

Rethinking Academic Freedom at Universities

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Abstract

Although the role of a university is to discover and disseminate new ideas, globally it is increasingly deviating from its ideal path due to some external pressures in recent years. Instead of becoming a place for alternatives and promoting free-space to question the status-quo, it is aligning itself to the current social structures, corporate values and bureaucratic invasions. The systematic intervention of such hegemonic forces has significantly shrunk the space for 'academic freedom', the lifeblood of a university. This study, therefore, reiterates the significance and necessities of academic freedom for cultivating new ideas, preserving democratic values and fostering societal progress instead of producing mere professionals and bureaucrats. In order to do so, this paper critically reexamines the very notion of 'academic freedom', its current state and the hurdles it must overcome.

Keywords: Academic freedom, Commercialization of education, Universities.

Introduction

Academic freedom is a prerequisite for the universities to function as an autonomous entity that ensures an environment of philosophical inquiries and engagement with heterogeneous ideas of diverse branches of knowledge. It safeguards the rights of the researchers, faculty members and students to critically evaluate the existing system of thoughts and ideologies against the fear of being persecuted. Furthermore, it shields them from undue political and commercial interference in their pursuit of new knowledge against the pressure to conform to the existing parameters. However, in the current global climate, the role and structure of universities are undergoing a paradigm shift. Globalisation has coerced these once-autonomous academic institutions to alter their foundational ethos, compelling them to respond to governmental and market pressures. The conventional equilibrium—comprising individual academic freedom for educators and students, institutional autonomy, and accountability to financiers—faces unprecedented challenges. Hence, critics have suggested a shifting trend favouring societal needs preferred by certain groups and market economic needs, which might occur at the expense of fundamental research opportunities and the ability to critically address the power dynamics of state and market.

These present circumstances place academic freedom at a crossroads as the multifaceted and intricate correlations of the relevance and effectiveness of the universities significantly depend on it. In this context, critical questions on the evolving discourse of academic freedom emerge that need to be addressed in order to clarify the notion of academic freedom along with the factors that necessitate it and the challenges that threaten its spirit of inclusivity. The present study tries to achieve these aims by providing rather an

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extensive thoughtful exegesis of the existing literature on various issues of academic freedom. For the convenience of the readers, the discussion section is divided into three parts. At first, the concept of academic freedom with all its implications is explored. Then, the necessity of preserving academic freedom is discussed. Finally, the emerging threats that undermine academic freedom have been identified.

The mainstream discourse on academic freedom often exhibits certain limitations: a lack of specificity, a focus on teachers to the exclusion of students (neglecting students' freedom to choose their field of study), a defensive assertion of academic rights, and the unwillingness to discuss the accompanying responsibilities of those in academia. Besides, references to academic freedom in public conversation are often formulaic, failing to encompass its true depth and significance. As a result, much of the literature on academic freedom—mostly authored by professors—amounts to self-serving praise and unsupported claims. Therefore, one must strive to develop a more nuanced, robust understanding of academic freedom that considers its full breadth and implications.

It would be challenging to give a clearer understanding of what academic freedom truly implies in the context of the universities because many possess an unclear understanding of it, and a smaller number have attempted to explain their interpretations of it as it is nearly impossible to establish a clear notion of it by objective consensus. Moreover, probing certain questions can be sensitive or threatening to an individual's resistance to shift his/her preconceived notion of an idea or those relying on a simplistic understanding of a topic.

While academic freedom primarily pertains to the autonomy of researchers and educators to seek truth, characterizing it merely as the liberty to pursue and share their research, teachings, and ideas, contingent upon the pursuit of truth and adherence to professional and ethical standards, would be a significant oversimplification. Academic freedom, albeit a frequently misunderstood and contested notion, requires further clarification of some questions like whose freedom from whose intervention is sought-after in doing what kind of activities and in what nature. Fritz Machlup attempts to answer these questions as follows:

Academic freedom consists in the absence of, or protection from, such restraints or pressures— chiefly in the form of sanctions threatened by the state...also by other power groups in society—as are designed to create in the minds of academic scholars...fear and anxieties from freely studying and investigating whatever they are interested in, and from freely discussing, teaching, or publishing whatever opinions they have reached.¹

