



Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy: Reflections on the Challenges and Sustainable Development of Higher Institutions of Learning in South Africa

Samson Adeoluwa Adewumi*¹ , Princess Thulile Duma²  ^{1&2}

Mangosuthu University of Technology, Faculty of Management Sciences, Umlazi, Durban,
South Africa

Corresponding author. Email: adewumi.samson@mut.ac.za

Abstract. The ongoing dialogue for academic freedom and university autonomy remains important for the development and sustainability of higher learning institutions. The concept of academic freedom, although explicates different meanings in context and nature, its understanding from the lens of most developing nations stems from academics' pursuit of knowledge, self-development, and discovery without fear of victimization. The argument of institutional autonomy explains the autonomy or freedom to disseminate knowledge, facts, and empirical research for their immediate local and community needs. However, the pursuit of academic freedom and institutional autonomy has been largely constrained in South Africa with consequences for sustainable, developmental, and innovative milestones of universities. The paper reflects on the challenges of academic freedom and institutional autonomy and argues that academic freedom and institutional autonomy are still untapped and under-utilized for the sustainability and growth of South African universities. These include cultural beliefs and environment, and state control and intervention that stifles free academic enquiry. Through a theoretical argument, we explore political, cultural, social, and other institutional challenges constraining academic freedom and institutional autonomy in South Africa. We argue that it is unrealistic to continue nursing the agenda of university reforms, development, and sustainability through innovative research and community development without canvassing for unhindered academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Thus, we conclude on the need for a thorough harnessing of academic freedom and institutional autonomy that can be leveraged as pathways for the resuscitation, development, and sustainable teaching and learning environment for nuance knowledge production and innovative research ideas among South African universities.

Keywords: Academic Freedom; Institutional Autonomy; Higher Education; Research, Socio-Political, Development

1 Introduction

The status of a university is different from other types of institutions, particularly from its dual roles of teaching and research, which form the core business of any university [1]. These responsibilities situate the university in a very important position for the dissemination of

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knowledge and teaching. By assuming the role of knowledge creation and dissemination, the university is no doubt in a position of power and authority. The exercise of this power has often conflicted with the State and other social institutions [2]. Notably, the two most important pursuits that often conflict with the interests of the universities and the state are the quest for academic and institutional autonomy. The quest for academic freedom is no doubt a Constitutional Right in South Africa, like many other developing nations [3]. It is the discouragement of interference or any form of hindrance in the business of academics and university [4]. In other words, it supports the freedom to teach and conduct research investigation in any field of study without hindrances [5]. One of the core mandates of academic freedom is an individual's right to teach and conduct research without any form of control by the State or other social institutions. While it is acknowledged that academic freedom is a Constitutional Right in South Africa, issues around the freedom to teach and conduct research freely for knowledge creation are not entirely "free".

Again, the power of the university should be rested in its autonomy the principle of self-government, and determination of its own rules and affairs [6], and the right to regulate its affairs. The autonomy of a university should be reflected in the capacity of the university to manage its affairs on its own accord. It encompasses the freedom to dictate what should be taught, how it should be taught, and to whom respectively. One of the arguments, which was later expanded in this paper is the concern of universities in the Global South. We can make quick reference to South Africa and tend to understand if South African universities possess these features. The affirmative response lies in the financial control of the university and the harnessing of its autonomy to the State. In the real sense, the practicability of autonomy can hardly be understood when universities feed from the State.

We argue in this paper that, although there has been an ongoing debate on the controversies of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, our convictions are that these demands do not emanate from a stance of purpose on the part of universities. For us, the universities cannot be glamouring for such when they are dependent on the State for survival and continuity. We recognize the gamut of challenges constraining or otherwise limiting the individual academic and university academic freedom, and the autonomy of the university [7]. The political control of universities through State interference and resource allocation impedes

the realization of any form of university autonomy. The State cannot be the financier of universities and one expects universities to make absolute decisions on its own. The State is an interloper whose interest has always been political. Universities through State control have been a tool of political oppression in favor of the government. The contestation about academic freedom and institutional autonomy is itself a mirage.

We also argued that the social institutions and the structure of university bureaucracy are elements constraining academic freedom and institutional autonomy, if at all we agree these are realizable. More like in Africa, the South African sociocultural space is highly sensitive, and one wonders if any sort of academic interrogation can pass the test of several of the sensitive issues embedded in sociocultural norms and practices. This means an individual academic is not free to research and express his or her opinion on any issues, especially those considered sensitive. If this is the picture, then academic freedom and institutional autonomy are only fiction.

