CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, FREE STATE

SOME PRELIMINARY VIEWS ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY

Compiled and edited by Laetus O K Lategan

1. Conceptualisation

In South African universities the academic autonomy of the institution plays an extremely important role. In simple terms university autonomy refers to the degree of self-governance of a university. Thus university autonomy entails the self-regulatory or internal power of the university. In accordance with their private act or statute a university does have the competence to determine its own style and direction and full responsibility for the consequences arising from this competence. The university arranges, in accordance with its own private act or statute, matters such as the contents and method of instruction, examination and the criteria for awarding of degrees. With this the university remains within the bounds of its competence as academic social-form and at the same time it provides room for the university to implement internal self-management.

The overemphasis of academic freedom has often led to conflict with institutional accountability. Therefore, up to recently, academic affairs - the promotion and control thereof - were in the hands of the universities. Universities were the sole owners of academic affairs, policies and decisions. The state (to be more precise, the Educational Ministry) had no say in these affairs of the universities. Thus: the result was a large degree of autonomy and an absence of state interference. The state in particular, played no role in university curricula, the setting of competency standards or the certifying exit qualifications. However, some of the professional councils did have concurrent powers over the training competency outcomes of aspirant professionals.

This state of affairs is changing rapidly. The described situation is no longer acceptable, as national reconstruction and development demand a totally new approach to education and training. It is demanded from universities to become more accountable to the society and the community. This notion is based mainly on the belief that accountability is owed to society, because society is not only the major funder, but the major beneficiary of higher education.

2. The role of government

There are different perspectives on the state’s involvement in higher education. One viewpoint is the one where universities are “required” to resist state interference and to offer their academic staff protection under the banner of academic freedom.
It is therefore debateable if there are any universities that would support the medieval model of institutional academic freedom whereby an institution would reserve its exclusive right to determine who teaches, who are appointed and what should be taught.

Universities in South Africa have never been without state interference. If we look back at our history, we notice that persons who supported the state and who were sympathetic towards ideologies propagated at the time managed many institutions. There were also institutions that used their academic freedom to oppose the state’s policies. The state in turn interfered for example by entering university premises uninvited, harassing protesting students and generally made life difficult for the academe that were seen as dissenting at the time.

The lines between state and the academe in South Africa appears to have become somewhat blurred. Renowned academics have contributed to national policies and practices in higher education, and have made significant contributions to better (higher education) governance in South Africa within the ideological context of a democratic social order. There are many that would argue that higher education is now better equipped to meet South Africa’s future labour needs and that it was government’s initiatives that contributed to this. Whether the state indeed has a legitimate and decisive leadership role in higher education is still debateable. In contrast to our situation, some universities in some developed countries are, when viewed from a South African perspective rigidly state controlled. Some salaries are determined on a national level, the institutions are subjected to grading processes and some institutions are somewhat regarded as state training entities rather than independent universities.

South Africa is not immune from the abuses of managers in higher education. Some examples are the excessive salaries of some VC’s, and the financial and administrative irregularities that regularly plague our institutions. It can be argued that state intervention in higher education is not only desirable but that it is for example a necessity to direct the growth of a developing country and to curb mismanagement. The current “marriage” between academic leaders and the state could be an indication that the academe are currently in command of the direction of higher education. There is no doubt that enormous progress has been made to the normalisation of society, democracy, freedom of speech, economic growth, and financial stability. It can be further argued that this synergy is good and that institutions must wholeheartedly embrace state directives.

What is however noticeable is the current lack of protest and public debate emanating from universities on controversial issues. It is as if the academe has either lost its independent voice or that the current state of affairs is above any critical reproach and therefore acceptable. We must realise that we are inseparable linked to a greater continent and an unstoppable wave of social changes. Africa is unfortunately characterised or caricaturized by mismanagement, incompetence and a spirit to blindly conform to the ideology of a dominant ruling elite, and as a consequence suffers immeasurably from
ruling elite changes. This is to be understood as the ruling elite commands most of the resources and loyalty brings rewards. Dissenting voices are seen as unpatriotic and has cause some of Africa's best academics, writers and intellectual to seek safer havens in South Africa, Europe and the US. The loss of these minds to Africa has made it easier for mismanagement and despots to thrive and grow. Africa has furthermore become a fertile valley were the continent nurtures, protects and develops its own dictators and despots. It is for this reason that the academe must have an independent voice and must treat with caution, the state’s desire to become involved in the management affairs of higher education institutions.

The central purposes of a university are the pursuit of truth, the discovery of new knowledge through scholarship and research, the study and reasoned criticism of intellectual and cultural traditions, the teaching and general development of students to help them become creative individuals and productive citizens of a diverse and pluralistic democracy, and the transmission of knowledge and learning to a society at large. Free inquiry and free speech within the academic community are indispensable to the achievement of these goals. The freedom to teach and to learn depends upon the creation of appropriate conditions and opportunities on the campus as a whole as well as in the classrooms and lecture halls. These purposes should be reflected in South African universities’ values namely that of pluralism, diversity, opportunity, critical intelligence, openness and fairness and should become the cornerstone of the South African society.

