



## **Academic Freedom, Autonomy & More, in the face of Complexity and Diversity**

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*Autonomy and Academic Freedom are standard ingredients in the kitchens of Higher Education. To such an extent that we most often think that they are invariable and stable, of uniform definition and content, the subject matter of legal arrangements and basic supplies. It is the main focus of this paper to show that the concepts of autonomy and academic freedom are rather changeable and context dependent, and that Higher Education systems and institutions must nimbly work on them, in terms of maintenance and activation.*

Higher Education systems do not operate in a vacuum. Their context matters, affecting the status of the institutions as well as their functions. What are universities for? is a question that cannot be answered without reference to ambience. Both in terms of license to operate and of services to be rendered some kind of *social contract* - written and/or unwritten - underlies each system as well as individual institutions for Higher Education.

If a university is to be *an independent, open and forward looking community of scholars dedicated to serve the education of future generations and the needs of society, at home and abroad* basic conditions must be in place that enable institutions to operate as such in a proper way. *Autonomy* and *academic freedom* are among them. Why is this so? The simplest answer is that they are enablers of professional quality performance, the critical rigour of academic work in face of the worldwide academic forum and the constant openness to new approaches and methods.

In as much as these qualities are crucial for universities *they must be granted to them*. All owners, donors and supporters - societies, governments, political, religious or ethnic groups, businesses, private individuals - should realize that without these qualities universities cannot be and cannot deliver what they should be and deliver. So these qualities must be part of the social contract about Higher Education and Research. And once they have been granted to universities, the job isn't done: *good and regular in-house maintenance is crucial*. Independence and integrity should be actively practiced and be discussed and rethought at all levels. Autonomy and freedom are freedoms with a purpose, *no excuse for 'everything goes'*. Higher Education systems and institutions have serious responsibilities, partly to the positive, partly to the negative: go for fair analysis and unbiased inquiry, avoid conflicts of interest and personal gain. Such responsibilities cannot be maintained solely on a private moral base, but must have an institutional base and be rooted in shared values of the academic community.

All this may look like a rather self-evident *model*. In reality it is quite a challenge to maintain a good degree of autonomy and academic freedom: it's a matter of balancing, in society, vis-à-vis owners and funders as well as within institutions, it's a matter of culture just as much it is a matter of structures and regulations.

The usual storyline on autonomy and academic freedom is about legal arrangements and basic supplies, in terms of *law making, governance, funding and quality assessment*. They are indeed of great importance, as in all of these domains a fair balance of freedoms and responsibilities must be established, and maintained over time and under conditions that are not stable. Yet it is crucial to not just repeat this part of the narrative in a modelling manner of speaking but rather scrutinize what happens in real life, amidst today's challenges to our societies, both in individual states and on a global scale. That way it will become clear how basic values can come under pressure and why they need constant monitoring, solid maintenance and regular rethinking.

A first, particularly relevant example is the erosion of the public support base for universities. In many countries the 20th century has seen a growing consensus towards public funding of Higher Education as an obvious case of a public good. For many a decade constantly growing numbers of students have benefited from this attitude. Universities were seen and appreciated as agents that worked towards the public good. They were readily allowed the autonomy and freedoms they needed to do this job. In recent years, however, the concepts of public good and general interest have lost much of their force. Individual and group interests have gained prominent roles, as drivers of national policies and as motives of the electorate. “White people my age are not going to vote to educate Hispanic kids or black kids”, a recent quote from The Chronicle of Higher Education goes. Where consensus and solidarity are being replaced by diversity and group interest based lobbying, arrangements of the past can easily be losing their support base. For Higher Education Institutions the consequence thereof may be the loss of their agent-that-works-towards-the-public-good position and reputation. They are then labelled as partisan rather than as autonomous and serving the general interest. For universities this shift in public support should be more than a matter of concern and complaint, of wanting to travel back to a golden age when things were good. It is a pressing invitation to rethink how they are serving society, how to do better and in particular how to respond to a context marked by division and diversity rather than by solidarity and unity. If they fail to do so, their autonomy and freedom will risk to be taken for a cloak of self-interest or traditional elitism.