Although Machlup's definition of the concept covers a number of aspects of the idea, he fails to address the accompanying responsibilities of this particular kind of freedom. Regarding the responsibilities of this unique kind of freedom, there seems to be a general misunderstanding even among many of the academicians and this misunderstanding stems from a mistaken belief that it equates to unbridled expressions and unaccountability of the academicians. This, of course, has solid grounds because these ideas spring from the current nature and trends of the universities where academicians use it as a means to gratify their personal greed and seek immediate

material gain although ideally it must be sought-after with a higher and noble purpose in mind instead of viewing it, in the words of Fuchs, “as a personal privilege”.²

It is important to note that such misinterpretations and misuse of the much debated notion of academic freedom arise when there is a lack of understanding among the universities and both their internal and external stakeholders. In the context of the western universities, these are avoided with a complex and sophisticated yet functional system. Cary Nelson calls it a ‘three-legged stool’ system that consists of academic freedom of the academicians, shared governance of both the academicians and the trustees (e.g., the state, the administration and the external power groups), and faculty tenureship. The reciprocal relations, despite its complex nature, of the three elements strike a balance that creates an operative reality where both the academic freedom of the academicians and the relevance of the trustees as fund providers remain valid. It stops academics from abusing academic freedom as a personal privilege since they are somewhat responsible for their actions, and it stops trustees from controlling and influencing the curriculum, hiring practices, and instruction because these are all entirely up to the academicians.³ Here, the academicians are accountable in the sense that they need to evaluate how their preferred research aligns with their institution’s needs and the society that finances their projects and salaries. After all, society will only endorse the granting of a unique freedom, such as academic freedom, if it is sufficiently convinced that these freedoms yield practical benefits.

Moreover, this balanced system of governance strictly ensures that the university must prioritise the innovative recruitment of researchers, scientists, philosophers, and sociologists, of course, by the academicians and without the interference of the other parties. These individuals can provide a foundation for meta-science discussions and sustain an ongoing dialogue about enduring academic issues and beyond with a view to finding solutions to the challenges faced by mankind in general. Such initiatives are crucial for maintaining the institution's identity and crafting a compelling external ‘brand’ as a ‘research-based service university’. However, this particular system has its limitations. In this regard, Michiel Horn observes that tenureship and such complex systems are not perfect but they serve the needs of the society and the universities well enough.⁴ Thus it aligns the role of the universities to a socially valued end in an ideal sense, of course, with the consent of both parties. Despite its limitations, the absence of it in many countries seriously undermines the notion of academic freedom and in turn contributes to the sustained contention of it.

Furthermore, academic freedom, inherently interwoven with an array of complementary rights of studying, researching and testing new ideas, does not simply safeguard scholars from external interference. To be more specific, it shields sociologists not only from trustees and public officials but also from fellow academics from different disciplines like physics. It is because the concept of academic freedom is equally relevant across all disciplines as there is no hierarchy of disciplines rather they are complementary to each other. In this regard, Issac Asimov’s contribution to the field of robotics and artificial intelligence as a literary writer compels us to remember the interconnectedness and the importance of academic freedom in all disciplines.

Alongside these issues, another implication of academic freedom, perhaps the most significant one, is that the role of it goes beyond just safeguarding intellectual liberty of the already established scholars, researchers and the faculty members; it also ensures that students are encouraged—both by instruction and example—towards independent thinking and critical reasoning. This cultivates in them the ability to better fulfil their responsibilities as intellectually active participants in an increasingly global community as future leaders. Therefore, the faculty members themselves must strictly uphold the spirit of academia so that they can motivate and inspire students as Nobel Peace Laureate Albert Schweitzer emphasises on setting examples as it is the only thing that influences others.⁵ Terence Karran reinforces the same idea by asserting, “if we, as academics, allow our freedoms to be eroded so readily, what example are we setting for those we teach?”⁶