Therefore South African universities should be institutions of learning and not platforms for political parties. They should exist to serve all their students, not just those who share the political or particular beliefs of their professors or politicians, especially on matters where reasonable people disagree. They are obligated to make students aware of a broad range of serious intellectual perspectives, not just the perspectives that correspond to certain groupings in society. Unfortunately the atmosphere that prevails on most university campuses today does not foster intellectual diversity or the disinterested pursuit of knowledge. Liberal Arts faculties at most universities are politically and philosophically one-sided, while partisan propagandising often intrudes into classroom discourse. It is appropriate for faculty to want open-minded students in their classes, not disciples. Faculty bias is currently reflected in the curriculum of academic programmes, in the manner in which they are taught, in readings assigned for classroom study, and in discussions only open to one side of a debate. On a macro level government should strive to incalculate these values in policies and state regulation initiatives and accountability procedures related to universities.

The concept of academic freedom has been premised on the idea that human knowledge is a never-ending pursuit of the truth, that there is no humanly accessible truth that is not in principle open to challenge, and that no party or intellectual faction has a monopoly on wisdom. Therefore, academic freedom is most likely to thrive in an environment of intellectual diversity that protects and fosters independence of thought and speech. Because free inquiry and its fruits are crucial to the democratic enterprise itself, academic freedom is a
national value as well and should be encouraged as such by the South
African government and Department of Education. This means that no
political, ideological or religious orthodoxy should be imposed on universities
through for example the appointment of university staff or through any other
administrative means by the academic institution. Nor shall legislatures
impose any such orthodoxy through their control of the university budget.

Subsequently curricula and reading lists in for example the humanities and
social sciences should reflect the uncertainty and unsettled character of all
human knowledge in these areas by providing students with dissenting
sources and viewpoints where appropriate. While academics are and should
be free to pursue their own findings and perspectives in presenting their
views, they should consider and make their students aware of other
viewpoints. Academic disciplines should welcome a diversity of approaches to
unsettled questions.

Exposing students to the spectrum of significant scholarly viewpoints on the
subjects examined in their courses is a major responsibility of South African
universities. An environment conducive to the civil exchange of ideas should
be fostered through all stakeholders involved in higher education – only then it
will be possible to be a democratic society in a true sense.

3. Government’s management of public higher education

The public sector has not been exempt from these pressures of measurement
and monitoring. The expansion of the use and application of the word “audit”
beyond the domain of financial accountancy has also largely manifested in the
systems that shape our daily lives. This expansion of the concept of audit is
shaping our public sector institutions and our working environments and is
influencing our sense of self. Auditing technologies like benchmarks,
performance indicators and ratings are being used to reinvent public sector
institutions. Public sector institutions want to be more effective and are held
accountable for spending public money, while the public in general requires
more transparency. Performance measurement and performance
measurement systems are becoming the “technology” of monitoring public
accountability.

Public higher education internationally has also been impacted by this trend,
although the trend in higher education can also partially be attributed to the
development of “new managerialism.” National measurement systems for
public higher education are in place in France, Britain, the Netherlands,
Scandinavia, Australia and New Zealand. These national measurement
systems driven by the various governments may differ, but all the
governments have one thing in common and that is to ensure that the public
money allocated to higher education demonstrates value for money. In South
Africa at present the situation is no different, except that as within other
countries, the governmental performance measurement drive and focus takes
place within the specific context of the country.
There are many reasons for the present worldwide interest in performance measurement. One of these reasons is the changing external demands. This reason is highly applicable to higher education in South Africa and is best demonstrated by the increased external scrutiny of public higher education by the Government. External scrutiny of the higher education system is driven by the Government as the largest financial stakeholder in public higher education in the form of subsidies or grants from the DoE. The scrutiny by Government is not only focused on securing a measurable return on their investment, but is also based upon ensuring that public higher education contributes to and meets the social and political needs of the country (NPHE, 2001). The required measurements are also backed up by a funding framework that will “penalise” HEIs for not reaching/maintaining certain targets. This approach is not uniquely South African.

But this is not where the DoE’s role in measuring the performance of public HE in South Africa ends. The content of performance measurement in HEIs mostly has two separate yet complementary components, namely legislative mandated accountability objectives and the individual institutional mission-based objectives plan. The first component is purely DoE based (formulated and prescribed) whilst the second is usually primarily institutionally driven. With the constant change and restructuring of the public higher education system by the DoE (NPHE, 2001; CHE, 2000a; CHE 2000b; DoE, 2002) there is at present also a large “DoE-measured” measurement component to be found in the usually autonomous institutional mission-based agenda. Some of these issues include equity and affirmative action targets for students and staff, staff/lecturer ratios, and progress being made with the issue of implementing new institutional cultures in support of the post-apartheid era. This approach from the Government gave the DoE an added dimension of involvement in the higher education system that is not restricted to simply monitoring the legislative, mandated measurement component, but can almost be defined as “managing” the system. Although many articles highlight the importance of addressing stakeholder needs when seeking to implement a performance measurement system (Neely, Adams & Crowe, 2001; Kaplan & Norton, 1992; Dickinson, Saunders & Shaw, 1998) it is within this context as described that higher education performance measurement in South Africa differs substantially. The engagement at stakeholder level seems to be far more measurement driven than in a normal stakeholder perspective as found in business and industry or in higher education in other countries.

This focus of the DoE on being both the primary stakeholder and the “manager” of public higher education has increased the need for enhanced institutional performance measurement. The targets as required by the DoE influence and reshape the institutional strategic and operational agenda. The DoE expresses its requirements through a variety of measurement instruments contained in policy and implementation documents like the National Plan on Higher Education (NPHE), the Three-Year Rolling Plan (TYRP) and benchmarking indicators for HEIs. It is here where the DoE is missing the point. The “management of the system” must be stopped and to a large extent institutional autonomy should be handed back to the public HEI’s.