

University Autonomy and Academic Freedom: A Historical Perspective

Kemal Gürüz

Kemal Gürüz is former president of the Council of Higher Education of Turkey.

E-mail: kguru@metu.edu.tr.

University autonomy and academic freedom are intimately related but form different concepts. The former is an institutional authority; the latter is a personal privilege accorded to academics to safeguard unfettered pursuit, transmission, and dissemination of truth and knowledge. What follows is an interpretation of the historical roots of these concepts and, in particular, how the determinants of university autonomy evolved in response to changing views regarding higher education.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The two concepts evolved over centuries in a mutually reinforcing fashion. Their historical roots can be traced back to the *Authentica Habita* (Bologna, 1158), which exempted students and teachers from tolls and taxes and protected them against undue justice, and *Parens Scientiarum* (Paris, 1231), which recognized the right of the university as a body corporate to award degrees. The first was an edict by an emperor; the second was a papal bull. Such bulls and edicts provided privileges and support and stipulated detailed conditions under which the institutions and

teachers could operate and function—including syllabi, graduation, and promotion requirements, libraries, facilities, and codes of conduct. The price for seeking protection, financial support, and legitimacy from an external authority was accountability.

Over time, the nation-state supplanted the Vatican and the emperor/king/prince as the external authority. According to Peter Scott, the modern university and today's higher education systems are creations of the nation-state since the late 19th century.

Two models emerged with the advent of the nation-state. Napoleon's Université de France (1806) was, in effect, a system of national education that replaced all universities in France and the occupied lands. Wilhelm von Humboldt was put in charge of reviving German universities after Napoleon's defeat. His views on the structure of the university are collectively expressed as freedom to teach (*Lehrfreiheit*), freedom to learn (*Lernfreiheit*), and the unity of teaching and research (*Einheit von Forschung und Lehre*). Many of von Humboldt's views were found to be utopian, and he was fired. These, however, formed the basis not only for the modern research university but, according to many, also the modern concept of academic freedom. Although still lacking a universally accepted definition, academic freedom is widely regarded as an inviolable attribute of the modern university, and is fully internalized in the West.

From the beginning of the 19th century, state bureaucracies in continental Europe took on a "regulatory" role, indeed regulating every aspect of university activities. Thus, university autonomy came to be defined as the relative powers of academia and the state bureaucracy in making decisions regarding activities of

the university. Outside of the Anglo-Saxon world, market and society were not significant actors then.

For centuries, criteria for university autonomy remained essentially unchanged. In 1965, the International Association of Universities defined university autonomy as the authority to make decisions regarding: who will teach, what will be taught, who will be taught, who will graduate, and what will be researched—with only perfunctory reference to financial matters. This definition is obviously not fundamentally different from what is embodied in *Parens Scientiarum*.

AUTONOMY IN A REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT

In the late 1970s, OECD-CERI (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development-Center for Educational Research and Innovation) undertook a survey of decision-making structures in 52 institutions of higher education in Europe. A “relative index of autonomy” was defined on the basis of institutional authority to make decisions on 20 issues referred to as “indices of autonomy.” These ranged from creation of teaching posts, appointment and promotion of academic staff and granting a leave of absence, appointment of rector/president and vice-chancellor, teaching methods, curricula and student admissions, and various aspects of resource allocation and budget management—down to minute details. While UK universities scored 100 on the relative scale, Dutch, French, Austrian, German, and Swiss (federal) universities were at the bottom with scores of 43, 42, 32, 29, and 20, respectively.

In many cases, especially in countries outside the Anglo-Saxon world, public resources were allocated in the form of detailed line-item budgets; and

many decisions, including a number of those on key academic matters, were made by bureaucrats outside of the institutions. This was typical of the regulatory state that left little room for institutions to define their missions and choose the means to achieve them.

AUTONOMY IN AN EVALUATIVE AND GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT

Since the mid-1980s, the role of the state changed dramatically, in Guy Neave's words, from "regulatory" to "evaluative." There was a marked shift worldwide from the "state-academic oligarchy axis" to the "market-society apex" in Burton Clark's "triangle of coordination." The university autonomy survey, carried out by OECD in 2003, reflected the changing landscape of higher education worldwide. This time, eight broadly defined, rather than 20-detailed, indices were used. These were institutions' authority to own buildings and borrow funds, set academic structure and course contents, employ and dismiss academic staff and set salaries, decide size of student enrollment and level of tuition fees, and freedom to spend budget according to institutional mission and objectives.

In marked contrast to the detailed indices used in the 1980 survey, which reflected the regulatory role of the state at the the time, indices used in 2003 were much more broadly defined. They dealt more with financial and human-resources diversification and management, clearly reflecting the change in the role of the state from regulation to evaluation and, again in Guy Neave's words, to "steering from a distance" and the "rise of market forces" in university governance.

Rather than quantifying autonomy, countries—including Mexico, Japan, Korea, Australia, Turkey, Poland, United Kingdom, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Australia, and Ireland—were evaluated in terms of their universities having full, limited, or no autonomy in making decisions. Results indicate, given models of institutional behavior in decision making, a worldwide trend consists of less bureaucratic, less political, and more entrepreneurial universities. State universities in southern Europe and Latin America are possible exceptions to this trend.

Higher education across the globe continues to become more international and more competitive. New types of both higher education providers and stakeholders/actors exist. The latter now constitute supranational bodies (OECD and UNESCO), international quality-assessment agencies (International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies, European Quality Assurance Register), processes (Bologna), and agreements (General Agreement on Trade in Services, if and when it comes into force). These new realities create challenges for defining and implementing academic freedom in a changed environment.