

The 41st TB Davie Memorial Lecture

University of Cape Town

Accounting for Autonomy

**Jonathan D. Jansen
University of Pretoria**

26 August 2004

Accounting for Autonomy

A Personal Reflection

Thirty years ago I walked nervously onto this beautiful campus of the University of Cape Town to seek admission to your institution, armed with the reassurance of being the first matriculant at my Steenberg school to gain a first class pass in Standard 10. I remember clearly how one of the admission officers subjected me to 'the gaze'—that powerful and debilitating white stare that only a black person can describe in terms of its dismissive intent. I also remember her calling a colleague and, staring at my provisional matriculation results, how they grabbed each other in shared hilarity at the audacity of this township kid to even show up at the gates of this mighty institution. Today I stand invited to the same campus to deliver the 41st TB Davie Memorial Lecture, and I am here not to return the gaze, tempting as it is, but to reflect with you on perhaps the single most important challenge facing higher education in South Africa—the uncertain future of institutional autonomy and academic freedom both as concept and practice in the post-apartheid university.

A Tribute

But before I take on this charge I would like to pay tribute to this great son of UCT, Thomas Benjamin Davie. There is not much written about or by TB Davie except for a few published reflections on his contribution to higher education and three major speeches during his seven-year tenure as Vice Chancellor and Principal of the University of Cape Town (1948-1955).¹ What makes this man remarkable was his sense of anticipation about the changing relations between the state and universities, his eloquence about the nature and ambition of the modern university, and his commitment to standards of scholarship which, across time and space, distinguish universities from other kinds of institutions. The more I read, the more I came to appreciate his character as a scholar and his credentials as an activist. I admired the man not only because we share a history as high school science teachers who became Deans of Faculties, but because of his defense of concepts such as "intellectual integrity", "civic honesty" and "teaching by inspiration." It is very difficult, in another century and this side of apartheid, to appreciate the courage and foresight of TB Davie (and others) in the wake of the first major challenge to institutional autonomy under what was

¹ Sources consulted include "Thomas Benjamin Davie", The first T.B. Davie Memorial Lecture delivered in the University of Cape Town on 6 May 1959, by A. Van De Sandt Centlivres, published in 1961, University of Cape Town; "Education and Race Relations in South Africa", The Eleventh Hoernle Memorial Lecture delivered at the South African Institute of Race Relations in 1955, by T.B. Davie; Address by Dr T.B. Davie on the Occasion of the Wits Graduation Ceremony, 6th December 1950; and Leo Marquard (1974), "University Education: Thomas Benjamin Davie" in R.M. de Villiers (ed), *Better Than They Knew*, Volume II, Cape Town, Purnell, pp. 121-147.

then, like now, a new government eager to stamp its authority on higher education.

Key Questions

I recently and informally polled a number of sitting and past Vice Chancellors as well as senior university administrators on the question: “Are South African universities less autonomous today than they were before 1994?” With one exception, all of them agreed that this was indeed the case; that universities enjoy less autonomy today than under *apartheid*. This immediately raises a series of follow-up questions. First, what exactly is the substance or content of this loss of autonomy? Second, how did this erosion of autonomy happen; in other words, what were the forces that enabled this loss of autonomy within the universities? And third, if autonomy was such a prized attribute in the institutional struggle against *apartheid*, why is there so little public outcry against the erosion of what TB Davie in his eloquent and durable formulation described as the right to decide who shall teach, what we teach, how we teach, and whom we teach? To respond to these questions it might be useful to begin by making explicit some starting claims and assumptions which I hold about the relationship between the state and universities.

Starting Assumptions

First, I move from the assumption that current concerns about the relationship between the state and universities have their roots in the very origins of the modern university. Put differently, the concepts of autonomy and academic freedom are as old as the idea of the university itself and are therefore neither recent nor peculiar to states in transition.²

Second, I hold that the relationship between universities and the state will always be a *contested* one because the state finances universities while its expectations about what universities should deliver in response to such patronage are subject to change. At the same time, the universities retain the view that the pursuit of truth requires minimal external interference despite state financing of the enterprise. The autonomy that universities pursue will naturally lie between two extremes: complete governmental control and supervision, and complete autonomy and independence of institutions. Exactly where universities find themselves between these two extreme points is crucial for their intellectual vitality and academic freedom.