It, therefore, further broadens the scope of academic freedom even to the students who are also entitled to ask pertinent questions regarding the teaching methodologies of the teachers, the relevance of the curriculum, issues related with academia and beyond. Sir Ken Robinson, an eminent educationist, argues in favour of this. He thinks academic freedom is equally relevant to the students as it is to the academic staff. To him,

It’s crucial for their growth and exploration as thinking individuals. It’s about letting the young minds explore uncharted territories of knowledge without the fear of being judged or persecuted.⁷

Bell Hooks emphasizes the same issue as she says, “students—the learners, the reason the educational system exists—must also have academic freedom, the freedom to explore, to question, to test ideas.”⁸ Therefore, it is established that academic freedom extends far beyond the faculty—it is a cornerstone for all who step into the world of knowledge and exploration.

Having narrowly mapped the lengths and breadths of the notion of academic freedom with all its implications, now it is time to shed some light on some of the important factors that necessitate it in the context of universities and broadly our life and society. The key point here is that academic freedom, while influenced by the varying dynamics of higher education in broader society, cannot be simply reduced to a consequence of contingency and pragmatism. It serves as a bridge to an ideal academy, where scholars ardently pursue knowledge with accuracy and sophistication.

Since universities serve as the bedrock of innovations, social progress, preserving democratic values and creating and circulating new ideas and knowledge, they are the premises upon which the progress and evolution of our civilization are built. The universities must retain their autonomy so that they can fulfil their roles effectively. And the prerequisite for their autonomy is academic freedom. Therefore, academic freedom must not be viewed as a lofty ideal rather it must be viewed as a crux of a progressive society that paves the way towards an enlightened future by fostering intellectual growth and spurring innovation. Henry Rosovsky argues that academic freedom is the “linchpin” of a university and “without it the university would cease to function as an institution.”⁹

In the realm of technological innovations, the importance of academic freedom for scientists and researchers is paramount. It allows them to think outside the box and explore

unconventional ideas without the fear of censorship. Max Weber argues “academic freedom provides the soil for the growth of new ideas, for the challenging of old norms, for the questioning of established truths.”¹⁰ It is vital because creativity, whether in science or the arts, cannot be administratively controlled. Furthermore, academic freedom allows scientists to collaborate with different perspectives of diverse branches of knowledge and consider the ethical implications of new technological discoveries. While maintaining meaningful relationships among varied elements and surroundings, such as well-organized laboratories, can enhance creativity, it can also be stifled by rigid hierarchical structures, inflexible bureaucratic regulations, and exhaustive paperwork. As discoveries are spontaneous and appear in unexpected places, the freedom to transcend conventional boundaries must not be curtailed for the progress of our civilization.

Moreover, as universities offer “alternate spaces”, It may make a substantial contribution by using the Hegelian approach of dialectics to offer direct and serious critique of society. Judith Butler, while attributing the importance of academic freedom to the universities, comments, “it creates a space in which the power of the state or the mob or of unexamined conviction or religious dogma is held at bay.”¹¹ Therefore, it is affirmed that universities can serve as engines that drive societal progress by employing academic freedom to address and resolve multifaceted problems that exist in society. Jonathan R. Cole perceives universities “as catalysts for change” that supply “the intellectual capital required for progress.” He further affirms that academic freedom is central to achieve this mission.¹² Thus preserving the liberty for teachers and students to question, study, evaluate, and grow is paramount for societal progression. As it allows “free flow of ideas”, Louis Menand argues that it prevents intellectual stagnation.¹³

In the like manner, Edward Said, in his seminal book titled *Representation of the Intellectual*, envisions that the true intellectual work necessitates a constant state of opposition to conformity, particularly the prevailing unjust power structures and hegemonic ideologies. Said asserts, “The intellectual's representations...are always tied to and directly involve a worldly, historical context”.¹⁴ In the context of academic freedom, this idea underscores the role of academics as challengers of societal norms rather than passive participants. Universities, which are increasingly subject to bureaucratic and corporate pressures, risk diluting this oppositional ethos. Academic freedom, then, becomes a safeguard for intellectuals to remain “speaking truth to power”¹⁵, ensuring that scholarship maintains its critical distance from the structures that seek to commodify education.

