

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS
FOR A RESPONSIVE
AND RESPONSIBLE
UNIVERSITY:
the principles and their
application

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Academic freedom has two meanings

- Institutional freedom, better known as institutional autonomy, that is freedom to choose
 - Study programs
 - Research topics
 - Professors and students
 - The organization and decision processes, as well as their leaders

However, autonomous institutions should be particularly accountable

- Individual academic freedom: academics and advanced students have the freedom to choose:
 - the subject of their research and methodology of inquiry
 - the ways and means to transfer knowledge to students

However, the necessity for institutions to think and act strategically as well as to guarantee quality justifies today that academic limits are put to academic freedom

Responsive and responsible higher education institutions

- Responsive institutions should respond to the needs of the community (serve the community)
- Responsible institutions should be “above the crowd”, that is
 - take advantage of their unique position (autonomy, academic freedom, scholarship and best methodologies to discover new knowledge)
 - to push the frontiers of knowledge, transmit the most up-to-date knowledge and to analyze critically societal developments and propose solutions

- The extreme situations:
 - Academic dependence from the State (politics), business (money) and religion (faith)
 - The “ivory tower” (the institution is living in a bubble cut from reality)
- Tensions between the two have always existed and will continue to exist
- However, the World of today has become so complex and is changing so rapidly, that higher education institutions must be deeply involved (interaction, cooperation, open innovation).

Conditions:

- The two “freedoms” must be guaranteed and respected
- Institutions should be both responsive and responsible (as well as accountable)

Freedom with respect to teaching and learning

- A few cases of bad practice:
 - Teaching of “creationism” in many US colleges
 - Teaching of Marxism as the single political philosophy
- A few border cases:
 - “supply-driven” curricula
 - Academic freedom is justified subject to the constraints of the coherence of the whole curriculum
 - Programs conceived exclusively to reproduce the “homo-academicus” (without paying attention to the development of generic skills)
 - Programs exclusively inspired by one school of thoughts (as if science was not progressing thanks to the dialectic “thesis” – “counter thesis”)
 - “demand-led” curricula
 - Pressures from business to produce graduates immediately cost-effective instead of teaching the fundamentals and how to learn
 - Programs set up specifically for continuous education purposes and largely dictated by government or business (disputable if a recognized grade is delivered; quite acceptable if not)

Freedom with respect to research

- The freedom of research is subject to many influences:
 - “Accepted” influences:
 - National research programs or EU framework programs which select a range of specific domains of inquiries: however, the funds made available divert researchers from other domain of inquiry which might bring more interesting results?
 - The overwhelming influence of refereed journals does influence the topics and methodologies of research as “publishing” has become as important as “discovering”; consequences:
 - risk of delaying the publication of other interesting results
 - pluri-disciplinary and interdisciplinary researches have hardly any chance being published in first class journals

– More disputable influences:

- Increasingly severe competition within the research community can push some researchers to “cheat”:
 - Faked results (cold fusion, first clonning of a mouse..)
 - Plagiarism
- Contract research for governments: for ex. “classified” defense research!
- Contract research for business:
 - Often serves to buy better equipments and to recruit additional researchers
 - But risk of diversion from more fundamental topics
 - Eventually, pushes to “discover” (!?) what sponsors wants to hear
- Religious bans:
 - Catholic church (Vatican) ban against stem research
 - Islamist condemnation of writers (Rushdie) or cartoonists⁷

By way of conclusion

- The two academic freedoms must be guaranteed by governments and respected by business and churches
- However, institutions should be responsive, responsible and accountable. This implies
 - A strong and responsible leadership
 - Responsible academic and non academic staff
 - The development of a rigorous internal quality culture
 - Strong ethical committees scrutinizing “risky” activities (ethically delicate research, contract research, recognized study programs, as well as continuous education programs, plagiarism)