Third, I take it for granted that the relationship between the state and universities is not uniform across or even within democratic societies i.e., there is no consensus about what such a relationship should be; it is commonplace in such

² A broad and detailed coverage of the history of these concepts is provided by Philip G. Altbach in the chapter “Academic Freedom: International Realities and Challenges,” in Philip G. Altbach (ed), *The Changing Academic Workplace: Comparative Perspectives*, Center for International Higher Education, Lynch School of Education, Boston College, Massachusetts, USA, pp. 261-277.

arguments to compare France and Norway, on the one hand, with the United States of America. Closer to home, more than one local commentator has observed the different standards of autonomy granted to black and white universities in South Africa during the *apartheid* years.

Fourth, I will assert that the relationship between the state and universities has come under powerful new pressures in the past fifteen years, and on terms that are very different from earlier decades. There are new global conditions that recast this relationship in very similar terms across nation states; the rise in what some call *new public management* and others *new managerialism* is in fact an institutional response to transnational conditions imposed on national economies and politics.³ The national obsession with institutional audits, performance based contracts, efficiency-driven restructuring and the like have direct consequences for how institutions (and the state) think about and respond to questions of autonomy; the double entendre reflected in the title of this Lecture is intended: we are in the awkward position of *accounting for autonomy*.

Fifth, I argue therefore that the origins of this constriction of autonomy lie outside of national borders. It would be too easy simply to blame government for the attack on autonomy or deride the institutions for yielding on the sacred ground of autonomy in the face of external pressures.⁴ What is crucial, though—and I return to this point in the conclusion—is that national actors *do* respond differently to the leveling conditions imposed by transnational forces.

Sixth, I recognize that the concept of autonomy is itself in trouble, and that it needs to be rescued from both its liberal expression as unfettered independence and its conservative expression as a managerial reflex reaction to accountability. Much more conceptual labour needs to be done which, hopefully, will yield a critical theory of autonomy in the context of a transition state. I know that there are some very competent philosophers, especially here at UCT, working on this problem.⁵ For my immediate purposes, the two terms represent the positive and

³ Perhaps the best South African paper on how new managerialism reacts roles and functions at institutional levels is Michael Cross and Bernadette Johnson's (2004) "Academic Leadership Under Siege: Possibilities and Limits of the Executive Deanship at the University of the Witwatersrand," *South African Journal of Higher Education*, forthcoming.

⁴ In two fascinating papers on the subject, John Higgins tends to focus on the threat to autonomy as an external one (the ANC government) while Andre du Toit sees the main threat as emanating from within the new professional management elite within the university. See John Higgins (2000), *Academic Freedom in the new South Africa*, *boundary 2*, 27(1): 97-119; and Andre du Toit (2001), *Revisiting Academic Freedom in post-apartheid South Africa: current issues and challenges*, Commissioned Paper for the Center for Higher Education Transformation, Cape Town. Neville Alexander, in the 2001 DCS Oosthuizen Memorial Lecture delivered at Rhodes University, comes closest to locating the meanings of these concepts in the logic of transnationalism; however, his deterministic reasoning that "transnational capital has displaced the nation state as the *raison d'être* of the university" fails to explain the tremendous variation in institutional responses to such pressures—a function of a lively agency among higher education institutions.

⁵ John Higgins (2000) poses what could well be the central question for such conceptual engagement: "is the accountability that the university owes to its society one owed primarily to the state, so that the

negative sides of the same coin. I will take *institutional autonomy* to mean the right of institutions to decide for themselves on core academic concerns; and *academic freedom* to mean the absence of external interference in pursuing these concerns.

Seventh, I argue that the relationship between the state and universities is unlikely to be resolved because of a deep ambivalence on the part of both about what universities are for. As Hans Weiler puts it, “The major dimension of this ambivalence has to do with the kinds of purposes that state and society consider appropriate for the university.”⁶ It is the ambivalence on the part of universities⁷ as well as the state about the purposes of higher education that will result in constant vacillation between stronger and weaker states of autonomy in practice.

Yet I wish to contend that this ambivalent space is an opportunity that can and should be filled by strong institutional voices that make the case for institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

What Happened?

The core of my argument today is that the most important changes in South African higher education since 1994 are not to be found in the dramatic structural reorganization of the sector or in the impressive policy/planning apparatus created for public institutions. Rather, I contend that the most far reaching changes in higher education are to be found in the gradual but systematic erosion of historical standards of autonomy that were ingrained within the institutional fabric of universities. Moreover, this erosion of autonomy within universities can be located within a steady series of specific events which, when taken together, have fundamentally altered the ways in which we talk about ‘the university’ in contemporary South Africa.