Moreover, Said’s concept of the academicians and intellectuals as the “exile and marginal”¹⁶ figure resonates deeply with the challenges faced by educators and researchers advocating for academic freedom. The marginality that Said describes is not merely geographical but ideological—a willingness to inhabit spaces of discomfort to challenge entrenched systems. In an era of commercialization, where universities are pressured to produce “marketable” knowledge, the intellectual must resist this trend and uphold the ethos of free inquiry. Said’s call for intellectuals to embrace their role as critics of the dominant order highlights the ethical responsibility embedded in academic freedom, urging faculty and students alike to resist co-option by external forces and remain steadfast in their pursuit of truth.

Finally, Said emphasizes that the intellectual's role is inherently 'public', extending beyond the cloisters of academia to engage with broader societal issues. He contends that intellectuals must "raise embarrassing questions, confront orthodoxy and dogma...and represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten".¹⁷ This mandate aligns seamlessly with the notion that academic freedom is not a privilege for the few but a tool to democratize knowledge and critique societal injustices. For universities to truly function as engines of societal progress, they must cultivate an environment where academic freedom is sacrosanct, enabling intellectuals to navigate between their obligations to society and their commitment to independent scholarship. Therefore, the necessity of academic freedom is not limited to an act of self-interest rather it is a commitment for the development of future generations. Thus, it is safe to say that violation of academic freedom is not only a threat to the academicians but a menace to the entire society.

Furthermore, for a democratic society to flourish with openness and tolerance, the sanctity of academic freedom must be upheld. As democracy implies the participation, potential contribution and recognition of all the members, it must ensure an environment where free exchange of ideas occurs all the time. Therefore, the idea of liberty of teachers and students springs from the very essence of democracy itself. Thus, universities should be a safe place for the dissent voices since history is replete with instances of political activity by minority, dissident groups who have often been the vanguard of democratic thought, whose ideologies have been ultimately embraced. Martha Nussbaum argues, "it is the mark of a healthy democracy that it safeguards the space within universities for creativity, self-criticism, and dissent."¹⁸

Hence, it is very crucial to realize that divergence from mainstream norms or dissenting voices are not to be condemned. Rather, their absence would indicate a grave illness in our society. Edward Shills further argues "a free society necessitates free universities. This does not imply universities serving as instruments for the momentarily powerful or the faddishly popular."¹⁹ The importance of reflecting deeply and prudently on this issue is paramount because in desperate times of shifting paradigms and political instability, the necessity of academic freedom to address these issues becomes prominent as it is a fundamental requirement for a thriving democratic society.

In recent years, heightened political polarization and frequent attacks on the collective understanding of truth have somewhat paradoxically increased appreciation for academic freedom. It is clearer now more than ever that these issues are not confined to isolated corners of our society. Rather, the tension between conflicting ideas is ubiquitous and not bound by political ideology. Consequently, safeguarding environments for teamwork and shared problem resolution is vital. After all, it is impossible to force a way through complex problems; it must be tackled through evidence, reason, and negotiations – the very pillars of academia. These institutions are equipped to delve into the deepest layers of complexity, devoting the necessary time and intellectual rigour to address challenges that often require a long-term commitment. Noam Chomsky articulates such political role of intellectuals and academic freedom and comments, "intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions."²⁰

Contrary to expected ideals, maintaining institutional autonomy and academic freedom in the context of the universities faces unprecedented challenges in recent years due to globalisation that encompasses free market economy, rapid technological advancements, cultural homogeneity, and heightened political polarization in national and international politics. Although such challenges can be traced back to the rise of capitalism, rapid industrialisation and colonial expansion during the Victorian period, they vary not in their nature but in degree in recent years. The intricate and complex web of inter-connections among the current hegemonic forces is more imposing and gradually diminishing the essence of the universities. Nowadays, stakeholders want universities to serve the interests of the government, the market, and the bureaucracy, motivated primarily by economic factors. This increasing emphasis on economic objectives has inadvertently undermined 'academic freedom' in tertiary education institutions.

