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Academic Freedom and Academic Integrity

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ACADEMIC FREEDOM and ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Tony Shannon

Introduction

The demand for freedom, an intense desire in fact, is a positive characteristic of our era, but human freedom does not mean acting in accord with one's caprices or without restraint by any law. Recent controversies at universities in Queensland have raised questions about mandating the French Review in Australian higher education as the review deals with the related issues of academic freedom and integrity [1].

Demands for freedom are not always accompanied by anything more than a certain vagueness, without understanding the limits of freedom [2]. One person's freedom can easily be another person's slavery in some form. For example, our pursuit of academic freedom in research can infringe the freedom of the right to privacy of others. Thus, academic freedom and academic integrity are close relatives, the occasional missing link being ethics [3].

While freedom and integrity should protect each another, it is difficult for institutions and those who navigate them to balance competing and conflicting demands. Some of these demands are at the institutional level and others at the individual level. The purpose of this paper is to tease out some of the issues which are often too sensitive to articulate in the public square.

Human freedom in general can be distinguished as ontological or existential. The former is the freedom we have by virtue of being human, whereas the latter is the freedom which each person actually has. A person in a prison cell has less physical freedom than someone who is not in a prison cell. The prisoner though may have more mental freedom. This was the existential freedom of Victor Frankl, the great Austrian psychiatrist, who survived the Holocaust and imprisonment in a World War II concentration camp, and who so eloquently expressed his ideas and experiences in his book, [*Man's Search for Meaning*](#), the title of which encapsulates his theme [4].

Existential freedom is then actual freedom for each person. It can be limited by prejudices and previous lack of experience, or by weaknesses of personality or character, or by access to appropriate material or adequate human resources. We are free, as academics, to pursue our intellectual pursuits rigorously or superficially, with enthusiasm which inspires others, or as a matter of routine obligation and boredom. In either case we can inspire our students or dampen their enthusiasm to seek truth, and so we can enrich or restrict their access to their right to academic freedom as students. In the last analysis, it is up to each individual person as Frankl demonstrates.

Academic Freedom

At the institutional level there are issues related to different cultural mores arising from

- multi-campus operations,

* These papers are for internal discussion within CESA: on topics related to CESA's Mission and Vision.

- globalization with staff and students with different habits and expectations,
- managerialism rather than leadership.

For the individual academic, affected by these factors, there are also such issues as

- erosion of tenure from institutional ‘re-structuring’ (particularly during Covid-19),
- confusion of freedom with ‘licence’,
- the only ‘absolute’ seeming to be that everything is relative!

Are these merely little issues which can be sorted out in the wash? Not according to the long-serving Judge José A Cabranes who has summoned up the current complexities. “We have good news and bad news today. The good news is that we are printing in hard copy the *Woodward Report on Freedom of Expression at Yale*. The bad news is that we need to reprint the Woodward Report. We are dealing today with interrelated developments at Yale that threaten freedom of expression and the institutions that protect it, including faculty due process rights, sometimes described as academic tenure. Many writers on this subject understandably focus on the fate of students. But it is important to recognize that today’s developments are also redefining the rights of faculty—and the role of faculty in the governance of this University. These are developments that, if not addressed, ultimately threaten Yale’s place among the great universities of the world” [5].

The freedom for staff to teach, research and communicate within their special competencies and in harmony with the public objectives of the institution which pays their salaries is important for the intellectual health of a higher education institution. This freedom implies not being targeted by the institution on the one hand [6] or subject to cyber bullying – the relatively new other hand [7]. However, to raise issues about academic freedom is pointless without some discussion of freedom in general, because complaints are not infrequently heard about the Dean (who won’t let me do this because it conflicts with the objectives of the institution) or the Research Ethics Committee which might reject an application because the methodology will not achieve the goals (and so the project would be a waste of time and money)!

Interwoven among the metaphysical issues of human dignity, respect, and autonomy, without which human freedom is meaningless in practice, there are the moral boundaries for human ethics committees to consider, particularly as some researchers push the boundaries in the pursuit of the idea that if something can be done then it should be done [8]. There is always a measure of uncertainty in research: it would require bravery and ignorance to claim to have written the last word on any topic [9]. In particular, the serendipitous results of curiosity-drive research are important in the long term for the academy. “opportunity to carry out our natural , impulsive, intelligent life, to realize plans, express idea in action or in symbolic formulation, see and hear and interpret all things that we encounter, without fear of confusion, adjust our interests and expressions to each other, is the ‘freedom’ for which humanity strives [10].

