

University autonomy: a matter of political rhetoric?

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Demands on the modern university

Modern universities have a diversity of missions and tasks, probably far too many. They are not only delivering qualified teaching and learning in a wide range of areas and subjects and doing research, but are also collaborating in research and development with different organizations in society outside the university. They are also expected to provide a plethora of different services in the ‘knowledge’ and social service universe. No wonder, then, that their ability to adapt to changing conditions in a time of general resource scarcity and competition have been questioned, from both without and within [1].

The obligation to outreach imposed from the outside may be more or less well formulated, and the willingness from the inside to respond is certainly varying. In some cases, universities have stubbornly, and successfully, stuck to their original mission and tasks, as set out in traditional statutes and charters. In other cases, they have, at least partially or rhetorically, been more than eager to change and reformulate their core obligations and institutional strategies, usually in accordance with what they have perceived as changing external conditions and demands. This has led to a state of insecurity, particularly in academia, but also in society at large, about the future role, organization and functions of the university [2].

Although in recent years, and particularly in the last two decades, there has been marked interest all over Europe in increasing the institutional autonomy of the institutions of higher learning, privatization has never been a real option and will not be, in my view, for many years to come. But strange as it may seem, these ‘calls for freedom’ have been equally frequent in political, bureaucratic and certain academic circles. The discussions have ranged from rather nebulous proposals to initiate some kind of ‘privatization’ process to the more humble propositions of the needs to renegotiate the 200 year old Berlin Contract between the nation state and its higher education institutions [3]. It is, nevertheless, a fact that European universities are gradually being decoupled from the state. The question remains whether this process should be called de-regulation, or if we are rather witnessing a process of re-regulation [4].

In 2005, the EUA (European Universities Association) highlighted the need for institutional autonomy in the so-called Glasgow Declaration, in which European Rectors called on their respective ministers of research and education to take immediate and decisive measures in order to radically increase the legal, administrative and financial autonomy of European universities. According to the institutional leaders, the need for a radical shift and bold action was not only a

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matter of principle, it was also driven and motivated by the challenges of sharpening international competition, not only from the old arch-enemy, the U.S.A., but from Asia and, not least, by the demands of the ongoing and accelerating integration on the European level, i.e. the Bologna Process [5]. A year later a similar manifesto, reiterating roughly the same arguments, was presented on the national level by the Swedish Rectors' Conference.

The driving forces and motives behind this heated discussion and supposed urgency for immediate reform are well-known and must be understood in a wider context of global socio-economic and political transformations:

- The change from mass to almost universal higher education, and a subsequent growing heterogeneity of the higher education sector.
- The competition for students, teachers, researchers and resources on a global scale.
- Rapidly increasing costs in teaching and research, and, particularly, in infrastructure.
- The retreat of the state as the central founder of the university/research system.
- The requirements of the labour market and the additional expectations society has regarding higher education institutions, besides traditional knowledge diffusion.
- The alleged shift from knowledge creation and diffusion to 'knowledge production'.
- The growing demands of 'entrepreneurship' and 'innovation capacity'.
- The shift (in Europe) from 'input' (*Abitur*, peer-review) to 'output' control (assessment/evaluation).

If one wishes to continue the list, it could be almost endless. Instead I sum it up below by using a quote from one of my learned Northern Californian friends:

"Today universities are not so isolated from society. They are no longer so difficult to find [...] and no longer of one or a limited type. They no longer have control over students, or over budgets, admission and hiring policies. And their integration with government, society and industry is so extensive that they often appear to be just another of society's institutions providing a realm of services and offerings that change according to outside funding. They are creatures of government 'policy'." ([6], p. 47)

University autonomy

The changes and shifts we are witnessing and experiencing presently are indeed both rapid, far-reaching and, to many of us, even frightening, but in our capacity as reflecting academic intellectuals we should, nevertheless, not forget that the university is but one institution among many which has to reposition itself in a world where almost every other sector in life and society is reshuffled, on the national, regional [EU (European Union)] and global level [7].

Thus one could perhaps make a tentative statement and maintain that our almost impossible present task is the remodelling of the university as a core cultural institution within what has been labelled the ‘knowledge society’, at the same time without losing what most of us consider to be a set of indispensable universal values that this noble institution has fairly successfully guarded. But, in the face of such an almost superhuman task, and in these days of academic gloom and despair, let me give you a word of consolation by recalling that in its millennium of existence the university, to my knowledge, has successfully undertaken profound adjustments at least five times before, so why should it not be able to perform a similar stunt one more time [8]?