Now I do not wish to underplay the significance of the merging of universities and technikons. Indeed, this is a major event in the post-1994 period that has promised to alter the landscape within which higher education operates. But our research suggests that in the long term, the most important effect of mergers may be, quite simply, the physical combination of two former entities (or the disappearance of at least one of them) rather than a recasting of institutional

university is best understood as an instrument of state policy, or is the social function of the university best grounded in what it actually does” (p.115)? See footnote #4 for full citation.

⁶ Hans N. Weiler (2003), *Ambivalence and the Politics of Knowledge: The struggle for change in German higher education*. Available on www.stanford.edu/people/weiler

⁷ One example of this ambivalence in South African higher education is evident in a rich set of debates in a recent issue of *Kagisano* (Issue 2, Summer 2003), the journal of the Council on Higher Education. See Martin Hall and Ashley Symes’ “Co-operative governance or conditional autonomy: principles for governance of South African higher education;” (pp. 5-29). And Teboho Moja, Nico Cloete and Nic Olivier’s “Would moving from co-operative governance to conditional autonomy contribute to effective governance?” (pp. 30-39).

cultures or programmes or profiles or productivities.⁸ Whatever the noble goals espoused for mergers by officialdom, it turns out that even the physical combination of facilities may not be attainable on a grand scale because of the under-estimation of the costs of these mergers.

Nor do I claim that the formidable policy and planning infrastructure set in place by the new government is irrelevant. We have profound and moving policy platforms and finely honed planning positions such as those evident in the *National Plan on Higher Education*. But there is considerable evidence that, apart from the blunt instrument of state financing, there is a very weak theory of action to translate the noble goals of policy or specific targets set in planning into institutional reality. In fact, it could be argued that the state is about to renege on one of the most sacred commitments of its policy—to dramatically increase participation in higher education—by prematurely setting caps on the number of students that may be admitted, a decision that has little to do with moral commitment and everything to do with fiscal capacity.

The deep and long-lasting changes in South Africa's higher education system therefore have little to do with the dramatic, the visible or the symbolic. Quietly but steadily, the state has made significant incursions into the arena of institutional autonomy which fundamentally redefine the long-held understandings of institutional identity and autonomy. What are the specific actions which have contributed to this receding line of autonomy once bitterly defended within universities?

1. the state now decides **what** can be taught, or rather, what institutions might be willing to teach without subsidized income, through skilful manipulation of the funding formula. What the “programme and qualifications mix” exercise does, in effect, is to authorize the state to decide what can be taught where, if at all, irrespective of the local demand or institutional capacity. Moreover, an unprecedented flourish of bureaucratic structures—the South African Qualifications Authority, the Council on Higher Education, the Department of Education—now create a series of approval barriers that must be scaled in order to have any new programme or qualification approved. So, it is not only that decisions about what can be taught are now centralized, but that structures of bureaucratic compliance ensure that institutions act in accordance with such authority.
2. that the state now decides **which institutions will offer what programmes**. For example, the decision to close Mining Engineering at the University of Pretoria and transfer that responsibility solely to Wits University is a case in point. It is not only that the state withholds funding

⁸ See J.D. Jansen et al. (2002), *Mergers in Higher Education: Lessons learned in transitional contexts*. Pretoria, University of South Africa Press.

from new proposed programmes, but that it has taken it upon itself to close down existing ones.

