Conditional autonomy and responsible Action: A response to Yusef Waghid and Martin Hall

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Abstract
Yusef Waghid in his response to Martin Hall argues that Martin Hall offers a better way of making sense of some of the conceptual and pragmatic links between academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Nevertheless Waghid critiques Hall’s uncritical treatment of prominent theoretical positions for his claims, which Waghid thinks leaves some of Hall’s arguments truncated. This response finds Hall’s option for conditional autonomy and Waghid’s option for responsible action both problematic.

In the first place, reading Waghid’s response would give one a feeling that Waghid, other than showing the limitations involved in Hall’s proposal, would explicitly lay down the links between academic freedom, institutional autonomy and responsible action. In more specific terms, one wonders whether the cultivation of responsible action should be an enabling condition for either academic freedom or institutional or for both. Little do we know what the cultivation of responsible action entails according to Waghid.

From the claims being laid in this response, I acknowledge that there are a few cases where issues regarding ‘responsible action’ have been alluded to. The first of these places is where he makes a contention that ‘the idea of a market driven or entrepreneurial university’ is not necessarily antithetical to critical reason and participatory democracy. While I acknowledge this idea to be true, it should also be noted that such an idea depends on the democratic virtues of the key players. Later in the section, Waghid also asserts that he cannot imagine how the development of an academic programme that is intended to prepare students for participation in a global economy and democratic society can be done without the deliberative engagement of both academic staff and students. This position has underlying assumptions that whoever is developing the programme will understand that responsibility as essentially democratic hence requiring the involvement of other stakeholders. To its best, this sounds more fanciful to me.

In any case, it should be recognised that being responsible means realising that one’s claims to freedom of expression goes as far as another’s claims to the same
start. In other words, no claims to freedom of expression can be justified if they unnecessarily cause harm and injury to others particularly the most vulnerable in society (Waghid 2006).

II

Hall and Waghid agree that the ideal of absolute autonomy does not work for the university. Waghid does not really find fault with the conception being advance by Hall that conditional autonomy implies that the powers of the state would be confined to the disbursement of public funds and the authentication of academic qualifications while the academic institution is left to execute what it can do best, that is, ‘pursue research objectives, . . . interpret their social responsibilities, determine curriculum and deliver it accordingly’ (Hall 2005, 5) among other things. But further in the argument Waghid proposes that certain interferences by the state in the content of academic programmes is ‘justifiably desirable because institutions need to retain rigorous levels of scholarship’ (Waghid 2006). This view is not properly defended by the author and to large extent leaves many questions than trying to clarify them. In itself, it begs the question of the conditions under which rigorous levels of scholarship can be promoted. In my view I think that such rigorous levels of academic scholarship do not require the intervention of a benevolent state that keeps the university on its toes. Under appropriate conditions of free academic life, any university should manage to cultivate serious scholarship among its members. In other words, universities should, under free conditions of academic life, manage to create a responsible collegiality that succeeds in maintaining serious scholarship, without there being an HEQC or state to keep the university on its toes.

III

Hall’s assessment of conditional autonomy is by and large a rejection of the classical conception. In the first place, he gives some room for Du Toit’s contextual understanding of autonomy where the state is considered to have legitimate interests in the internal affairs of the university for the sake of promoting certain public goods. As a result the ideal of freedom of speech is still maintained not as an individual’s entitlement per se, as the classical position argues, but as an obligation to speak out freely in the public interest. This understanding further sees academic freedom in terms of ‘empowering viable intellectual discourse communities’ (Hall 2006).

The conception of conditional autonomy being advance by Hall is one where he thinks that the state has a legitimate right to steer the system and its outcomes procedurally. This procedural control is justified because the democratic state requires such accountability because of the public funds it releases to such institutions and for the authentication of the qualifications. Hall’s argument
assumes, in other words, that such control by the state has no room of affecting the university’s content of research, its teaching and other social responsibilities. This thinking is erroneous both in its conceptual frame as well as in its historical unfolding, in this regard taking into consideration the politics around funding and the qualifications framework in South Africa.

The assumed substantive autonomy of the universities within the framework of conditional autonomy is highly problematic. If it is the case that moves towards conditional autonomy are inevitable because of the contemporary demands for a system that should be just to everyone, then I do not see how the state can maintain the position of ‘an all good’ donor who does not put conditions to the funding that any university gets from its public sources. In other words, usage of funds from public sources assumes the intent is for the good of the public; hence the same public and its assumed needs should be seen to be at the heart of the core business of the university whether this is explicitly stated or not. The university is therefore determined by such needs and within such a framework of thought it is almost impossible to imagine the university’s full control of its own substantive autonomy as Hall would want to make us believe. The erosion to academic freedom in South Africa that many have alluded to is specifically on such grounds. Recent trends in the relationship between the state and the university as far a conditional autonomy is concerned reveal that there is more state interference than state steering in the governance of higher education (Coughlan et al. 2004). In my view, this is a result of the problematics in the combination between procedural autonomy and substantive autonomy that Hall is entertaining in this regard.

IV

Lastly but not least, Hall’s option for conditional autonomy and its expression largely seems to be collapsing into the classical framework. While buying into the argument that academic freedom and institutional autonomy are indissoluble, the author moves forward to recapture the classical notion of the two using T. B. Davie’s formulation as: ‘our freedom from external interference in (determining) a) who shall teach, b) what we teach, c) how we teach, and d) whom we teach’ (as cited in Higgins 2000a). This view is what Hall wants us to consider as the classical notion of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. On the other hand, he proceeds to suggest that the better conception of such autonomy today is substantive autonomy. Among other things, this sense of autonomy includes ‘the authority (of the university) to determine its own objectives and academic programmes’; ‘the right of individual institutions to pursue research objectives on their own terms, to interpret their social responsibilities, to determine the content of their (programmes) and to teach in a manner that they think best’ (Hall 2006).

It is my considered view that what is involved in the classical formulation is not any different from Hall’s option for substantive autonomy of the university. Since substantive autonomy and procedural autonomy are considered to operate
individually in the way they are juxtaposed to each other, then one can comfortably argue that Hall’s argument for conditional autonomy is a contemporary framing of the classical position. There is no substantive difference between them, except for the fact that the state will demand that the funds given to the university be accounted for. But in so far as the university is allowed to do what it can do best: teaching, research and any other forms of knowledge outreach that the university freely decides to embark on, the two positions are the same.

REFERENCES