Therefore, the professoriate's commitment to maintaining academic freedom seems increasingly at odds with the shift towards greater accountability to external stakeholders who are now the advocates of utilitarian education. This utilitarian view of education that emphasizes 'measurable' outcomes, vocational training, specialization in a particular field and commercialization of education is essentially contradictory to the ideal nature and purpose of university education. Education, especially university education cannot simply be reduced to such utilitarian views/practicalities. Instead, such usefulness of education should be seen as a by-product of education. John Henry Newman, who shares the same sentiment, argues against this utilitarian view of education and suggests that the only practicality of university education "is that of training good members of society."²¹ Though the utilitarian view of education, a challenge to academic freedom, prioritises short-term material benefits at the expense of long-term benefits such as an individual's personal, intellectual growth and overall progression of the society, yet it prevails and is growing its influence over time.

Although university education should promote an interdisciplinary approach as Newman suggests, "it educates the intellect to reason well in all matters, to reach out towards truth, and to grasp it,"²² the dominance of utilitarian views, further, limits the academic freedom to challenge established norms and seek truth by critical evaluation of ideas, instead it focuses on developing particular set of skills and training professionals. Furthermore, the rise of consumerist culture, fostered by the aim of creating a homogeneous culture across the world, poses a great threat to the pursuit of knowledge, academic excellence and the culture of critical reasoning as it chiefly focuses on profit and marketability of education. As a result, it targets different disciplines to be subjected to scrutiny and criticism for varying reasons. There is a growing consensus that certain academic fields are 'practical,' while others are deemed 'impractical.' In reality, every field necessitates the ability to traverse boundaries, exchange ideas, and foster intellectual collaboration. Although there are no 'practical' or 'impractical' disciplines, the challenge lies in the imposition of such stereotypical demarcations by a group of people who uphold the values of free market economy. John Henry Newman further offers a meaningful premise for comparing the essence of academic freedom with the commercialization of higher education. Newman postulates that university education's

main goal is not an extraordinary material outcome, but rather to elevate the intellectual climate of society. Newman also points out the role of the university as a site for the transmission and expansion of universal knowledge,²³ questioning its relevance if its primary focus turns out to be teaching students and producing “mere professional”.

This growing trend of focusing on the economic value of education has a significant impact on the nature and functions of the universities. It is turning most of the universities into factories where “mere professionals” are produced who are ‘skilled’ in a particular field and lack a comprehensive knowledge or an understanding of interconnectedness of all disciplines. Regarding the degrading nature of the universities, Bill Readings postulates that universities are transforming into “ruins”. However, he does not refer to physical abandonment but rather to the metaphorical remnants of a bygone era—the epoch of intellectual culture. Universities, he contends, are evolving into places where cultural apparatuses are merely consumed.²⁴ Though it might not be true for all the universities across the world, traces of such conditions can be found in many of them.

It gives birth to an urgent question— is academic freedom viable within an institution fundamentally dictated by services catering to economic criteria? Phillip Altbach, investigating this dilemma, argues, “in an era of globalisation and commercialisation, the concept of academic freedom is besieged. Universities are progressively perceived as service providers, with faculty members reduced to mere product deliverers.”²⁵ Bill Readings further claims that the university’s mission is gradually being supplanted by the bureaucratic pursuit of “excellence”—a shift indicative of an emerging market-oriented academic system. Readings thinks, “the university is now expected to find its purpose in the larger national or economic good, aligning the interests of professors, students, and administrators.”²⁶ Stefan Collini also draws attention to the shifting terrain of universities and emphasises the critical need to maintain their true purpose: spaces for critical thinking, innovation, and academic freedom, especially in an era where knowledge is increasingly commercialized and commodified.²⁷

Maswood Akhter, while comparing Newmanian vision of university with the present condition of the universities in Bangladesh, finds a ‘tragic discrepancy’. According to him, universities are becoming “desperate playgrounds for state and corporate fantasies” and a place where even the teachers are being hostile to their colleagues and students by functioning “as some sort of agents of mainstream political parties for their selfish gains”. He affirms that universities cannot run “like a business house or corporate farm, or a military or civil bureaucracy”. In general, he summarises all the challenges as follows:

The entire arrangement appears to be plagued by limited vision, greed for immediate material profits, and an unholy nexus of local political elements and academic opportunists, resulting in a steep decline in intellectual and research standards.²⁸

Although he comments specifically on the context of Bangladeshi universities, these problems can be found in many universities across the world.