The contribution of this paper is the attempt to understand the challenges of academic freedom and institutional autonomy in South Africa. The overarching aim of the paper is to interrogate and reflect on the discourse of academic freedom and institutional autonomy challenges for sustainable higher education development in South Africa. Essentially, what we seek to contribute is the argument that academic freedom and institutional autonomy are not yet developed in this part of the world, given the social and political control of universities in Africa. Our conclusion was for the university to depart from the unrealistic pursuit of academic freedom and institutional autonomy and concentrate on its responsibilities of teaching and research, at least, for now. We envisaged that academic freedom and institutional autonomy might be attained shortly, only if the universities become their financiers by generating funds for their management and administration.

2. Methodology

The study employed the qualitative research approach using the literature review analysis. Specifically, the qualitative secondary research approach was employed to understand the challenges of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. The paper employed the qualitative secondary approach to garner theoretical and documentary analysis to

understand the research trajectory. The study was carefully designed on the proposition of the exploratory research design. This is intended to advance the limitation of knowledge on academic freedom and institutional autonomy discourses [8]. The qualitative sources were employed to build the conceptual and theoretical arguments in this paper.

The qualitative sources include a detailed and systematic exploration of journal articles, books, and book chapters that were reviewed to present robust arguments for understanding the narratives of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Publications and documents were retrieved from the Scopus database, EBSCO academic, Springer, Talyor and Francis, JSTOR, Google Scholar, Wiley, and Emerald. The search employed keywords such as academic freedom, institutional autonomy, higher institution, and development. The search engines span across geographical focus including South Africa, United Kingdom, Australia, the United States of America, Nigeria and Ghana. The basic conceptual arguments drawn from these sources include conceptual understandings of academic freedom and instructional autonomy. Others include an exposition of the challenges of academic freedom and institutional autonomy in South Africa, academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and research development. The accumulation of these sources provided insightful themes that were analyzed contextually in this paper.

3. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy: a conceptualization

The university as a knowledge institution needs to possess some fundamental attributes required for its optimal functions. Two of these attributes are the extent of its academic freedom and autonomy as an institution. In the Global North, the concepts of academic freedom and institutional autonomy are entrenched and conceived as fundamental human rights that must be always upheld [9]. In the Global South, however, the idea and pursuit of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and human rights are unconnected [10]. The conceptual understanding of academic freedom and institutional autonomy are not static as they are vulnerable to changes in terms of changing social and political circumstances of the country, including legislation, however, the fundamental belief remains unaffected [11].

The conceptual clarification of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, although are commingled, yet there are distinct from each

other, and it is crucial to draw this line of distinction. This attempt is important for the overwhelming idolization of academic freedom, while institutional autonomy has continued to receive vilification, even though both concepts are mutually exclusive [12] The theoretical understanding of academic freedom admonishes the communal activities of a university, and this underpins the corporate freedom of an institution that supports the privileges of self-determination by the university in terms of the management of its affairs and activities that precludes any form of external control [13]. Broadly, academic freedom explains the conditions of work and service for staff and students about teaching, research, learning, and freedom to express opinions and the freedom to publish without constraints or sanctions. Academic freedom explicates the struggle or intention to escape the constrictions imposed by government and other social institutions in the dissemination of research-driven knowledge. The freedom of an individual to possess their views and opinions about a piece of research and innovation without being criminalized and allowing for critical inquiry is a true sense of academic freedom [14]. The quest for academic freedom has always hinged on the freedom to allow for improved university innovation and knowledge production. From the foregoing, the conceptual understanding of academic freedom can be conceived as a split of a substantial set of university autonomy.

Thus, university autonomy is considered to constitute four critical essential pillars including the autonomy to decide for itself who may teach, the context and curriculum to be taught, the pattern and means this will be taught, and the criteria for admitting who forms the students that will be taught [15]. Regarding the complexity and functional arrangement of the university system, talents' attraction to it must be hinged on high intellectual standards and academic values [10]. In other words, the ability of an individual to demonstrate excellence through teaching and research must be considered in the trajectory of university autonomy. The university's pivotal autonomy rests in its choice of people who are proficient enough to do its business. To be able to attain momentum and balance in the intellectual caliber of the institution, an equal and reasonable system of academic appointments should be pursued [6]. As reiterated earlier, the concept of academic freedom is the central theme under which institutional autonomy strives. Although having said this, the presence and practice of university autonomy itself

is no assurance of academic freedom, since an independent university, for instance, may nonetheless treat students and staff unfairly [16].