As stated earlier, the concept of autonomy has been a key issue in the internal and external European debates on university reform for a long time, and particularly so during the last 25 years. But when discussing university autonomy, one must be aware that the difference between the idealized form of the university and the ‘real’ institution is blurred. Even if there has always been at least a formal consensus that institutional autonomy is a fundamental necessity to promote changes from the inside and, thus, at the same time safeguard the freedom of research and teaching, it is, nevertheless, debatable whether this cherished concept has been uncontroversial even within the internal academic discourse.

The German sociologist Rudolf Stichweh [9] has suggested that the concept of institutional autonomy should include the following properties and dimensions:

- The right and competence to make independent decisions on the limits of institutional commitment.
- The right to endorse specific value systems and define forms of ‘capital’, career systems and incentives.
- The right to independently decide on institutional principles and forms of internal governance.
- The ability to control the criteria of institutional access, at the level of both students and academic staff.
- The right to define strategic tasks and to set institutional aims.
- The possibility to identify and determine the formal and informal relations and links to other sectors of society.
- The duty to assume full responsibility for decisions taken and the possible external effects of these decisions; in short, to be accountable.

It is perhaps unnecessary to point out that the last point indicates that, far from the somewhat idealized and free-floating vision of institutional autonomy cherished by some academics, the university has always been linked to various systems of societal accountability; ecclesiastical, regal and civic, and this unavoidable connection between ‘town and gown’ will also be the crucial determinant for the future formation and scope of institutional autonomy. Autonomy is always historically situated and must be understood as a relative dimension with a crucial impact on the way higher education and research actually functions in a particular historical and societal set of circumstances [8].

In the present policy-dominated discussions, at least in Europe, the concept of autonomy is defined and used almost exclusively in an instrumental and technical sense. It is presented as an operational tool promoted and accepted by the state as the best practical means for running 'university business' efficiently. This in turn leads to the consequence that the societal responsibility (and hence also the accountability towards society) is understood and implemented as an operational 'objective' technical formula, usually consisting of a rigid set of quantitative indicators, and not as a procedure of negotiation between universities and representatives of society about the balance or trade-off between certain academic values, on the one hand, and the duty to provide society with certain public goods, on the other [10].

Against this background, it is no surprise that the most frequent argument in the public rhetoric of almost every European government representative to promote swift reforms in order to enhance university autonomy has nothing to do with academic freedom. The increased autonomy is supposed to strengthen the capacity of universities to respond, immediately and efficiently, to explicit short-term demands coming from society. Thus autonomy has basically a management dimension, and nothing to do with the value-base of academic institutions. Accordingly, the buzz-words in this 'reform agenda' are 'competition', 'flexibility', 'responsiveness', 'innovation' and, last but not least, 'leadership'. Universities are no longer primarily perceived as self-reproducing cultural institutions, but rather as 'clearing stations' between academia and the national and/or regional economy [11,12].

At the same time, collegiate structures of decision-making are automatically and routinely presented as, and axiomatically supposed to be, cumbersome and almost archaic. Thus power is gradually transferred to smaller selected administrative groups and even to individual 'professional' officers. In introducing 'New Public Management', it has also become quite obvious that, in the selection process for higher managerial positions in the universities, there are no longer any automatic links to academic excellence. And as I do maintain that recruitment strategies, as well as decision-making procedures and structures, in many ways correspond to what is conceived as the basic values and mission of an institution, these are important performance indicators [13].

The collegial and managerial models are often described as two contrary institutional 'ideal-types', in the Weberian sense of the term [14]. The collegial university usually tries to combine an explicit professional autonomy with a high level of participation in management. The managerial model reduces the professional influence, while at the same time introducing executive management systems and structures found in the corporate sector; the illusive dream is obviously to force the allegedly cumbersome, expensive and reflecting members of the 'temples of learning' into instantly reacting, 'on-demand-producing' and lean 'temples of earning'. This rather simplistic dichotomy is not only false but, as pointed out by Lars Engwall in Chapter 2, it is potentially very dangerous, both for the university and for society at large.

Whether this development is possible or even desirable is a matter of opinion and intense discussion. There are those of us who are perhaps less euphoric,

or even sceptical, about these glorious managerial prospects. But those offering such warnings and caveats are often dismissed, not least by the most enthusiastic managerial proponents, as romantic Humboldtian 'Ewig-Gestrigen' (incorrigible romantics) who are incapable of understanding where the world is presently heading. And, interestingly enough, it should be noted that not a small number of the most fervent representatives of the new 'entrepreneurial' creed are to be found in academia, notably among the European Rectors, some of whom, by the way, seem to spend more of their time in Brussels than in their own institutions [15]!

