

Academic Freedom: a position paper for the University

Ethics Committee, September 2006



Atque inter silvas Academia quaerere verum¹



“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less’²



Academic freedom is a widely-used term within academic circles, but less frequently precisely defined. It is generally understood to refer to the freedom to pursue knowledge, through enquiry, debate and teaching, without restriction or interference either from one’s own institution or from public or state forces. There are, however, corresponding academic responsibilities which are often less clearly articulated, but are equally important in any consideration of the concept.

Historical definition

Essentially, academic freedom is rooted in the understanding that the academic enterprise is about the pursuit of knowledge and that knowledge is best pursued through rational and open enquiry.

The concept is both historically and culturally contingent. It developed in Western Europe, during the period conventionally known as the Enlightenment, as one consequence of the paradigmatic shift from the religious to the scientific method of analysing phenomena as the basis for the pursuit of knowledge, and remains fundamentally tied to this approach.

Mediaeval universities were, in Europe, religious foundations where enquiry operated within known and generally theologically confined boundaries. Answers were, in effect, determined by prior belief and traditional authority. This did not, of course, make the studies less scholarly or intellectually challenging, and it remains the basis for academic study in many other, often highly sophisticated, world cultures. Indeed, in Europe itself the new approach developed largely outside universities, particularly in this country, where the first entirely non-denominational seat of higher education was not founded until 1827, with the University of London. Nevertheless, 20th century academic freedom was predicated upon the reverse of such knowledge from authority.

¹ Horace, *Epistles* bk 2 no 2 1.45

² Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, 1872, ch 6

Extensions of meaning

Academics call upon the concept of academic freedom for many different reasons, not all of them legitimate. Academic freedom, for example, is often defined by public, state or institutional freedoms, as for example in the USA, where definitions of academic freedom are extended to include the right of tenure in office. Academic freedom is quite commonly confused with other, more general civil rights, such as freedom of speech, which obscures its intellectual basis. Again, it has been claimed as the right to articulate, without contradiction, a set of beliefs, or even to impose these beliefs upon others.

Social definition

The US Supreme Court has ruled that academic freedom is the freedom for a university to “determine for itself upon academic grounds who may teach, what may be taught, how it should be taught, and who may be admitted to study”³.

This definition is rooted in the concept of institutional autonomy and the right of each institution to shape its own educational purpose. It makes clear that the institution’s choice should be on academic grounds, which might be seen to put some constraint upon, for example, faith or ideologically-based foundations. It does not, however, explicitly encompass the freedom that academics might expect to enjoy within their institution, that is the freedoms which institutions allow their academics and their students to pursue different lines of enquiry. More fundamentally, this approach, while including what might be called political and civil freedoms, does not engage with the intellectual rationale which underpins the concept. It is, therefore, limited and secondary.

Academic freedom and free speech

That quintessential figure of the Enlightenment, Voltaire, has been famously summarised thus, “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it”⁴. This encapsulates what we take to be the right of free speech, but it is not quite the same as academic freedom. Both are of course necessarily constrained. But if the former is constrained by civic and legal considerations of courtesy, tolerance and anti-discriminatory and libel legislation, the latter is equally constrained by the obligation for all academic enquiry to be open-minded, conducted through rational enquiry, supported by demonstrable evidence, and unfettered by personal considerations or private convictions. In accord with this obligation, the academic should not defend the right, within an academic context, to argue illogically or base conclusions on the uncritical, unproven or unexamined.

Changing practice

Academic freedom has not traditionally meant the absolute right to assert one’s own view over that of another simply in and for itself, as began to be suggested in the later part of the 20th century. Arblaster, in *Academic Freedom*, for example, claimed that

³ University of California v Bakke, 1978

⁴ SG Tallentyre, *The Friends of Voltaire*, 1907

“the freedom that matters is the freedom to teach and to learn according to one’s convictions and interests”⁵. This is an attractive idea, but it leads logically to the admission of, say, partisan opinion, religious belief, political ideology or moral conviction alone as the basis for academic enquiry. It signals the re-emergence, in a different guise, of the older tradition of belief-based rather than evidence-based knowledge within western culture.

The intellectual developments of the 1970s, loosely characterised under the general heading of post-modernism, ushered in very many new and explicitly ideologically-determined studies. The idea that any intellectual enquiry could be independent of the prior beliefs, understanding or perspectives of the enquirer was rejected in favour of a more personalised legitimacy of knowledge.

More widely, this movement has been echoed by the resurgence of institutions characterised by specific belief-sets. This is antithetical to the concept of academic freedom as understood in western culture since the intellectual revolution of the seventeenth century laid the foundations of eighteenth century enlightenment. Concurrently, post-colonial thinking re-defined the ideology of the enlightenment as itself part of western political imperialism, leading to its rejection in many non-western intellectual circles. Both in civil and political society and in university practice, academic freedom as it has been traditionally defined has been under question for some years.

Academic freedom and academic obligation

According to the traditional view, academic freedom is an intellectual freedom, defined by rational thinking and directed at the pursuit of truth. It carries with it a stringent requirement, on the part of both academics and students, for dispassionate critical enquiry into all things, for only accepting that which can be demonstrated, and for setting aside personal beliefs and opinions. Moreover, if academic freedom is the freedom to persist in the pursuit of knowledge, its obligation is to accept what that brings, even if this turns out to be the reverse of what one wants or believes.

This position could have been accepted as reasonable in the past, although there were always many dissenting voices. It cannot any longer be seen to be wholly so, as everyone is recognised as being to some extent imprisoned within their own belief-systems, cultures and experiences. No one is wholly dispassionate. Within the academy, however, the obligation for as great a measure of objectivity as possible remains. To meet it, academics must continue to engage with different opinions and perspectives, but also clearly to articulate their individual beliefs, and to set their claims for the security of the evidence within this context.

The future of academic freedom

As the concept of academic freedom itself is called into question, so its obligations are increasingly difficult to maintain. An advanced, tolerant and sophisticated multi-cultural society requires that diverse belief-systems and cultures are welcomed, accommodated and respected in and for themselves. Where all cultures are accepted,

⁵ Anthony Arblaster, *Academic Freedom*, Penguin, 1974 p 15

it becomes more problematic to uphold any one as the most appropriate in any given context. In a world which celebrates the equality of diverse cultures, beliefs and traditions, is academic freedom out of date, being based upon too partial and contingent a belief-set of its own?

The Western European educational tradition of academic freedom can be seen, at one level, as but one of a myriad of potentially conflicting traditions. It is, nevertheless, the tradition upon which modern higher education has been built, and its tenets and patterns of working have become the *lingua franca* of a more global academic discourse. Nor has it been unsuccessful in providing the seedbed for the development of the human understanding of the world over the last three hundred years. It is reasonable to argue, therefore, that this tradition should remain, at least for the moment, the dominant one within the academy.

To create a civil society in a multi-cultural context, the respect between diverse cultures must always be mutual. This is as true of the intellectual culture of universities as any other. As academia must always be alert to other intellectual traditions, so it can expect reciprocal respect for its own tradition of academic freedom, but to retain that respect, the imperative on academics is to articulate and uphold its premises. While it remains the defining culture within academia, the rights and obligations of academic freedom set the professional code of conduct within which the academy must determine, monitor and judge its performance.

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