The individual's academic freedom relies on institutional autonomy since it is a crucial but not adequate requirement for academic freedom [17]. The quest for autonomy by a university is not a simple quest by universities but one that entails special functions that will be best delivered if they are allowed their autonomy [10]. The pursuit for autonomy is vindicated by the understanding that the harvests of universities necessitate ideas and creativity, which are traits that can only thrive in a setting of considerate independence and freedom [9]. Traditionally, a university is autonomous to the degree that it is free to make its own rules and decisions within the legal confines and structure of its operations in matters relating to its administration and management. However, the real sense of institutional autonomy for universities in addition mandates that the management of universities should also comprise a reasonable member of the academic in its decision-making organ. The question then becomes to what extent are universities indulging their academic members in their decision-making? The answer to this question can be addressed with the current state of universities, especially among developing nations where decisions hinging on the management of the university are politically and externally driven.

4. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy in South Africa: an exposition of challenges

There are complex issues around the notion of what academic freedom and instructional autonomy entail, especially in the context of developing countries [17]. While we can acknowledge that these two concepts are works in progress in most parts of Africa, including South Africa, the reality on the ground reflects that African universities are far from the realization of academic freedom and institutional autonomy in any sense. These arguments will be supported by a range of factors that we argue are constraints to the attainment of academic freedom and instructional autonomy in South Africa.

First, we argue that by far, political intimidation and control of universities by the government and its agencies remain one of the most suppressing threats to academic freedom and institutional autonomy. The government through the Department of Higher Education determines

what should be the basic rules of teaching and learning, the number of students to be admitted in any given academic year and the nature and type of programmes universities must offer to students [12]. The political threat of academic freedom and institutional autonomy also extends to the appointment of university principals to a large extent [7]. The very essence of this control is the bane behind why many South African universities lack their academic freedom and autonomy. The historically disadvantaged universities are well caught up in this web control due to their poor financial muscle and backgrounds.

First, one of the familiar challenges of academic freedom and institutional autonomy in many democratic nations in Africa, including South Africa is the uncontested verity that universities are still being suppressed, even long after the transition to democracy in these countries [12]. Thus, it is safe to argue that universities are still governed by undemocratic principles today. The finances and financial reporting of universities in South Africa are still largely being managed by the apex education body such that universities seem not to have the independence to control their finances. How can the universities control their finances when they are been financed by a government agency? This is the contradiction that has long existed and still day remains a threat to academic freedom and institutional autonomy. One can even argue that academic freedom and institutional autonomy have not been given the desired momentum it was given before the new democratic South Africa. The point of this argument is that politicians have hijacked the structure and management of universities for their self-aggrandizement while the pursuit of academic freedom and institutional autonomy continued to be an unrealistic wish for those tolling the part [10]. It does not make any sense to continue pursuing the narrative of academic freedom and institutional autonomy when the State oversees the business of university education in South Africa.

The State in its nature has always been selfish and controlling. The perpetual control and hijacking of academic and institutional autonomy in South African universities follows the trajectory of Higher Education's consistent review of its policies and documents. One such is the 1997 Higher Education Act, which has seen a series of reviews and amendments that no doubt has continued to nourish the power and authority of the State in the management and affairs of universities, while continuously relinquishing the autonomy of universities [13]. The challenge of State control of university autonomy and freedom has in

recent times become a norm, especially in Africa. The case of Nigeria is a typical example where universities autonomy and freedom have been hijacked by state machinery thus predicting and directing the affairs and functionality of universities. Whatever understanding and interpretation one intends to apply to academic freedom and institutional autonomy, it must be accepted that the relationship between the State and universities before the emergence of democratic South Africa in 1994 was not as complex as it is today with the trends of political control and hijacking of universities. We, then, argue that the interference and control of universities by the State is unjustifiable and not in congruence with best practices in most developed nations [13].