Another, seemingly quite different, but in reality quite related topic is the flip side of the great success of universities. All over the world the good news is that Higher Education systems and most individual universities are in high demand. They cannot complain about a lack of interest in what they have on offer. The opposite is true: there is a multitude of benefits, claims, expectations, requests, stakes, uses, wishes about the university and most of these are increasing in most places. Apparently universities are seen as useful by many and for many uses.

This multitude of demands, however, translates into *competing* claims on ownership (whose university?) and *rivalling* concepts on the university (what university?), at the same time representing a broad range of rivalling underlying *values*.

A particular speaking example are research universities struggling to adapt their traditional ways of doing research, in terms of prioritizing, impact, dissemination, academic independence, integrity. It is not easy to keep one's balance, integrity and freedom in situations where direct impact (benefiting one party), quick wins (in the interest of sponsors) and individual career interests are informing and defining key demands.

Another example is about setting educational priorities: deciding on which student population to serve (are we educating global elites and/or fighting inequalities?) and on what basis to do your curriculum redesign (marketplace skills and/or civic virtues). A quite relevant matter these days is on which values to base one's international educational strategy. Is being an international institution a matter of recruiting the best - as a factor in the world-wide game of brain gain, brain drain - or a definite choice for bridging cultures and fighting inequalities?

All of this shows that universities which keep their eyes wide open to changing conditions will find themselves at a *crossroads of various interests* (inside & outside, often contradicting each other) and *stakeholders* (ever more independent and demanding), each with their own set of *values and cultures*.

Are universities, is our familiar system of Higher Education and Research ready for this? My response, based on observations of institutions and systems in very different settings, tends to be negative. I very much doubt whether institutions and/or systems are *ready to cope with the challenges of complexity and diversity*. I rather observe a high degree of traditionalism (sticking to arrangements and priorities that have worked well in the past) and a low degree of rethinking, seriously wondering whether our recent successes are sustainable, whether past success maybe is no guarantee of future success.



Wouldn't it be good to ask ourselves if we are using our space of autonomy & academic freedom well? *An independent, open and forward-looking community of scholars* is what universities are and should be. They must base their style on and remain truly faithful to their independent identity and mission, not out of self-protection and as a privilege but rather as a duty, a service to the benefit of society and therefore seriously rethink their response to the complexities and diversities of societies. That's our belief. Now, what does this analysis imply for university strategies and practices?

In terms of *virtues* (in institutional and personal terms) it seems to be crucial to not just preach the norms and pretend to stick to them, but discuss real dilemmas and mistakes made, and exercise individual and group attitudes and decisions. In terms of *values* (in-house shared beliefs about what is important and acceptable, and what not) it would be desirable not to leave this to individual choice and preference, but try and establish core *shared* values, as a solid base for our role and responsibilities in society. Such an exercise hopefully "produces" *trust* – the quotation marks indicating that such a response cannot be simply produced, must be given – in as much as the road to trust starts at respect, respect for institutions acting with integrity and a keen sense of sharing responsibilities. In short, our common and continuous efforts are wanted if we want to avoid losing our base, the social contract on which our existence depends.

Magna Charta Observatory tries to find ways to promote serious thinking, talking, working on values and virtues. It does not have the ready answer to all questions and challenges *but invites critical self-monitoring of universities*. In 1988 hundreds of European universities signed the Magna Charta. Since then many more have done so, convinced of the value of autonomy, academic values and integrity for academia. More than a conviction, a signature and a statement is needed, however. That's why we organize platforms for value maintenance and regular updating. In the decades since 1988 our societies have seen substantial change, also affecting the value system on which universities rely. HE systems and institutions worldwide should engage in critical self-analysis and strategic value development to reposition themselves. The long time sustainability of academia is at stake. Highlighting these themes as part of the Bologna EHEA process seems to be of crucial importance. It will be our pleasure to continue to participate and facilitate the process.