freedom can be employed as a tool for the purpose of justifying extremist notions: at best, it may reflect an insensitivity towards its target; at worst, it may provide the platform for expression of blasphemy, sexism, racism and so on.

Academic freedom is a qualified freedom, which designates liberties within an academic context. As such, it serves as an antidote to intellectual parochialism in our institutions of higher learning. Clearly, academic freedom belongs in the hands of the responsible academic – the true, balanced, integral champion of the common good of mankind in whose hands the progress of a nation is entrusted. In the hands of anyone less endowed it can become a tool capable of dismantling the very foundations upon which nation building is premised.
A critical, underlying stance of this paper is that academic freedom is integral to the healthy maintenance of academic enquiry. It should be entrenched in our institutions of learning. It should be encouraged so that the knowledge and attitudes that govern our lives are continuously interrogated to ensure growth, development, and liberation of the mind, the spirit and, in general, the lives of mankind.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY

In an attempt to narrow down the focus of this paper, a brief reference to Dlamini’s distinction between academic freedom and institutional autonomy in South African universities would help. He warns that government funding of higher education is a chief threat to institutional autonomy – and that institutional autonomy is a prerequisite for academic freedom. (Dlamini, 1997:3) Dlamini and others seem to concur that higher education institutions in South Africa generally enjoy institutional autonomy. It is my contention, however, that during this transitional phase of our democracy in South Africa, certain laws and government decrees introduced to address injustices inherited from our apartheid past, will necessarily impact on the autonomy of institutions, broadly defined as “the freedom of the university to choose (on academic grounds) “who should teach, what should be taught, how it should be taught and who should be admitted as students” (Dlamini,3)” A case in point could be laws governing equity issues, which directly impact on “who should teach” and “who should be admitted as students.” Any discussion on “academic freedom” in the South African context, therefore, should bear the distinction between academic freedom and institutional autonomy in mind, so that arguments or deliberations can remain focussed. All too often diatribes on the demise of academic freedom in the New South Africa are essentially arguments lamenting a perceived encroachment on institutional autonomy. This does not imply that institutions of higher learning should not defend their independence, especially in this time of increasing stakeholder involvement. As has been mentioned earlier, institutional autonomy and academic freedom are mutually dependent. However, our higher education institutions are not insular entities! They need to deliver the human resources needed to achieve a nation’s strategic goals at a given point in time. As such, they are therefore accountable to the nation which sustains them. In South Africa, more than ever before, our institutions need to gear themselves to deliver according to the Human Resources Strategy, which is clearly formulated around a transformational agenda. This agenda, infused in all sectors of our nation, should be evident in the manner in which higher education institutions conduct their business as well. To this extent, institutions of higher learning are accountable to national strategic goals.

INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY AND INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

There is a fine line between institutional accountability, and institutional autonomy. Institutions of higher learning should be autonomous, but this does not mean that they are not accountable to the nation that spawns them. Institutional accountability should therefore not be perceived as an erosion of institutional autonomy, as long as institutions strive to achieve overarching national strategic objectives, as they manifest in the core business of education and training. When this obligation (to account to the nation) is taken too far by national quality assurance agencies, especially if it becomes an interference in the specialist expertise of academics, the institution’s autonomy is encroached upon, and academic freedom would then be compromised.
The National Qualifications Framework (NQF)
The introduction of a national qualifications framework (NQF) in South Africa, which is intended to incorporate both vocational and academic qualifications, is generally perceived amongst academia in higher education circles as cumbersome. (South Africa, 2003:8) This view is often expressed with reference to the prescriptions within national policy that perpetuate outcomes-based education and training (OBET) as the preferred approach to the delivery of education and training in South Africa. The emphasis on skills-based learning based on unit standards and demonstrated competences is perceived, especially within higher education circles, as a fragmentation of the learning process, accompanied by an over-emphasis on practical competences (South Africa, 2003:8). In short, vocational competence is perceived to enjoy pre-eminence over cognitive astuteness. The pre-eminence of outcomes over knowledge (or “content”) in the design of learning programmes is interpreted as a critical flaw in the reconfiguration of higher education in South Africa. (Allais, 2003:17)

It is not the purpose of this paper to enter into a protracted defence of each component of OBET and the NQF. However, it will be argued that within the architecture of this new higher education paradigm lies the space for promoting academic freedom.

Stephanie Allais, in her article titled “The National Qualifications Framework in South Africa: a democratic project trapped in a neo-liberal paradigm?” suggests quite unambiguously that

the problems with implementation are associated with a marginalisation of curriculum and pedagogic issues within the NQF approach, and its tendency to close down debate.

(Allais, 2003: 4)

The two criticisms mentioned here are:

- the marginalisation of curriculum and pedagogic issues. Allais joins a growing number of HE commentators who question the shift from a content-based curriculum design, to an outcomes-based one. Essentially, she voices the sentiments of a significant number of critics who are not convinced that the perceived neglect of input variables, like subject matter, is justified in the new outputs-oriented, assessment-based learning philosophy.
- its tendency to close down debate. This view is based on her claim that the NQF has been marketed in the rhetoric of emancipation heralded by the post-1994 democracy. This euphoria, she maintains, has insulated the new educational paradigm from surgical scrutiny.