Second, socio-cultural constraints have remained an impediment to academic freedom and institutional autonomy in this part of the world. South Africa, and Africa by large is diverse in terms of social and cultural beliefs. Many of these cultural beliefs are retraining academic freedom in terms of the nature of research that must be conducted which is often tagged an attempt to interfere with cultural norms and practices. These challenges are more common with disadvantaged universities who still revolve around the social and cultural practices of their host communities in terms of freedom to conduct research. Social beliefs no doubt are the fabrics upon which many African societies exist and co-exist. Yet, the rules and principles set by many of these belief systems are not in the interest of academic freedom and institutional autonomy of universities. In South Africa, for instance, social and cultural beliefs are upheld in high esteem and considered sacred with little or no permission for research exploration, thus limiting the extent to which one can express academic freedom. Why the intention of this restriction may be understood, at least, the impact on scholarship and academic freedom cannot be overemphasized.

A university, by its very existence, must be culturally diverse in terms of teaching, staff, and student enrolment. The recruitment of teachers and students must be conducted through a fair system and translucent approach [15]. The responsibility of the university is to engender an environment that is most conducive to the engagement of teaching, research, and the creation of innovation and new ideas for addressing socio-economic problems. A university in this sense must, therefore, be described with freedom in terms of inquiry. What is playing out in recent times is not a reflection of this position and the spirit of free inquiry in many universities has been constrained by social-cultural

ideology and restrictions, the South African case is not an exception [15]. Our argument is centered on the assumption that no free inquiry, otherwise academic freedom can thrive in a contested socio-cultural environment where access to scholarly inquiry is restricted and guided by some unfamiliar rules. Then, as often referred to as a case illustration, the Western socio-cultural beliefs and environment promote free inquiry and academic freedom, rather than the layers of restriction we see in this part of the world.

Third, the structural position of universities is at the core of development through cutting-edge research and innovation [11]. For the realization of this role, the university must relish a high degree of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Thus, universities are expected to take appropriate steps to ensure the core mandate of its existence is directed towards human development and social progress. In our arguments, one very impediment to this objective and by extension academic freedom and institutional autonomy is what we call the “idolization of gatekeeping” that has been given a forceful marriage with conducting research in many South African universities. We argue that the over-reliance on gatekeeping is a constraint on free inquiry- a prerequisite for academic freedom and institutional autonomy. While the intention of this argument is not to vilify gatekeeping in research in any way, we stand by the position that it is more of a threat to academic freedom than the advancement of academic integrity.

Fourth, we argued that the fast pace and influence of globalization on higher education arrangement and functionality is another angle to conceptualize academic freedom and institutional autonomy challenges. For instance, globalization has reshaped the practices of teaching and learning in higher education of learning taking away the conventional practice of academic freedom. University lecturers no longer possess or own the freedom to express their academic or research piece as advancement in globalization influenced by artificial intelligent does recently does more than the human academics. This argument reflects on the fast pace of academic relevance giving rise to digital relevance.

Lastly, the challenge of institutional bottleneck and power abuse on the part of university administrators also explains another cog in the wheel of academic freedom and institutional autonomy in many South African universities. Academic employees of universities are being monitored and gauged in their academic expression and sanctions when their views and opinions are not in tandem with the supposed policy or

rule of the university. One then wonders how the university that should promote academic freedom and institutional autonomy of its employees is the very one stifling their freedom in the right sense of the word [17, 18]. Of course, we are that the university would rather advance the cause of the State at the expense of the university teachers because of the mutual intercourse between the duo (University and the State). After all, universities are hardly free from the State's political authority and economic control.

What is prevailing, to say the least is the intentional frustration and constraint on the professional growth of academics who fall out with the authorities of universities in their academic expressions. Many are witch-hunt and placed with undue and unnecessary hindrances on their carer trajectory. The management of many universities is a mere reflection of the workings and political arrangement of the State whose interest is self-induced, and largely out to suppress different opinions. If by any chance, the conversation on academic freedom and institutional autonomy should continue, we argue that the universities should first begin by putting their house in order and allowing the expression of academic opinion for the promotion of scholarships [19, 20, 21].

