

The Challenge of University Autonomy

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CHAPTER 1

The Challenge of University Autonomy

John E. Reilly, Romeo V. Turcan, and Larisa Bugaian

Setting the Scene

There is a consensus among European historians that the oldest European university was founded in Bologna in 1088. However, there are disputes about the location of the oldest university in the world. There were important centers of scholarship in the ancient world and major institutions of theological, legal, and scientific study in the Islamic world before Bologna. The medieval European universities enjoyed varying degrees of autonomy depending on their legal status and the source of their funding. The cities in which they were located tended to draw their reputation and prestige from the existence of the university, which played an important economic, social, and political role in the life of the city and the surrounding region. Until the nineteenth century, participation in university education tended to be limited to the social and political elite. In the nineteenth century, higher education (HE) expanded considerably with the establishment of new institutions of HE, increasingly with a more scientific and technological perspective.

Scholars such as Alexander von Humboldt in Germany and John Henry Newman in Britain explored understandings of the role and nature of a university. The Humboldtian idea of the university has been interpreted as one that is encapsulated in the phrase “a community of scholars,” in which academics and students are free to study, research, and develop scientific knowledge and understanding. For Newman, in his *Idea of a University*, the object of the university is the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake—an idea that is challenged in the contemporary world. Although both Humboldt’s and Newman’s ideas of the university have been subject to critical review, they shaped thinking about the object of a university, not only in Europe but also internationally, and they share an emphasis on freedom and independence to pursue and transmit knowledge and scientific understanding.

The European model of a university has spread in various guises throughout the world. In the second half of the twentieth century, there has been a dramatic growth in HE characterized in many countries by a diversity of types of institutions—classic universities, polytechnics (*Hochschule*), monotechnic institutions, and specialist institutes. Although in most countries public or primarily state-funded institutions predominate, there has been a significant growth in private institutions (HEIs). In the European Union, participation in HE has grown from a low percentage to over 40 percent and in some countries to over 70 percent of the age cohort 18–24. Individual and social aspirations; recognition of the importance of high-level skills for economic, social, and political development; and the pace of scientific and technological change, all place a greater premium on HE.

Mass participation, and the consequent escalating cost of HE, placed HEIs in the public spotlight, a spotlight that did not provide universal approbation for the Humboldt and Newman idea of the university. New questions were raised about the role and function of HEIs and their effectiveness and efficiency in meeting the developing and wide-ranging demands of society. HEIs are expected to play a central role in the knowledge society and the knowledge triangle: to produce graduates with high-level skills for employability; to promote fundamental research and at the same time applied and impact research; to play a role in the export market through attracting international students and scholars; to engender a competitive and entrepreneurial institutional environment among staff and students; to contribute to national prestige through international league tables; to contribute to local, regional, and national development; to interact with commerce and industry in effective partnerships; to support government through research and consultancy; to “provide value for money,” and to fulfill a myriad of other objectives.

The focus on outputs has fostered a significant change in the student-teacher relationship with an emphasis on student-centered learning. When universities do not appear to be responding rapidly enough to the needs of society and individuals, governments and international organizations (see the European Commission) call for “modernization and reform.” Governments (national and regional) in all parts of the world are engaged in the radical reform and reshaping of HE to achieve economic, social, and political objectives.

Current Understanding of University Autonomy

The scale and diversity of contemporary HE, however, means that it is difficult for governments and ministries of HE to effect the change that they desire through close central management. Although totalitarian regimes typically insisted (and continue to insist) on detailed control of universities because they recognized that academic freedom poses a threat to autocracy, contemporary democratic regimes understand that tight control and regulation are inimical to creativity and innovation and the entrepreneurial spirit that they hope to engender. Consequently, with a common accord and in varying degrees, governments have advocated and legislated for more autonomy for HEIs. They recognize that to achieve their objectives, they need institutions that have greater freedom to help realize their goals and that are, consequently, more autonomous. The challenge is to define what is meant by