Words like “restrictive”, “reductionism” (Allais, 2003:11;17), which refer to the South African NQF, reflect Allais’ view that academic freedom has been muzzled in the new educational dispensation. The rest of this paper will investigate these perceptions.
The Goals of the NQF

It is no secret that the NQF has been erected as a tool for educational, social, economic and related reform. This transformation of the provision of learning in SA cannot be separated from the political agenda – nor should it. The liberating political agenda inherent in the NQF is itself a mechanism capable of transforming the educational landscape from the prescriptive, insular, teacher-centred, rote learning approach of the previous dispensation. A brief overview of international trends in education will convince most commentators that the new system, given its weaknesses, is comfortably positioned to meet the challenges of learning in the 21st century. Much in this regard can be inferred from the objectives of the South African NQF:

- To create an integrated national framework for learning achievements;
- Facilitate access to, and mobility and progression within education, training and career paths;
- Enhance the quality of education and training;
- Accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities;
- Contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large.

A close, critical analysis of these objectives reveals a balanced framework for expanding learning opportunities in an equitable manner for the purpose of nation building and individual growth. It is an opening up – a dismantling of barriers of control – rather than a closing in or narrowing down for the sake of satisfying a political agenda. It is critical to note that the national objectives of the NQF do not contain one element of intent that is discordant with the ethos of a true academic in the 21st century, who accepts ethical social engineering as one of the ultimate outcomes of education. Admittedly, the project is an ambitious one, given the fragile condition of the socio-economic platform on which to implement it. It is true that the test of validity would only be evident in practice, at an operational level, when objectives translate into practical implementation. But the intention of releasing the human spirit to the benefit of the individual and society, through education and training, is an honourable one which needs to be supported.

This expansiveness reflected by the goals of the NQF is not limited to a national strategic level, but is evident in every structural detail of templates which guide the teaching and learning process - from programme design to final assessment guidelines. This category, namely teaching and learning, (including research) constitutes the core business of higher education institutions. It is here that national imperatives should manifest themselves – but it is equally important that the academic’s autonomy should be upheld in this category. By drilling down to the operational level, where academics are involved in teaching and learning activities, I hope to demonstrate that academic freedom to experiment, to employ initiative – essentially to expand the frontiers of chosen disciplines – is alive and well in OBET.

Inputs and Outputs

The flexibility of OBET lies in its design as an outputs-based approach to the delivery of education and training. In the past, academics who are highly specialised in their disciplines
were inhibited by prescriptions which mapped the content requirements (syllabi) for a specific subject and learner group. This preoccupation to standardize content matter is typical of an inputs-based approach to education and training – and is in direct contrast to OBET.

OBET does not impose such prescriptions on academics, and is therefore more suited to the development of programmes in higher education. Academics need to constantly incorporate research-led knowledge in curricula, rather than be bound by archaic theories and outdated information that have little or no bearing on current technological advancements. Knowledge is in flux – and therefore academics should be allowed the flexibility to offer relevant learning material. OBET ensures that the inputs (subject content) of a learning programme are left to the discretion of the educator, who is assumed to be the best suited to decide on the latest and most current material appropriate to her subject. This sovereignty constitutes the space for the exercise of academic freedom within the new educational paradigm.

The outputs (outcomes) on the other hand represent the framework within which education and development should occur. They are the manifestation of national goals and imperatives in the lecture theatre. Educational outcomes therefore represent the educational end-products, achieved through a cascading process which originate from a national strategic plan. They depict the alignment of the learning event with national goals – for which the institution will assume accountability. They do not impose on the educator’s primary area of responsibility, namely the inputs. Academics have striven hard to maintain autonomy over their disciplines. The country’s conversion to OBET, therefore, represents an achievement on this front for academics, and should be celebrated as such.

The relationship between the past and the present is a reciprocal one. In the past, inputs were controlled by educational authorities, to the extent that educators were evaluated according to their faithful adherence to content prescriptions in syllabi. The effect was that “textbook-bound teachers” emerged. In worst-case scenarios, they simply ensured that they were a page ahead of the class in order to qualify to teach. Such educators, protected by a teacher-centred philosophy, were unable to offer the crucial basic principles which underpin the disciplines which they taught, thereby discouraging deep and lifelong learning. Yet they enjoyed more favourable evaluations than the experts in the field. Subject experts, who often felt it necessary to deviate from the dictates of the syllabus in order to consolidate crucial foundational concepts, were frowned upon. Teaching “mechanics” did well in this environment; subject experts and academics failed. Teaching conformists excelled; progressive non-conformists were often censored. Experimentation and research were hampered. The result was that academic creativity was severely stunted under the old dispensation, as was academic freedom.

