



Institutional Autonomy, Public Accountability and Academic Freedom: An (un?)holy trinity

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COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION



A point of departure

- Distinguishing characteristics of universities:
 - a) Teaching universal knowledge.
 - b) Creating knowledge for its own sake and not in response to any pressure or factors external to the university.
 - c) Commitment to the searching for the truth, and serving the truth.
 - d) Institutional autonomy.**
 - e) Academic freedom.**
 - f) Internal unity.

Ref: Newman, J. H. (1852) *The Idea of a University*, Dublin: Christian Theology Books, Aertene Press

- Institutional autonomy and academic freedom are defining characteristics (necessary conditions) for the critical institutions that we call universities.





Academic freedom as a Constitutional right

- Academic freedom and freedom of scientific research are rights enshrined in the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of South Africa.

s16. (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes—

- (a) freedom of the press and other media;
- (b) freedom to receive or impart information or ideas;
- (c) freedom of artistic creativity; and
- (d) **academic freedom and freedom of scientific research.**

(The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, p.7)



Principles to guide higher education transformation

- *Education White Paper 3 (EWP3): A Programme for Higher Education Transformation (1997)* identifies **8 fundamental principles** to guide transformation of higher education in the post-apartheid South Africa:
 - a) Equity and redress
 - b) Democratisation
 - c) Development
 - d) Quality
 - e) Effectiveness and efficiency
 - f) Academic freedom**
 - g) Institutional autonomy**
 - h) Public accountability**



Academic Freedom

EWP3 defines academic freedom as follows:

The absence of outside interference, censure or obstacles in the pursuit and practice of academic work. It is a precondition for critical, experimental and creative thought and therefore for the advancement of intellectual inquiry and knowledge. Academic freedom and scientific inquiry are fundamental rights protected by the Constitution.



Institutional autonomy

- EWP3 defines **institutional autonomy** as a high degree of self-regulation and administrative independence with respect to:
 - a) student admissions
 - b) curriculum
 - c) methods of teaching and assessment
 - d) research, establishment of academic regulations and
 - e) Internal management of resources generated from private and public sources.
- Delineated areas in which institutional autonomy should be exercised.
- Institutional autonomy entitles a university to make academic decisions (in particular) without undue interference from government, or any external body or person.



Public accountability

- Education White Paper 3 **defines public accountability** as:

the act of institutions being answerable for their actions and decisions to their governing bodies (Councils), institutional community and the broader society.

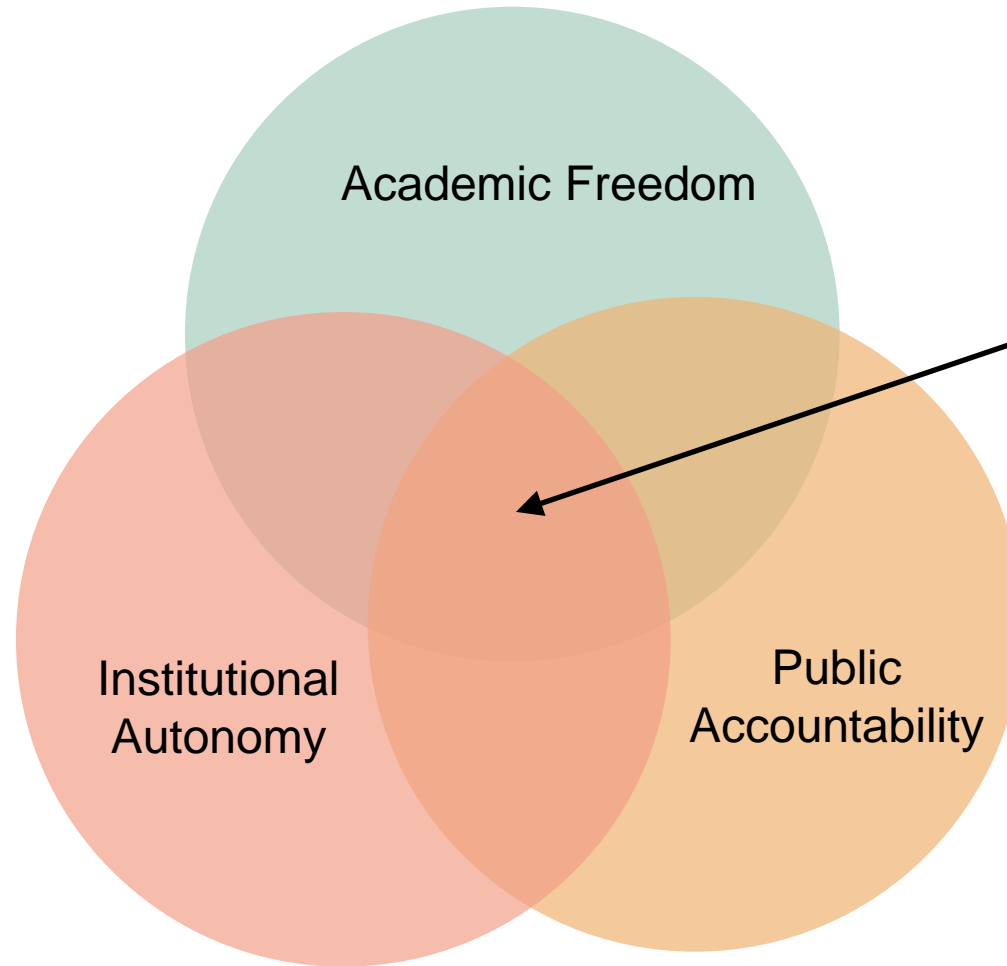
In practice, it entails three actions:

- Reporting how, and how well publicly funded institutions spend the public funds allocated to them.
- Demonstrating the results that the public institutions achieve with the use of resources at their disposal.
- Demonstrating that, as public institutions, they strive to achieve national policy goals and priorities.

EWP 3 stated that “there is no moral basis for using the principle of institutional autonomy as a pretext for resisting democratic change or in defence of mismanagement. Institutional autonomy is therefore inextricably linked to the demands of public accountability”.



Cooperative Governance: Finding the sweet spot?

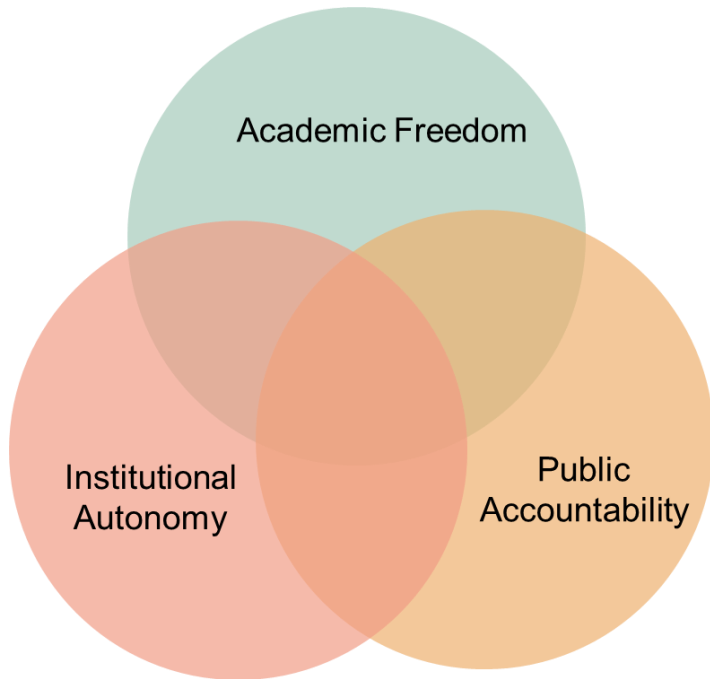


A cooperative governance compact– an appropriate, contextually relevant, time responsive **balance** between autonomy and accountability that supports an environment in which academic freedom can be exercised?

The *White Paper for the Post-School Education and Training (2013)*: The principles of **institutional autonomy** and **public accountability** may, at times, appear in conflict with each other. However, the principle of institutional autonomy should never be used to justify resistance to transformation, and to pursuing agendas that are at variance with national developmental imperatives.



Some examples of the interplay



- #FeesMustFall -The decolonised university....
- “Talking back” to research....
- University Executive remuneration...



The danger from the outside?

A slippery slope?

→ **'State steering of institutions that are largely autonomous'**

-1994-2000: State –university relations governed by a HE policy framework of cooperative governance, state's role to 'steer'.

- Higher Education Act enacted and implemented: standardised governance structures of public higher education institutions; prescribed democratic participation in structures, particularly to represent students' interests; funding of institutions regulated and dependent on, amongst other things, appropriate record-keeping to ensure accountability.

→ **'State interference'**

2001 -2009: Greater 'state interference'; State's growing concern with efficiency and effectiveness of institutions; More top-down decisions implemented in a more unilateral manner eg decisions to merge institutions, introduce PQMs and implement programme accreditation, to name a few.

→ **'Direct state control in the public interest'**

2009 onwards: Frequent amendments of the HE Act, some of which give more direct control to the Minister to intervene in university operations.

This is the movement that some commentators propose is happening. Is this claim valid? And if so, why is this happening, is it desirable, and how do we respond?



The danger from the inside?

- Senates are vital governance structures in universities that must play a critical role in upholding academic freedom, and in defining and leading the enactment of the academic project for the university, including through ensuring that academics are able to pursue knowledge and undertake scholarly work that meets standards of evidence, integrity and ethical conduct – a complex balance that can lead to debates about the boundaries of academic freedom, and internal collective decisions in this regard.
- But increasing concerns that:
 - Absence of rigorous debate in Senates
 - Academics not taking on the role fully and effectively...
 - Senates are being reduced to tick box structures that “note and approve”.
 - Significant Council “overreach” on academic matters and the role of Senates.

- A research project that explores the role of Councils, Senates and Institutional Forums in relation to their defined mandates and in relation to each other.



THANK YOU