Academic freedom is a matter of great controversy in South African universities. There is a number of very different views of academic freedom and they correspond to competing conceptions of the university as an institution. The following renditions of these conceptions are necessarily crude and somewhat misleading, but they may be posited. The first conception of academic freedom is that in which it is assumed that, for example, a university is a purely academic institution, and that the primary function of that university is the pursuit of truth and discovery, and that those who are involved in that pursuit are entitled to pursue that pursuit freely and without interference. The second conception is that academic freedom is a right that is entailed in the process of the service of the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, and that it is and ought to be defended against interference from the state and other movements or organisations outside the university. This view often goes with, or is synonymous with, the view that no university and no university in the world should be allowed to exist, let alone to flourish, if it is to be left free to pursue the research and other activities that are a part of the university's function. This view of academic freedom is based on the idea that universities are simply institutions that are established to pursue the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, and that any interference with that pursuit is therefore an interference with the universe's right to pursue knowledge. The third view is that academic freedom is a right that is entailed in the process of the service of the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, and that it is and ought to be defended against interference from the state and other movements or organisations outside the university. 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determine the subject areas to be taught - as distinct from the actual content of lectures and tutorials within those areas - freedom (in the sense of the effect) is demanded by the university to have autonomy in respect of determining the membership (staff and students) of the university, and of subject areas and disciplines. So freedom to determine membership, subject areas and standards, in a manner that makes any sense, is an essential aspect of institutional autonomy. However, as is the case with freedom of expression, these matters of academic staff and student membership and standards pertain only to the university as an educational and research institution. Moreover, it is no part of the role of the university to ensure that the government of the society it serves is democratically constituted or that the government is capable of being able to judge, what knowledge and which inquiries are the most fruitful and important. It is therefore a matter of academic freedom whether one can publish or not, and what can be taught or researched. Accordingly, it is the task of the university, as an educational and research institution, to determine the subject areas to be taught and research to be undertaken. Historically, the universities in South Africa have not in fact - for whatever reason - pursued the educational/informational ends of the community as a whole, and not simply in the narrower sense. This is because the university is not mandated to public service by national and international trends and only the university is competent to make the required judgements here. However, it would not follow from this that (a) other bodies or groups ought not to have some say in the determining of student intake, and (b) purely academic criteria ought to be the only criteria for determining admission.

In practice the modern university, student intake (as well as in fact subject areas to be taught and researched) have become increasingly characterized by the discipline and regional based interests of the academic community (at the expense of blacks in this country. In South Africa academics have not, and do not secure their positions under conditions of fair competition. So there are and ought to be certain non-academic considerations in the appointment of academic staff.

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