

Why we continue to discuss university autonomy and academic freedom

Abstract:

University autonomy and academic freedom should be more than topics of proclamation and celebration. Sijbolt Noorda, President of the Magna Charta Observatory, discusses why they should be lived in the realities of university life and actively promoted worldwide – especially as they are being challenged in new ways and with greater intensity.

Article:

The other day I bumped into a former university colleague. “What are you up to these days,” he asked. I told him about my work for the Magna Charta Observatory. Then he questioned, “Why on earth do you continue to discuss university autonomy and academic freedom? Isn’t it obvious that universities are independent, and the university community enjoys academic freedom?” My response was, “Well, yes and no.” I then proceeded to explain that independence and freedom are crucial for a university of standard definition. It is, however, a discriminating definition as not all universities are of the same type and not all universities are living up to this ideal under all circumstances. It is exactly this imperfect situation that makes us speak up on autonomy and freedom.

Afterwards, I gave it some more thought. In fact, it is not just a question of university type or definition. Context matters. Back in 1988 when European rectors first signed the *Magna Charta Universitatum* advocating independence and freedom, they were incentivised by the particular mood of the times, expecting the end of decades of isolation and opposition between East and West. They anticipated intensified international relations and collaboration. In view of a future of partnering and exchange they wished to clearly state the principles of the true university. Morally and intellectually independent from economic power and political authority, such a university is able to truly serve the needs of the world. This first principle is about autonomy, self-rule and self-determination as a crucial prerequisite for a university if it is to be of service and good use to the world.

In addition, the declaration identified freedom in research and teaching as the fundamental principle of university life. This implies tolerance and openness to dialogue as characteristics of the academic community of teachers and students. At the time it seemed particularly appropriate to underscore these principles. If universities were to engage in more and deeper international collaboration, it needed to be clear which particular principles they stood for.

Back in 1988, independence and openness were seen as defining the true university. Since then we have learned that proclamation is one thing, living according to these proclaimed principles is quite another matter. Both principles - of university autonomy in relation to outside powers and of freedom and tolerance as features of university life - are high-maintenance. It is not sufficient to recite and celebrate them. They must be lived and practiced, developed and protected. This is because they are contextual to a high degree and challenged by changing circumstances. And this is exactly why we must continue to discuss university autonomy and academic freedom and make serious efforts to protect and practice them.

Since 1988, our optimism about international relations and collaboration has dimmed. We have learned that there is no straight road towards shared principles of university life and independent science on which worldwide collaborations can be based. In addition, I see at least three major challenges before autonomous universities. They happen in diverse countries to a varying degree and in a variety of manifestations.

The *first* is surprisingly linked to the great success of universities. In most places over the years, higher education systems have been doing very well in attracting increasing numbers of students, as well as contributing to economic and social progress. Precisely these successes have been magnets for keen outside

interest, easily leading to intense interference, regulating and steering. How to remain free and independent under such influencing is not easy, above all because it often comes with funding priorities.

A serious *second* challenge is the politically or ideologically motivated reigning in of universities and their staff and students by governments and/or other authorities. Independent inquiry, autonomous prioritising of study and research programs, and freedom in recruiting and appointing students and staff are not wanted, but seen as disobedience to the ruling political class or ideological authority.

A *third* major challenge is the erosion of support for autonomous universities and of trust in independent science and free scholarship. In situations where society is highly fragmented and the classic concept of the common good has become obsolete, universities are easily seen as partisan, serving only part of society, the corporate elites or the socio-cultural establishment. Here independence and freedom are no longer acknowledged. Impartiality is called into question. Scientific results, even those of a wide consensus, are being side-tracked as yet another view or opinion.

In all of this, universities themselves would do well to actively promote inhouse awareness of these issues and engage in grassroot deliberations on how to best respond and cope. Joining forces and sharing best practices with colleagues, nationally as well as internationally, will no doubt invigorate such efforts. Together we should be standing up for the ideals and good practices of independence and academic freedom. Not because they are prerogatives of selfish academic communities, but because they are crucial prerequisites for universities serving the needs of the world around them. The Magna Charta Observatory, founded by EUA and the University of Bologna, and its worldwide community of more than 900 signatories wants to be a platform for such concerted action. Your support is very welcome. The stakes are high.

(contributed to EUA News, October 2019)