Furthermore, the price paid for the ongoing increased institutional autonomy is an abundance of accountability and *ex post* evaluation schemes, short-term and task-oriented contracts and performance-indicator-based resource distribution. If the criteria and indicators of these regularly executed evaluations are primarily defined by government bureaucrats, and resources are distributed accordingly, this is an extremely powerful means to exert influence on the decision-making process without having to carry the burden of responsibility. And a situation where political power and action is separated from immediate policy responsibility would create an even more delicate and dangerous position for the European universities than the present situation of more-or-less permanent starvation.

All things considered, one could, and should, question whether the externally driven 'autonomy movement' is a new and perhaps different form of introducing a more subtle form of increased political dependency. In most European cases, there seem to be a tendency to introduce a division between detailed decision making and responsibility (university), on the one hand, and the control functions (state), on the other. In most reform initiatives implemented or proposed, the institutions are presumed to be free to decide autonomously on certain issues, but, at the same time, the state, directly or indirectly, has gradually introduced new control systems and steering mechanisms; for instance, in the U.K. and Sweden [16,17].

Simultaneously, in most European higher education systems, the individual university lacks the necessary internally controlled resources for efficient long-range strategic planning and action. Thus they are running an actual risk of being even more preoccupied with daily chores than ever before. In addition, a more officially pronounced right to directly interfere in the internal affairs of the university has also been transferred to different stakeholders and to a vaguely defined society at large [10].

Thus while universities are given a wider range of autonomous decision making, society is increasingly trying, through different mechanisms and devices, to impose its particular demands, visions, interests and values on the universities institutional long-term policies and short-term priorities. Sometimes either intermediary strategic bodies have been created and appointed by the government, or the central state has kept the right of direct intervention on matters considered to be of central importance. Autonomy, in this respect, is certainly no synonym for independence; it is rather a case of widened scope of decision making under certain important constraints, with less local power but more local responsibility than ever before [16].

University autonomy and academic freedom

Autonomy is a heavily value-loaded concept. 'Freedom', and especially academic freedom, has even stronger value connotation. And whereas institutional autonomy has been central to the intense discussions on the acute need for institutional reform, academic freedom for the individual academic teachers seems to be a non-existing problem. It seems to be taken for granted that if institutional autonomy, in some form or other, is granted to the universities then academic freedom will somehow automatically follow. In reality, the tensions between individual and institutional autonomy are obvious. Academic freedom refers to the actual working conditions of the individual faculty member. Institutional autonomy, on the other hand, refers to the self-governance of the institution [18,19].

It is quite possible to have institutional autonomy without academic freedom. And, as shown in many European historical cases, it is equally possible to have almost total academic freedom without institutional or financial autonomy. In the ongoing debate and reform initiatives, there is a clear shift from the notion of the university as 'the house of Solomon', a specially designated and secluded place where scholars and researchers carry out their work in 'Einsamkeit und Freiheit' (solitude and freedom), to the notion of the university as an open organization that provides certain agreed-on and asked-for 'knowledge services' to society [10].

A particularly interesting and illustrative case in this context could be the gradually changing visions regarding academic staff and employment principles, and not least the shifting balance between permanent and temporary staff. For a long period of time, tenured positions were regarded as the main vehicles to secure academic freedom. This general consensus has gradually evaporated, at least in Europe. Paradoxically enough, the first step in this process was to transfer the right to hire and fire academic staff from the government to the universities themselves. To begin with, this change was generally welcomed by the universities, but gradually it became clear that, at the same time, it meant that new and rather heavy financial, administrative and legal burdens were put directly on the individual institutions.

To handle and remediate this, a steadily growing number of short-term staff are employed, which eventually is threatening to put the universities in an insoluble dilemma of responsiveness/flexibility and institutional stability. Furthermore, it has also led to steadily growing functional and symbolic differentiations within the academic profession. It has also virtually dissolved the old and, at least rhetorically, cherished Humboldtian ideal of the integration of 'Forschung und Lehre' (research and teaching).

The new heterogeneous staff structure is also changing the power relationships in the university, because it means that faculty no longer has 'natural' common interests. It has also led to a situation where the body of academic staff is considered to be, and treated as, a collective 'manpower', rather than as highly qualified individual researchers and scholars. And it is a well-known and established fact that manpower is much easier to shift and replace than individual and specialized researchers, especially if the manpower is hired on short-term contracts and a task-oriented basis [20,21].