3. that the state now decides **who** can be taught, or rather, how many students are allowed to enter universities and in which specific fields. As already mentioned, the recent cap placed on student enrolments cannot be read other than as an official retreat in the face of declining central funds from a fundamental commitment of the White Paper on Higher Education—that is, the goal of increasing access to higher education. What is significant, for the purposes of this presentation, is the impact of the decision on *institutional autonomy* rather than the merits or otherwise of the policy itself.
4. that the state now decides **how** students will be taught by placing institutional qualifications on a national framework grid through which qualifications are organized and delivered. The requirement that learning outcomes should be specified, that assessment criteria should be made explicit, and that programmes should be “packaged” in particular ways are unprecedented intrusions into actions that were always considered the domain of the universities. Again, the issue for now is not whether such state interventions hold educational value or not; the point is that further ground has been lost in traditional areas of institutional autonomy.
5. that the state decides on **which programmes will be funded at what levels**—*but in ways that appear increasingly arbitrary* such as the differential funding decision on what kinds of programmes are more desirable than others e.g., the funding formula privileging masters degrees by dissertation only, over those in which theoretical training takes the form of coursework—irrespective of whether the latter course of action strengthens and deepens the quality of the thesis research being submitted.
6. that the state decides on the **credibility** of qualifications, programmes and even institutions through the mechanism of higher education quality audits. What was until now the province of self-regulation among institutions is now the prerogative of the state. Despite the attempted reassurances that auditing is a mechanism for institutional development, the fact is that this form of state intervention could close down institutions or programmes and make harsh and final public judgments about such activities.
7. that the state now decides **which institutions will exist**, and in what combinations. The mergers generated fierce resistance from some quarters and this may also account for some reversals in the more ambitious plans of the former Minister. With the strong moral argument that the existing institutional arrangements reflected “the geopolitical

landscape of apartheid”, a politician decided on which institutions would be closed, which would be merged, and which would—in the language of the times—be left untouched.

8. that the state now contemplates the **centralizing of information** (or rather de-institutionalizing information) required for student admissions in a proposed central applications office. There is considerable suspicion on the part of institutions that the real intent of the state was to push for a central *admissions* office—based largely on a distrust of institutions.
9. that the state can now displace a Vice Chancellor on the basis of review and **install his or her own Administrator** to run the institution. An institution deemed to be in crisis, and unable to resolve such crisis, could be subjected to direct government intervention that changes key personnel—all allowed under revised higher education legislation.

I am not making the argument that some of these interventions were unnecessary or avoidable or intentionally pernicious; nor am I arguing that some of these interventions actually changed institutional practice. Institutions have become quite adept at dodging policies they do not like. For example, there is some evidence emerging that the national qualifications framework has had very little impact on universities despite its profound ambitions with respect to access and mobility of learners.

What I *am* arguing is, first, that these interventions by the state, taken together, have irrevocably changed the discourses, understandings and behaviours of institutions in ways that make *any* state intervention more legitimate than before; and second, that such interventions have permanently altered how universities understand themselves, their missions and their degrees (sic) of freedom.

How did it Happen?

There has always been, and continues to be, a tension *within* the post-apartheid state between centrist and democratic tendencies in relation to society in general and, in particular, in relation to the governance of the universities. How much control should be exercised over universities, and how much freedom should they be allowed? These questions, curiously, also preoccupied the first major commission on higher education, the Van Wyk de Vries Commission⁹ of 1974, where strong debates raged (including an articulate dissenting opinion by one GR Bozzoli) on the nature and extent of autonomy of universities.

Parenthetically, it would be very useful to do the unthinkable—compare the so-called Van Wyk de Vries Commission with the National Commission on Higher

⁹ This is the Main Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Universities, Department of National Education, Republic of South Africa. Government Printers, Pretoria.

Education in 1996 to examine ideological continuities with respect to the question of autonomy.

Then, as now, the paradox of autonomy in South African society and institutions has been the subject of much discussion—a university sector (at least the white institutions) that at once enjoyed considerable autonomy in relation to the apartheid state but which at the same time was subjected to the most arbitrary restrictions from the same state. In other words, I am arguing that there is a coincidence of orientations between state-centred thinking of the Nationalist Party and the state-centred tendencies of many new government officials. In this context, there might very well be a degree of political continuity between the de Klerk proposals for greater control over higher education (late 1980s) and the Asmal plans for greater state intervention in this sector (late 1990s).

Unlike de Klerk, however, the new government could claim legitimacy for its intervention on the basis of an outright electoral victory. It could also, as guardian of the crusade against *apartheid*, mobilise strong moral arguments for bringing the higher education system under greater centralized control through appeals to politically loaded commitments like equity, access and redress.

What facilitated this unprecedented level of state intervention in higher education, and the erosion of institutional autonomy, was the crisis of governance especially within the historically black universities at crucial points in early transition (1994—1999, the Bengu period). In ways not seen under *apartheid*, several institutions started to come apart at the seams during this period. Dysfunctional councils, corrupt managers, violent student protests, authoritarian leadership, financial crises, hostage taking, campus occupations by private militias—posed direct questions of the new government.

