



**THE UNIVERSITY IN A DEVELOPING FREE SOCIETY: CHALLENGES TO
AUTONOMY AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM .**

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Professor Perry Kaye (Chair of the Academic Freedom Committee), distinguished guests, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for inviting me to give the 2000 DCS Oosthuizen Memorial Lecture. Professor Daantjie Oosthuizen's contributions to justice and academic freedom remain and live in our memory, hence this memorial lecture. It is a singular honour for me personally and the organisation I represent, the Medical Research Council of South Africa, to be accorded this particular opportunity to share my thoughts with you. In the process of preparing for this lecture, I was informed that the brief has been broadened to embrace "the University and a Free Society". I have thus entitled my contribution "THE UNIVERSITY IN A DEVELOPING FREE SOCIETY: CHALLENGES TO AUTONOMY AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM"

Education is not only empowering but also a developmental instrument for any nation. It is the first step in the ladder of individual sovereignty—to be master of one's destiny. Hence education should be for all, by all and for life. Through education one learns to be, to know, to do, and to live. Education allows nations of the world to compete, compare, to internationalise information, knowledge and culture. Higher education, particularly university education has not only been critical but also instrumental in every nation for each of the above. Through university education nations of the world achieved **the impossible through investing and seeing the invisible**. It is therefore imperative that the process of acquiring, reflecting and critiquing information, knowledge and society is freed from political interference, manipulations and machinations. Most African scholars today would admit that the present university system does not serve the needs of Africa and the aspirations of the African people. Most scholars who

have travelled would equally admit that the continental European university system is different from the British, just as the British, the American and the Russian university systems are different from each other. In short, each university system is unique but in context within each country, within each culture and civilisation.

Each university system is a **microcosm** of the society, the values and aspirations of that society; it is a microcosm of the development, culture, the institutional instruments of that society and the trajectory it hopes to take into the future. The university system is thus both a **product and a catalyst of its environment in time and place**.

The university in a developing society "... must not pursue knowledge for its own sake, but for the sake of and the amelioration of the conditions of life and work of, the ordinary man and woman. It must be fully committed to active participation in the social transformation, economic modernisation, and the training and upgrading of the total human resources of the nation." Yesufu 1972.

Furthermore "each country has its own genius and its special characteristics; its institutions must bear the stamp of these special characteristics; without isolating themselves from the international community, African universities should identify themselves with the societies they serve and should contribute actively to solving the problems facing these societies" UNESCO 1963.

It is within this context of development in a **developing free society**; a society grappling with its identity; a society grappling with its vision of the future; a society grappling with its past and future roadmap in development that we should locate the challenges of university autonomy and academic freedom in South Africa. For whom and in what context does academic freedom and university autonomy exist and serve?

Why are universities always whinging about university autonomy and academic freedom? Are the university autonomy and academic freedom models of the British-type suited to our own peculiar set of circumstances?

University autonomy in general implies the freedom of institutions to decide what to teach, how to teach, whom to appoint and whom to admit. Academic freedom confers the notion of independence; reflective critique of society, knowledge, information or ideas to individual academics without interference; or fear of interference from state or government beaurocrats. In general, kings, monarchs or popes around the 12th century handed down university autonomy and academic freedom historically. These three structures are by today's standards redundant, undemocratic, have little accountability and are not transparent. At the time though, it was very crucial for the young universities and academics to be protected and isolated from society so that they could develop and evolve untempered as important independent institutions and members of civil society, hence the "ivory tower" label. Most universities have utilised this principle of autonomy and academic freedom successfully and for the benefit of mankind and the societies in which they exist through the production, application and dissemination of knowledge; and to become important independent institutions of any society. Their pronouncements on issues of the day speak to no authority and fear no power or authority. They speak to reason and rationale rather than to emotions and piety.

However, over time, many institutions and academics, to act as exclusion principles and to divide society, have also abused university autonomy and academic freedom. In South Africa for example, where was university autonomy when the government banned

African students from the so-called historically White institutions? Where was university autonomy and academic freedom when many eminent visiting scholars could not be allowed to teach or be employed at our universities, because they belonged to an undesirable political thinking, population or were married across the colour line? Where was academic freedom and university autonomy when racially and socially-engineered institutions were being established throughout the country? Where was academic freedom and university autonomy when Africans, Afrikaners, English, Indians, Coloureds could only teach at certain institutions? In short, none of our universities experienced academic freedom and university autonomy as it is classically described.