Perspectives on changes in university autonomy and academic freedom

Thus the ideological foundations of the university as a key societal institution have undergone fundamental changes in the last three decades. And this is certainly nothing new or exceptional in the long and winding history of this always contested, sometimes detested, and sometimes cherished curious institution. Today, one could perhaps say that there is something like a general consensus, inside and outside academia, that European universities, by and large, are underfunded and, in many cases, over-regulated (e.g. in the Nordic countries). It remains, nevertheless, another matter altogether whether you endorse the present-day 'reform orthodoxy' put forward by its ardent proponents in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), the World Bank, the EU Commission, European Ministries of Education and the 'entrepreneurial Mode 2' academic zealots in the EUA [5]. In any case, it is certainly not always quite clear on what grounds the particular changes proposed or undertaken are being justified or even commonly characterized as 'self-evident'.

Against the background of the contemporary prevailing and growing entrepreneurial ambition, or illusion, to transform the European universities into smoothly run corporate operations producing innovations and perhaps even profit, it would, as pointed out in Lars Engwall's contribution, be wise to remember, or at least to contemplate, some of the fundamental differences between these two important institutional or organizational forms: the university and the corporation. Engwall demonstrates that universities first differ from corporations in terms of origins and histories. Furthermore, their aim is reputation rather than profit. Ownership, whatever that means, is very different. Finally, the organization of universities does not allow the same degree of control of employee behaviour and of financial flows.

Thus even if universities today are increasingly adopting management methods and rhetoric, they cannot be considered corporations. Instead they are professional organizations, many with long terms of experience, with often unclear ownership structures aiming for reputation. These characteristics are significant for making them special, and they have probably also been instrumental for the very long survival of the organizational form called a 'university'. If these constitutional principles were changed, universities would no longer be universities. This, in turn, would imply that they no longer could perform their basic tasks of education and research.

This has certain implications for our future deliberations over university governance, since it reflects the necessity of acknowledging the special character of universities. As a matter of fact, this is in the interest of both universities and their principals and trustees, be they private, public or state. In order to stimulate innovative research and promote high-quality education, the best trustees can do is to rely on the disciplinary experts. The role of the trustees should be to provide stable and transparent rules for universities and not to make direct interventions or to use them for political purposes. Otherwise there is an obvious risk that not only research performance and the quality of education is endangered, but also that the innovative general capacity of society is severely reduced and even hampered.

The constitutional rules of a university are not only important for the relationship between universities and their trustees. They are also crucial for the establishment of rewarding and prospering university–business relationships. It is important that these rules provide stable platforms for negotiations aiming to combine the obvious and necessary long-term perspectives of universities with the more short-term and equally necessary goals of business. For both parties, a mutual understanding of the working conditions of their respective partner can only be expected to be very fruitful.

All this could, of course, be interpreted as a plea for leaving the universities alone, but that would be misleading. As a matter of fact, even if there are good reasons to continue with a system for university governance that has survived over centuries, it is also in the interest of universities that politics and business pay them close attention. This is crucial and important for the future of universities. However, in order to be productive, this attention has to be based on realistic expectations and proper knowledge about the fundamental characteristics of universities.

It should also be noted that universities today are not only governed by states and trustees, and to a certain extent have intimate relationships to business. They are also increasingly in the eye of the media, which in turn, as Lars Engwall indicates, means a tendency to focus less on what scholars have actually to say (content) than on where they say it (publication) and who has used it (citations). There are a number of risks associated with this development which may be a threat to both innovative research and quality of education. However, having such an excellent survival record over the centuries, there should be good chances that universities also will be able to handle this challenge in the transnational society of learning.

Finally, one often gets the distinct impression that we, being caught in a curious type of ahistoric and simplistic analogy-thinking, have a tendency to believe that the developments of the 1960s and 1970s are forever relevant. In short, when, and if, the university has to respond to ‘new challenges’, or is asked to ‘reformulate its agenda’ or ‘mission’, the universities tend to conclude that they must take on any new task or responsibility to society on an almost daily basis, in response to suggestions or demands. This is not true, simply because when it comes to knowledge, society very seldom actually knows what it really needs in 15 years time, not to mention in a generation!

The two Berlin-based ‘revolutions’ of the 19th Century, which thoroughly re-organized and rejuvenated the Euro–American universities and turned them into the real intellectual and industrial powerhouses of their societies for almost two centuries, had in fact very little to do with expansion [8]. On the contrary! Wilhelm von Humboldt’s exceptionally successful institutional reforms of 1810 in Berlin meant retrenchment and ‘purification’. The establishment of the modern European and North American research university at the turn of the previous century also meant that the universities defined their core mission in a much more restricted way than they had previously done. So, today, when we are discussing how to ‘respond to the new challenges and demands’ and to ‘redefine our new role/mission in society’, we should also perhaps remember that all great universities always have, at the same time, been institutionally adaptive, intellectually creative and ideologically conservative institutions.

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