5. Academy freedom, institutional autonomy, and research development nexus

The university is comprised of a community of scholars whose mandate is to uphold, preserve, and disseminate knowledge freely without any form of contradiction on social and economic issues [22, 23]. In other words, the essential responsibility of a university is practically the pursuit and utilization of new knowledge. The best invention of the university must, thus, be able to produce knowledge that serves the interest of society and not selected few. Unfortunately, the absence of academic and institutional autonomy has stifled the potential impact of the envisaged knowledge from the university in the interest of society. Rather than concentrate on the procreation of new insights and knowledge, the business of the universities is gradually shifting to politics, and this is in furtherance to the role of the State.

The arguments we tend to raise in this section of the paper is that the creation of new knowledge and research development in universities of higher learning is gradually eroding as the main business of the

university is no longer tilted towards research development and the advancing of society. We argue that, while the university cannot be entirely held for this malady because of its financial position of not being able to solely run the university, we argue that the State in its attempt to stay relevant by controlling the freedom and autonomy of universities is responsible for the poor innovation and contribution of university to societal development.

The conversation we intend to convey through this paper is to establish a narrative that has been consistent in the canon of higher education freedom and autonomy. Without any attempt to continue in the old order, research development and relevance are not entirely an autonomous responsibility of universities with the consistent intervention of the State. The State in recent times dictates the tune and trend of research that university academics must explore. The freedom to explore any research endeavor is no longer that of the academic but of the university through the dictate of the State. As retired earlier, the failure of the university to express its academic freedom and institutional autonomy are recipe for the poor development of research innovations has been witnessed in recent times.

6. Way forward: conclusion and solutions

The crux of this paper is to theoretically explore the discourse of academic freedom and institutional autonomy reflecting through the challenges and development of higher institutions of learning in South Africa. Thus, the aim was to interrogate the promotion of academic freedom and institutional autonomy by South African universities. Having given an account of issues and contestations in the academic freedom and institutional autonomy literature, the section of the paper attempts to proffer solutions or otherwise to the challenges of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Throughout our analysis, we thoroughly identified with other debates about the challenges of academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

We recognize, of a true, that academic freedom and institutional autonomy have been greatly stifled. These arguments were traced to the political authority and manipulation of universities by the State and other socio-cultural issues that were hindrances to academic expression and freedom. The point of these narratives is that there is no academic freedom and institutional autonomy in the real sense of the word among

South African universities, and perhaps in Africa. In the South African case, the historically disadvantaged universities have perpetually had their sovereignty stifled by the State. Two factors could account for the possibilities of this. One is the financial handicaps and the backgrounds of these universities. In essence, a large chunk of State control and manipulation are manifested through historically disadvantaged universities.

While this paper does not intend to join issues with those who vehemently believe in the principle of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, or perhaps have strong resolve in the fact that it is attainable, our emphasis on this discourse will be taking another trajectory. This, however, does not exclude us from the struggle for academic freedom and institutional autonomy. The resolve of this paper is a departure from the conversation around the struggle for academic freedom and institutional autonomy. We argue that the political authority and manipulation of the State in the governance and affairs of universities will long remain, especially in this part of the world. Amongst others, we resolve that academic freedom and institutional autonomy of universities will only remain a fiction, or perhaps, a pregnancy whose labor period will never happen.

Because many universities in South Africa are government-owned and funded, the idea of chasing academic freedom and institutional autonomy will only remain rhetoric. While the popular debates on the quest for academic freedom and institutional autonomy might be familiar with the one that will be shared in this paper, the fact demanding academic freedom and institutional autonomy while still at the expense of the State is only a show of hypocrisy. We argue that the State and politicians have only conceived the universities as a tool of political oppression whose interest is to defend the government, rather than vilify their policies. Based on our conviction that academic freedom and institutional autonomy do not exist among universities, or rather cannot be attained unless universities become self-sustained by generating their finances. This is what is obtained in developed countries, and one can see why universities in these countries are independent.

We conclude that while this is the only pathway to the realization of academic freedom and autonomy, the question then becomes how realistic it is for universities in South Africa to be self-sustaining and generate their fund without the financial intervention of the government. While we believe that this conversation will still be very much around,

we conclude by urging universities to expend more focus on their business of teaching and research for the progress of society. We recommend strategies for diversifying funding away from the over-reliant on the State for university sustenance to other sources such as partnership with private sectors organisations. While at this, we argue that universities have no locus calling for academic freedom and autonomy while still under the financial and political authority of the State. Lastly, we recommend that university consider the role of technology and innovation in achieving greater autonomy, especially in relation to its increasing importance in global higher education.

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