Should Politics Meddle in Science or Academe in a developing free society? The simple answer is No!!

Whenever politics takes centre stage, manipulate science or academia for its ends, opts for the wrong scientific advice, erodes the independence and rigour of academics or the scientific methods in any country, **the consequences have been dire**. History is replete with examples of these dangers of politics meddling in science or academe.

- i) In 1924 the US Congress passed legislation that decreased Jewish immigrants from Poland on the wrong advice that "genetically inferior people, who would make bad American citizens, were more frequent in Southern and Eastern Europe than Northern Europe".
- ii) The manipulation of German scientists by the Nazis led to the sterilisation of about 350,000 "inferior" people most of them labelled "feeble minded"; to the discrimination and murder of many Jews and Gypsies. Similar but less advanced sterilisation policies were practised in the US and Scandinavia by politicians manipulating science.

- iii) In apartheid South Africa politicians collaborated with some scientists to develop a Biological warfare programme through which those that were against apartheid would be selectively targeted by poisoning or chemical sterilisation.
- iv) Africa's inability to have a strong SET base or flourishing/successful universities can be squarely placed on unwise political choices meddling with universities or academic institutions. Some of Africa's best scientists and academics are haunted by the spectre of exile life having been driven out of their countries by political interference.

The current scientific and political controversy around HIV/AIDS is nothing new nor is it peculiar to a developing nation such as South Africa. In the late eighties, French and US scientists were locked in an ugly battle as to who had isolated the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) first. After much deliberations and scrutiny of the scientific literature, laboratory notes and notebooks, President Ronald Reagan and President Francois Mitterrand through the advice of their scientists signed an agreement that credited Drs Robert Gallo and Luc Montagnier as the co-discoverers of HIV—the causative agent of AIDS.

However, the effect, impacts and implications that the current political/scientific/academic furore on HIV/AIDS has in a developing free society, on academics and their independence are much broader and deeper than some are initially prepared to admit. The current controversy is:

undermining and eroding the independence of academics, scientists and the scientific method in a developing country;
discouraging young and talented people from taking science as a career option;

eroding investor confidence into our country with dire economic consequences; creating a climate of fear---the worst inhibitor of creative, innovative thinking in any developing society; the worst inhibitor of academic freedom and autonomy

If we do not heed these examples and their implications, history may judge us, the present South Africans to have collaborated in the greatest genocide of our time by the types of choices –political or scientific-- we make in relation to this HIV/AIDS epidemic. We cannot afford any more blunders or give mixed messages on these choices. Responsibility and clarity of common purpose, commitment and vision from all sectors is of the absolute essence. The dissidents with their theories, like seasons of the year will come and go, just as they did in the US and Europe. When they are gone, we South Africans will remain facing the consequences of this explosive and unrelenting HIV/AIDS epidemic and the daunting challenges of the African Renaissance. **Worst of all we may be entering a very difficult but slippery road in the development of our own free society. The fear, inability or reluctance to protect autonomy and freedom of academics and the scientific process may in the end become too costly a price to pay into the future.**

However, in spite of all these, our universities yearn for and continue to fight for these sacred principles. The reason why universities guard academic freedom and autonomy jealously is simply to protect the very limited freedom they presently enjoy, in order to pursue the academic exercise with minimal **state interference**. **State interference** should be distinguished from state involvement in university matters. The latter is essential and generally welcome in our situation, but the former is so destructive to the whole university ethos that it should not be allowed to exist, let alone to enter through

the back door. Our universities, with the history of our past government threats, inadequacies and inequalities are more than aware and more that committed to participate and play a meaningful role in reconstructing and reconfiguring a new South African society. What they are pleading for is legislation that is facilitatory, enabling and liberating, rather than one that is inhibitory, disabling and more bureaucratic. More important than legislation, is the behaviour of our government, how it acts in the every day life activities.

