

Abstract

Why do we continue to discuss university autonomy and academic freedom? Because they are being challenged in new ways and with greater intensity.

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.

We have learned that proclamation of freedoms 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.

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. Precisely their 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 programmes, 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.

In all of this, universities themselves would do well to actively promote in-house awareness of these issues and engage in grass root 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.