Did this new government have the authority to intervene, stabilize and restore to order the turbulence in this visible higher education sector? In many ways, the credibility and legitimacy of the new black government was put to a very public test in the arena of higher education.

And it responded by changing legislation which placed unprecedented power in the hands of government over universities; and at this moment of vulnerability, it pushed through under an impatient and aggressive new Minister, a series of interventions (mentioned earlier) that would not have been possible with a strong, well-organised university system.

With characteristic balance and economy, Professor Njabulo Ndebele reflects on this period as one in which “A weakened sector became vulnerable to determined external intervention” and found itself “caught in a whirlwind of inevitable regulation and control.”¹⁰ He ponders that this regulatory environment

¹⁰ Njabulo Ndebele (2004), Higher Education and Political Transition, *IZWI Voice of HE Leadership*, vol.2, 2nd Quarter, p.1.

could result in “a compliant higher education system...[which would] undercut the objectives of institutional autonomy as defined in the White Paper for Higher Education.”¹¹

In this context, centralist tendencies within government “won.”

But it is not simply the coincidence of centralist orientations or the vulnerability of dysfunctional institutions that brought universities into this heavily controlled status. It was also a set of earlier decisions made by the new government to subject itself completely to the terms and technologies of the global economy. The new state would prioritise science and technology, build human capital through investment in high skills development, build strategic linkages with the Bretton Woods institutions, reorganize its macro-economic policy on terms that favoured international investment and local stability, and define progress in terms of a global metric of development—exemplified in GEAR. What did this mean for higher education? Quite simply, the systems of evaluation and accountability, the measures of performance and progress, the terms of academic appointment and contracting, the sources of academic authority and institutional legitimation, and the terms of funding of universities—all of these have their origins outside of the country, and defined the ways in which the South African state, and its institutions, responded to what I elsewhere (extending Neave)¹² called “a transnational form of the evaluative state.”¹³

The loss of autonomy has to be explained, therefore, in relation to global, state and institutional developments in order to understand why it might be so difficult to regain lost ground in the near future.

What are the Consequences?

There is the disturbing recent story of the Irish girl who auctioned her virginity on the Internet in order to raise the funds to pay for her university tuition.

Reflecting on the history of state intervention in African universities, the political scientist Adam Habib makes the interesting point that once the state gets into the university, it has no idea how to get out. The loss of autonomy, like the loss of virginity is, as far as I know, not recoverable once given up. This loss of innocence is the major consequence for higher education. Institutions now have to pose the question as to how they will manage their relationship with a state that has centralized so much authority in itself that what is taught, how and to whom, are now legitimate areas for official intervention. It is not, however, simply

¹¹ Ndebele (2004), p.2.

¹² Guy Neave (1988), *The Evaluative State Reconsidered*. *European Journal of Education* 33(3): 265-284.

¹³ JD Jansen (2003), *Opening Plenary Address (Invited), Targeting Education: The Politics of Performance and the Prospects of ‘Education for All.’* The 7th Biennial Oxford Conference on Education, University of Oxford, England (forthcoming in the *International Journal of Educational Development*, 2004).

a case of the state not knowing how to get out; the more disturbing question looking forward is this: “what is to prevent a virile state now or an undemocratic state in the future from pressing for even greater control over the day-to-day actions, decisions and destinies of individual institutions?”¹⁴ To avoid this happening, and to regain ground already lost in the autonomy stakes, higher education institutions will have to face up to some unpleasant facts.

The first is to concede that autonomy as a historical and political concept is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, the struggle *for* autonomy enabled the white English universities, and in particular UCT and Wits, to declare themselves “open” and reserve the right to admit “non-Europeans” (as black people were then called). On the other hand, it was also a powerful instrument in the hands of institutions to determine how many to admit, to what facilities, and into which programmes. The same argument could be made for staffing appointments. In preparing for this Lecture, I was stuck by the deep racism, offensive paternalism and the sense of European mission (let alone epistemological naïvete) that accompanied moving arguments by the great English liberal men for greater autonomy with respect to decisions over admissions.¹⁵ Is it possible, therefore, that the racial distribution of senior academic staff at the former white universities reflects, at least in part, the negative consequences of institutional autonomy?