OBET effectively addresses this unsatisfactory state of affairs, by ensuring autonomy around core business of educational institutions, while at the same time providing a framework within which the educational goals of a nation can be pursued. In summary, therefore, inputs, the domain of the academic experts, are left to the discretion of such experts, while outputs, the domain of national strategic planning, ensure that all learning events are aligned towards the achievement of the national goals of the NQF.

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1 This argument, in this specific form, is more applicable to Technikons, which had to contend with external audits in the form of SERTEC evaluations during the pre-1994 era in South Africa. Universities were not subjected to external audits, and therefore evolved around a culture of non-accountability.  I would argue that the call to accountability by the nation, through the NQF, is the main reason that university academics feel their space has been invaded, and their academic freedom curtailed.
The purpose of outcomes, therefore, is to ensure alignment to national objectives! They are a critical component of curriculum planning in higher education. I believe that there is no justifiable reason (or none proffered till now) why higher education institutions in South Africa should not embrace the OBET paradigm. OBET promotes academic freedom in the autonomy around its inputs, while it ensures accountability to the “extended agenda” of the NQF through its outputs.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

An integral function of any higher education institution is to maintain, monitor and account for the quality of its education and training. The assurance of quality is incumbent upon any academic charged with that responsibility. Stephanie Allais has the following to say about quality assurance under OBET:

…what appears to be happening is that individuals with subject expertise in the area to be “quality assured” are not involved in the quality assurance processes; instead, people who are experts in “quality assurance”, who understand the “quality assurance system” will evaluate programme delivery. Specialists, people who actually know their field, whether that is an occupational field like construction or a curriculum field like physics, are given very little responsibility within this system…

(Allais, 2003:16)

What Allais purports as a shortcoming within the new quality management systems under the ETQAs, I have argued to be its strength: externally-imposed quality assurance should focus on the outcomes, while the subject expert enjoys the academic freedom to manage the quality of the inputs.

Allais identifies two practitioners in the above extract: the subject expert and the quality assurer, and goes on to infer that the subject expert’s role is sorely diminished in the quality assurance exercise. While the assurance of quality is an integral element of any system, including the educational system, one needs to bear in mind that the academic is not only a professional educator, but a highly specialised subject expert as well, hence the best qualified to pronounce on quality issues within her field of expertise. The delivery of knowledge in the lecture theatre is therefore the sole responsibility of the lecturer. Any questioning of an academic’s choice of learning material should be limited to its relevance to the prescribed outcomes. This ensures that the paths (not path) to attaining those outcomes are decided by academics, who have the freedom to impose their specialist knowledge on the learning programme, unhindered by content prescriptions. Academics have carte blanche to exercise their unquestionable subject expertise to its full. Personal research, current research, tailor-made interdisciplinary designs to subject offerings are all examples of learning packages that only the expert in the field is able to deliver – and should be allowed to deliver, as long as the outcomes of the programme are achieved!

It seems appropriate, therefore, that the quality assurance expert need not (necessarily) be a subject expert, for the quality assurance process is not primarily directed at inputs (the academic as the champion of the specific discipline is best suited to decide on its quality) but at outputs. This slight, yet significant re-focussing is critical. The apparent oversight around content, as suggested by Allais, is in fact a deliberate statement of confidence in the ability of
academics to quality-manage their own discipline. The quality assurance process is intended to make pronouncements on a host of deliverables which include alignment to national objectives. It ensures that while the scholarly freedom of academics remain uncompromised, their outputs are monitored in terms of institutional and national objectives. The specific focus of the quality assurance process on outputs, rather than inputs, should be a crucial factor in the development of a brief for quality assurance agencies in higher education, and will constitute the subject of further research.

It is therefore precisely this – the design of prescribed outcomes, rather than the design of content syllabi, that distinguishes OBET as an educational philosophy that enshrines academic freedom. Specialists in their fields of study have a free reign to offer their courses unencumbered by previously defined subject matter and material prescribed by academic planners.

**CONCLUSION**

The scope for academic freedom within the teaching and learning environment has, according to the views expressed in this paper, been expanded well beyond the potential offered in the previous educational dispensation. This places a tremendous responsibility on academics – an obligation to apply his or her discretionary powers when choosing learning material and deciding on methods of delivery. The concerns around standards, access, assessment of competences, language as barriers, and so on, can be effectively addressed through a crucial requirement within the armoury of the new-age educator: an *obligation of discretion*. This concept relates to the pivotal, critical role accorded an educator in this new dispensation, and is the direct consequence of being afforded academic autonomy. Those who have embraced the obligation of discretion will develop mechanism to deal with diversity, to incorporate personal and collaborative research findings in their offerings, to offer developmental trajectories as well as enrichment and fast-tracking opportunities to learners, thereby promoting competence-based rather than time-based learning. In short, the destinations of learners are clearly defined for them by the outcomes, but the paths that lead to them are determined through a symbiotic engagement between the academic as guide, and the learners. The different paths of learners striving towards a common destination represent the broadened scope for academics within which to exercise their academic freedom, while the achievement of outcomes affirm that the learning process will contribute to “the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large.”
REFERENCES