Academic freedom then is not unlimited: staff can be dismissed for gross incompetence, but what about not conforming to ‘political correctness’ in what they study or the fashion of the day or how they study or the results of their research? The converse of this was when religious institutions tried to coerce their beliefs on scientists or totalitarian societies limited what scientists could study. For instance, scientific research was brought under strict political control in the USSR of the 1930s when some research areas such as genetics and sociology were declared [bourgeois pseudoscience](#) [11].

The current irony is that the old left and right socio-political identities and labels have been reversed: it is now the intolerant left who refuse the right of free speech to those whose views they want banished from the campus! [12-15]. To what extent this is failure of leadership in the Academy is a moot point [16]. University leaders are certainly publicly sensitive about free speech, but while they can enunciate the principles, the extent to which they can supervise the practices in a large

university is a different matter [17]. Managerial qualities, if they are dominated by ideology or instrumentalism [18], rather than inspirational scholarly leadership, seem to be valued at a time when governments regard education of their citizens as a cost, and even a financial loss in the budget, rather than as an investment in a country's future.

At least Roman Catholic universities with pontifical status have the scope and limits of academic freedom clearly stated in *Sapientia Christiana* so that potential academics know the boundaries before they begin employment – even to the extent of clarifying what is a “suitable doctorate” for teaching in a canonical field [19]. Christian universities can contribute to the debate in that from their viewpoint freedom requires ideas central to Christian thought and the natural law tradition. Both have been under attack by secular thinkers since the Enlightenment. The first is the idea of freedom of the will, that we really do make choices and are responsible for them. The second is the idea that liberty is bounded by moral norms, that there is a difference between liberty and licence [20].

In an era of growing intolerance, perhaps secular universities could minimize this highly contested issue with more specific institutional charters and codes of conduct! [21]. As most faith-based institutions are private, there can be different approaches to academic freedom between private and public universities even within a single jurisdiction [22]. Moreover, private universities themselves can be distinguished as not-for-profit or entrepreneurial [23], which in turn raises contrasting, if not conflicting, points of view in relation to academic freedom, research and intellectual property [24].

What about the academic freedom of students exposed to brainwashing from lecturers with extreme views on sociological issues? Some students are alert to this, but others have had their sensitivity blunted by media, or at high school, or countries with a totalitarian regime. Many, of course, will simply conform for assessment purposes, their opinions untouched as they move on.

Other complicating factors are internationalization of students and globalization of cooperation among academics on an ever increasing scale [25]. In itself, this is to be encouraged but it brings with it the different interpretations of academic freedom in different cultures [26]. It has been difficult among groups of countries which have theoretically embraced cooperation, collaboration and [27]. Internationalization includes multi-campus operations, where even another campus in the same country can raise cultural differences, which are usually exaggerated when a university has another campus in a different country, particularly when the host country is secular and the second country has an officially established religion [28].

Concluding Comments

The latest trend in higher education relates to academic freedom of students as consumers through micro-credentialing, a non-traditional path in which students can gain skill sets in a specific area and receive a credential [29]. Microcredentials can take the form of short course completions, open digital badges, e-portfolios, verified short-course certificates, nano-degrees, or other tools that help earners gain a foothold in signalling competencies, skills, and connected networks through a growing system of evidence-rich credentials [30]. The other issues related to academic freedom canvassed above also relate to this growing phenomenon.

Professor Jane Fernandez, Vice President (Quality and Strategy), Avondale University College, and Dr Kathie Ardzejewska, Manager of the Office of Learning and Teaching, University of Notre Dame Australia, have launched the Academic Integrity Policy Project on behalf of the Higher Education Private Providers Quality Network to consider

1. what is the future model for academic Integrity?
2. which areas lack focus in our institutions?
3. what new forms of academic misconduct are not picked up in policy?
4. how effective are the measures we are using to track the effectiveness of the management of academic integrity?

All Australian universities have policies and procedures related to academic integrity that may also be referred to as academic honesty, academic or student misconduct, or plagiarism policy. These policies define acceptable academic practices and what constitutes misconduct, such as cheating in examinations, plagiarism, collusion or falsification. In Jane's words: "Academic Integrity is the cornerstone of Higher Education. The validity, authenticity and integrity of Standards and Qualifications depend on our management of this." The Australian regulatory requirements are outlined in Section 5.2 Academic and Research Integrity, Paragraphs 1-4, and Section 6.2 Corporate Governance, Paragraph 4, which states that "The governing body takes steps to develop and maintain an institutional environment in which freedom of intellectual inquiry is upheld and protected, students and staff are treated equitably, the wellbeing of students and staff is fostered, informed decision making by students is supported and students have opportunities to participate in the deliberative and decision making processes of the higher education provider" [31].

In the last analysis it can be reduced to genuine scholarship, faithful to the academic virtues enshrined in the objectives of each institution, rather than attempting to follow the latest fashion in research rankings or trying to be "isomorphic with Harvard"! [32].

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