These issues generate a profound source of dissatisfaction as they initiate altered dynamics between university faculty and key decision-makers within and beyond the campus. Historically, educators held significant sway over institutional policy decisions.

However, they now perceive that what was once their ancillary staff, the administration, has usurped control over decision-making processes. The administration, having grown substantially in resources and influence, governs the university more from an administrative perspective than an academic one. Furthermore, the shifting behaviour of the university's key benefactor, the State, has inflicted pain upon educators. States have recurrently failed to act as a 'faithful' financial patron to the university instead they are meddling with the freedom of the academicians. The moment an individual's inquiries cross paths with an uncomfortable reality for those in power, the potential for trouble arises. This issue is further magnified by the politicization of universities due to rising tension in global politics. Universities which previously functioned as state-building mechanisms are now turned into "ideological state apparatuses" that help to maintain the status-quo of power dynamics. Thus, it now promotes intellectual biasness and persecutes by criminalising those who differ with the dominant ideologies at the expense of 'holistic' development of the society and mankind in general.

The persecution of the Ukrainian marine biologist who was studying plankton is very relevant in this context. He was incarcerated for his research on the minute organisms that constitute a major part of the ocean's food chain because he utilized data from sonar beacons deployed across the ocean by the U.S. and Russia during the Cold War to track plankton flows. This data was publicly accessible on the internet, yet the remnants of the old regime regarded it as classified information, leading to his prosecution. Here, academic freedom in marine biology proved to be far from 'safe'. Moreover, physicists represent one of the largest groups of historically persecuted scholars. It is known to all that Galileo Galilei, among many others, suffered persecution because he published his findings that were against the then Catholic beliefs. They were not targeted for their study, research and findings but because they championed academic freedom, asserting the necessity of exploring and exchanging ideas. As a result, they frequently turned into public dissenters. However, it must not be forgotten that the concept of academic freedom is equally relevant across all disciplines. Its application is not restricted by the nature of the research or study in question.

Conclusion

Drawing on these ideas and insights, it becomes clear that academic freedom serves as the cornerstone of intellectual exploration and societal advancement, a principle that should not be violated at any cost even in the face of growing commercialisation in higher education. The voices from the past and the present in the academic field emphasise the necessity to protect and uphold this freedom, which is intrinsically tied to the progress and development of society at large. The role of a university, therefore, extends beyond being merely a marketplace of knowledge and political institution. It is a crucible of critical thought, innovation, and intellectual growth, nourishing the democratic, cultural, and technological fabric of society.

By utilizing academic freedom to address difficult facts and issues for the benefit of society, universities should strive to establish an atmosphere that promotes the general welfare. Such a space must be protected to ensure that free thought and challenging discourses can thrive. Here, the term 'space' carries dual implications. Firstly, it denotes

the physical safety of scholars, who are too often subjected to violence, coercion, prosecution, or threats. Concurrently, it refers to the conceptual space—a domain within our minds where free thought is not stifled. This is a space where questions can be posed and ideas can be shared without the fear of harassment, targeting, job loss, or threats—not due to the quality of our ideas, but the sheer boldness of possessing and disseminating them. Noam Chomsky states, “universities must maintain the freedom of thought and expression in the face of societal pressures and allow for disagreement with prevailing opinions and orthodoxies.”²⁹

In fine, the issues of academic freedom and commercialization of education create a complex problem in the landscape of higher education. Despite the pressures of commodification, the essence of universities—as places of intellectual curiosity, critical thinking, and academic liberty—must not be compromised. These institutions’ commitment to uphold academic freedom, despite the changing socio-political contexts and economic pressures, is imperative for cultivating a healthy intellectual culture and promoting societal progress. Indeed, the preservation of academic freedom serves as a litmus test of a society’s investment in its future, mirroring its commitment to fostering democracy, encouraging cultural growth, and societal progress.

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