The second is to recognize that the infringement of institutional autonomy will continue unless the higher education sector as a whole begins to speak with one voice. Here we find a dilemma: in its politically crude and racially inspired attempts to rescue some of the historically black universities, the state has in fact “redistributed” funding in favour of these largely rural and under-developed institutions.¹⁶ In the same way that the “open universities” were compromised by the silences and benefits that accrued to the Afrikaans universities in the 1950s, the post-apartheid university sector as a whole might be undermined in its press for non-interference by the silence and self-interests of the historically black universities. Unless the leadership of the higher education sector finds a strategy to speak with one, binding voice on the question of autonomy *as a common*

¹⁴ I do not believe that the political economy of South Africa parallels that of the post-colonial Nigerian state; but it is worth taking account of Julius Omozuanubo Ibonvere’s (1993) account of how once great African universities can slide into positions of servitude towards the state; in “The State and Academic Freedom in Africa: How African academics subvert academic freedom,” *Journal of Third World Studies* X(2): 36-73.

¹⁵ It is such attitudes that enabled the liberal E.G. Malherbe, for example, to point out that “These people are in many cases still close to the primitive mode of life; so that, as experience has shown, they may take to burning down buildings, just as they burn down each others’ huts in tribal warfare”—even as he lectured on “The Autonomy of Our Universities and Apartheid” (undated).

¹⁶ This is not a debate I wish to return to in this presentation; I simply affirm a position I have taken in the past that this rescue act is self-defeating for the construction of a high-quality university system even though it might satisfy short-term political pressures for the ruling party; a better strategy is to build a few strong universities from among the established institutions, and to accelerate their deracialisation as quickly as possible.

interest, it will continue to loose ground on the right to decide on core academic matters.

The third is to be conscious of the fact that the university sector will remain vulnerable to state intrusion unless they find ways of strengthening their own systems of institutional governance. The weaker the Councils or senior leadership of universities, the weaker the degree of financial management and self-regulation, the less aggressive the measures taken to enhance student and staff equity, and the less democratic the forums established for stakeholder participation, the more likely the state will use such weakness as a pretext for greater surveillance, intervention and control.

Steering or Interfering?

At the turn of the century, the relationship between the state and universities in South Africa is under renewed stress. How this relationship will unfold, and whether institutions will have more or less or any autonomy in the future, will depend crucially on decisions made in the present conjuncture. After brief experiments with participatory governance in the mid-1990s, there is now a concerted move towards greater government control of universities.¹⁷ The first wave of reforms, argues government, resulted in non-implementation and negative effects which “if left unchecked, threaten the development of a single, national, co-ordinated but diverse higher education system.”¹⁸

It is therefore crucial that at this and other forums, the question of academic freedom and institutional autonomy be addressed as a matter of great urgency. Such counter-intervention is necessary for at least two reasons.

The quest for greater and more state control is based on the flawed assumption that the state can best “steer” higher education institutions in the direction of what is too loosely called *transformation*. There is no evidence for this. On the contrary, there is more and more evidence that profound policies and detailed plans tend to have very little effect on the day to day operations of institutions—with one exception: the manipulation and allocation of funding. Here there is a serious challenge since this funding allocation is no longer based on a clear and transparent model in which the rules of the game are clear to institutions. It is vague and complex, without any clear rules except to invest in one Minister unprecedented powers to make arbitrary decisions without any downward accountability to institutions. An Appendix to a submission made by SAUVCA in this respect is worth quoting at length:

¹⁷ A detailed description of how this happened appears in Nico Cloete, Peter Maassen and Joe Muller (2003), *Great Expectations, Mixed Governance Approaches and Unintended Outcomes: The post-1994 reform of South African higher education*. Paper presented at CHER 2003.

¹⁸ Department of Education (2001), *National Plan on Higher Education*, p.8.

The new [funding] framework will give the Minister of Education considerable freedom to direct the future funding of higher education institutions....In effect, the independent formula of higher education will cease in South Africa in 2004 and the benefits of having a system that is certain, objective and devoid of possible manipulation, will be lost to a large degree¹⁹

To its credit, SAUVCA understood the direct implications for institutional independence:

Former notions of university autonomy, requiring 'arm's length' treatment of higher education, will cease and higher education, for funding purposes at least, will be treated more or less as part of the broader civil service²⁰

Where SAUVCA makes a crucial error is to plead for a later reversal on grounds lost:

SAUVCA's Finance Committee has accepted the need to steer institutions in the interests of transformation; a time limit should be imposed to ensure that university autonomy is not permanently forfeited²¹

Since Ministers tend to act on short-term political priorities rather than long-term system gains, the entire higher education sector is placed at deep risk not only in relation to its basic functioning but also in its quest for autonomy with regard to academic management. Put differently, there is no evidence that centralized planning models can best achieve transformation goals.