The ideal principles of academic freedom and university autonomy, which served universities very well, will continue to do so if carefully adapted to our particular time and circumstances. The ushering of democracy, the generation of knowledge, the interdependence between nations, the relationship between civil society and institutions, the need for universities to relate and reflect their societies have changed drastically and continue to challenge the old papal model of university autonomy and academic freedom. No university could have had the sort of autonomy they have had, if the monarch or the pope then had consulted and taken all stakeholder' input into account.

Can or should the four classic pillars listed above be upheld in today's world and society? The simple answer is yes, but with modification, adaptation and contextualisation. The four pillars are the competing ideals to which we should aspire as scholars. Like democracy, another ideal to which we aspire, university autonomy should be particularised to a certain people or civilisation. No two democracies are the same, even within the same culture or civilisation. British democracy is not the same as the French, the German or the American democracies. Even university autonomy is not the

same within the European nations. Why should our university autonomy be an imitation of any?

The tensions between universities and civil society are peculiar to each location and civilisation in the world. The role and purpose of universities are different in different countries and even within the same country. The humanistic approach to education and development is a strong current that impinges on autonomy. The tensions of social class, social selection and the international visa status of university education especially in the African continent, has generated tensions between the elites and the egalitarians. University autonomy and academic freedom have had to adapt and change over the centuries; they are guaranteed and maintained by the silent conventions or rules of conduct that pertain and are peculiar to each society.

South African society is in the process of identifying and defining mutually agreeable conventions. We are Africans so I have heard the Honourable Messrs. Mbeki, Leon, de Klerk and Viljoen confess in front of Parliament, and our civilisation and university autonomy should by definition be African.

The National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) Framework for Transformation document posed a number of questions in its vision and proposals that immediately on the surface appear to erode university autonomy and academic freedom. These are: an integrated society, equity, massification of education, redress, affirmative action programmes, and contextualising higher education etc. A deeper and systematic analysis of any of the above issues leads one to a simple conclusion, ie if you have each or all of these proposals, followed logically to the letter and implemented; you will have

very little classical university autonomy left. How do you then accommodate these without a further erosion of university autonomy? Do you abandon autonomy completely, or do you devise a new framework? These are the variables and imperatives around which we have to formulate the ideal and appropriate model of our university autonomy. The framework has to strike a balance between freedom and control of higher education. The highest form of our education system has to be liberated from state control and interference. Our model of university autonomy cannot therefore be imported from Britain or America; it has to be uniquely South African. British or American society has conventions and circumstances that are different from ours. Hence the creative co-operative governance proposed by the NCHE was refreshing, unique, original and facilitatory. In the whole document on Framework for Transformation, this is the only original idea that has emerged from South Africa and has been well articulated. It is a concept that the higher education sector should welcome and ensure its proper development and implementation.

Co-operative governance is based on three assumptions: the differentiation and sharing of functions and powers; the separation and the connectedness of policy-making, implementation and monitoring; and the multiple levels and facets of policy-making, implementation and monitoring between the government, the stakeholders and the university sector. It is another tripartite alliance. It provides for stronger, increased and co-operative participation in the alliance. Through co-operative governance, the available capacity within the system can be diminished and mechanisms can be established where co-operative behaviour that is consensus building can be fostered. In this model, the government, the higher education sector and the stakeholders will be

able to build mutually trustworthy relationships that are essential for the harmonious development and evolution of our higher education system. The low-trust syndrome, the tensions and confrontations that presently exist between the sectors, will gradually give rise to a high-trust syndrome and co-operation. The alliance will over time be able to understand the roles and limits of each sector to the mutual benefit of the higher education sector. More importantly, the theoretical threat of state interference and intervention will greatly diminish in this model—this will liberate universities and academics alike

The co-operative governance model is an exciting concept for the liberalisation of the higher education sector in South Africa. It is a model that we should fully endorse and implement in order to salvage and modify whatever freedom and autonomy is left from the classical British model. It is a model that approximates best our solution to the concept of academic freedom and university autonomy in a developing society. It is our model, conceived and made in South Africa. It captures our own unique circumstances and realities that affect the development and integration of our higher education system. The co-operative governance model is a logical consequence of and the central tenet of the vision of higher education. We should embrace it fully.

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