What makes this particular moment in our history so dangerous is not only the silence about the moves towards greater state control, but the attempts by some to negotiate academic freedom through compromise positions such as "conditional autonomy." This is dangerous because *it assumes a benevolent state* that not only exists in the present to advance the intellectual interests of higher education, but that it will remain a benevolent state well into the future. And this is where the case for institutional autonomy is strongest. One African nation after another has found that as the post-colonial state failed to deliver in the economic domain, and as the state then moved towards greater authoritarian behaviour, the first target was the university. If and when that point arises in the future, on what grounds will the South African university be able to challenge the post-apartheid state?

¹⁹ South African Universities Vice Chancellors Association (2004), Comments on the revised framework for higher education institutions, Appendix A, April, p.14.

²⁰ SAUVCA 2004, p.14

²¹ SAUVCA 2004, p.14

But the erosion of autonomy also has dire intellectual consequences. In a climate where steering is becoming indistinguishable from interfering, there is less space for the open expression of ideas, less experimentation with alternative programmes, less diversity with respect to research and innovation. The South African obsession with singularity—no doubt an over-reaction to the fragmentation enforced by apartheid—will cost the country dearly in intellectual (but also in economic) terms. One example will have to suffice. The new concern on the autonomy horizon is the threat of installing ‘a dedicated distance education institution for higher education.’ The preferred interpretation of ‘dedicated as single’ institution threatens the innovative and indeed the competitive with respect to the delivery of high quality distance education programmes across the country, the continent and beyond. If government proceeds with this plan, only one institution will be allowed to offer distance education; continuance on the part of other institutions will be threatened by the withdrawal of subsidy and, quite possibly, a direct order to discontinue such programmes in the former “residential institutions” even if they choose to offer such programmes on a non-subsidised basis. The reality of so-called mixed-mode institutions among leading universities in the world could easily fall prey inside South Africa to this obsession with singularity—and, in the process, threaten intellectual vitality, institutional diversity and professional freedom in the design and delivery of curriculum.

When does a university cease to exist?

It cannot be when a government decree declares some final date by which a university shuts down; or when a large institution engulfs and extinguishes the identity of a smaller one; or when new signage goes up declaring an imagined community. Nor can it be said that a university exists simply because it goes through the routines of graduation ceremonies or that it registers another “intake” of students or even that it teaches them.

But you may recognize another university in which the entire place has been transformed into a commercial center, the departments called ‘cost-centres’ and the students called ‘clients’; in which every “management” meeting is consumed with balancing the budget in the light of impending subsidy cuts; in which the response to external intervention is one of compliance and consent; in which the accumulation of larger and larger *numbers* of accredited publications is pursued with relentless vigour; in which teaching is equated with technology; and the mechanics of research confused with the elegance of scholarship. Just about everyone in such a place is in the business of (ac)counting. Here, too, the university has long ceased to exist.

A university ceases to exist when the intellectual project no longer defines its identity, infuses its curriculum, energizes its scholars, and inspires its students. When the intellectual project defines a university’s identity, then only are the

conditions set under which academic freedom can be secured and institutional autonomy jealously defended.

Conclusion

On the morning of the 2nd of March, 1948, a 52-year old medical scientist born in Prieska stepped up to the podium of Jameson Memorial Hall to declare to his audience what he called his “intellectual testament” as newly appointed Vice Chancellor and Principal of the University of Cape Town. Speaking in the long shadow of the Second World War, the new man at the helm observed and then warned as follows:

Recent history hasshown only too tragically how easily and *almost imperceptibly* Universities can be deprived of their freedom until they become mere instruments for the dissemination of dogma and propaganda under authoritarian direction. That no such degradation has befallen the Universities of South Africa is to be counted among our blessings; but he who thinks that no such danger exists lives in a fools' paradise (my emphasis)²²

These words of Thomas Benjamin Davie are as true today as they were in that year when another nationalist party came to power.

²² Inaugural Address by Dr Thomas Benjamin Davie on the occasion of his installation as Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town on 1st March 1948, p.3.