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## Institutional and Individual Autonomy in Relation to Research Productivity in Hungarian and South African Higher Education Contexts

### Abstract

As scholars we navigate in the fast changing and demanding research environment. The pressure to produce tangible outputs, secure funding, and undertake international collaborations has high implications on individual researchers' work and well-being. The issues brought forefront in scholarly literature showcase the impact of research pressures on other academic duties such as teaching, scholarly service and community engagement. The attention is also drawn to the ways in which the above mentioned pressures influence choices researchers make regarding their research agenda. In this reflective paper we take the academic discourse a step further to explore how demands of research productivity intertwine with institutional and individual autonomy in our respective countries, Hungary and South Africa. Our conceptual framework is informed by commonly recognized levels of autonomy in HEIs, which relate to research activities. The three levels include: individual researcher, collaborative research teams and the institution at large. Considering the complexity of the topic and length restriction for this paper, we narrow our focus to how institutional and individual researcher's autonomy converge with two research productivity activities, namely dependence on funding and selection of outlets for research outputs.

Keywords: institutional autonomy, individual researchers' autonomy, research productivity, research outputs, Hungarian higher education, South African higher education

### Introduction

Institutional autonomy and individual autonomy have a controversial history. The literature informs (Kori, 2016) that for centuries, the state, church, and other civil authorities influenced and often restricted researching as well as teaching. Till nowadays, institutional and individual autonomy is not promoted in all parts of the world. In fact, in some places academic freedom is suppressed and penalized.

*Universities often function as centres of political and intellectual dissent, and regimes are thus reluctant to allow institutions the freedom and autonomy that may contribute to instability.* (Kori, 2016, p. 47)

As indicated by scholarly literature (Etomaru et al., 2016) the notion of autonomy can be considered at institutional and individual level. Individual autonomy as an intellectual freedom (Moshman, 2017) refers to freedom of individual academics, meanwhile institutional autonomy accounts for the entire higher education institution (Armbruster, 2008). Institutional autonomy can be also viewed as the right of institutions to make independent decisions without external interference on academic matters. Etomaru et al. (2016) further clarify that institutional autonomy has to do with institution's decision to make independent

decisions, to exercise academic freedom and self-governance with regard to internal activities. This in turn implies freedom from interference by the state or any other external governing bodies on institutional organization, governance, funding arrangement, the generation of income for its sustainability, recruitment of its staff, admission of students as well as teaching and researching.

Scholars (Kori, 2016) warn that presence of institutional autonomy does not assure presence of individual autonomy. Having said that, autonomous HEIs need to follow professional standards and be accountable to public bodies and own communities. Meanwhile autonomy of individual researchers needs to be framed by scientific standards and ethical conduct (ALLEA, EUA & Science Europe, 2019).

Although, there are many principles framing institutional autonomy and individual researchers' autonomy, often these principles are not as evident or functional in practice which have implications for researchers. The reality that research enables societies to progress through the advancement of knowledge, scientific discoveries and technological development impacts the expectations placed on researchers. In fact, nowadays scholars navigate in the fast changing and demanding research environment where they are faced with pressures to engage in international and interdisciplinary research projects; secure external funding; and generate knowledge in tangible outputs.

Scholars (Barnes, 2019) warn about the consequences of publishing pressure on academics, which lead to choosing topics for publications that are more desired and have potential to gain more citations. According to Te'eni (2019), choosing topics, methods, levels of analysis, and collaboration belong to academic freedom, which can be restricted by various gatekeepers. Aberbach and Christensen (2017) bring attention to dependencies from external sources, which can strongly affect the research productivity. Based on the interests of funders, some research activities and projects can be privileged and others ignored by external sources.

Achieving the above mentioned expectations is more complex and challenging than it is often perceived (Niemczyk & Rossouw, 2019). Yet, scholars are being mainly assessed based on their performance of different research activities, which closely connects to the level of institutional and their own autonomy (Steinmetz, 2018). As indicated by McGinn (2012, p. 15) researchers are held increasingly more accountable for their research performance.

*In assessments related to research accountability, particular kinds of research are rated as more valuable than other kinds of research. Peer-reviewed publications in top-tier scholarly journals and academic presses are seen as the "gold standard" and perceived as essential to academic success; publications in lesser-known or more professionally focused outlets gain limited favour. Similarly, research that is supported through external grants is rated more highly than research that does not require such funding...*

Shore and Wright (2004) bring attention to the fact that in the past universities were mainly conceived as autonomous public institutions whose role was to pursue knowledge and provide social critique independent of the State. Although nowadays, many universities define themselves as independent institutions, the accountability practices tell a different story.

## **This work**

The purpose of this comparative paper is to offer a reflective piece on research productivity pressures intertwined with institutional and individual autonomy within two countries in which the authors operate, Hungary and South Africa. The discussion of our work is grounded in the review of relevant international scholarly literature and personal reflections.

Our conceptual framework is informed by three levels of autonomy in HEIs (Moshman, 2017; Steinmetz, 2018): the individual researcher, the collaborative research teams, and the institution. Within the institution, every activity on upper levels impacts and can restrict the lower level of individuals' autonomy, i.e., institutional and team activity can restrict the autonomy of individual researchers. Strategy and funding are both moral and financial supports for research activities (Aberbach & Christensen, 2017; Steinmetz, 2018).

Due to space constraints we are able to explore only a drop in the ocean on this topic. To that end, we devote our attention to the linkage of institutional and individual researcher's autonomy to two research activities: dependence on funding and selection of outlets for research outputs. We anticipate that this paper will stimulate further academic discourse and potential research studies.

## **Hungary**

In the context of Hungary, the debate on approaching autonomy and academic freedom mentioned afore is not only theoretical but practical. The former Hungarian constitution declared both academic freedom and institutional autonomy. It stated that the republic respects and supports the freedom of scientific life, education, and teaching; on the other hand, declared that only scientists have the right to decide on the issue of scientific truths and to determine the scientific value of research. Although the new constitution stepped forward in the case of academic freedom, declaring that the state shall have no right to decide on questions of scientific truth and only scientists shall have the right to evaluate scientific research, and so, it seems like a stronger regulation if we look at the rules of autonomy, we can recognise a weaker description. Namely, the new constitution misses declaring the government's obligation of support. It only states that Hungary shall ensure the freedom of scientific research, learning, and, within the framework laid down in an Act, the freedom of teaching.

Furthermore, the law declares the higher education institutions' autonomy only in terms of the content and the methods of research and teaching but delimits their freedom to decide in their organisation. They have the right to it only in the frameworks of an Act. Moreover, the law secured the right for the government to lay down the rules governing the management of public institutes of higher education and shall supervise their management within the framework of the Acts. According to Öniş and Kutlay (2017) with these arrangements the Hungarian government demolishes step by step the constitutional guarantees which in other countries ensure censorless research and saving researchers from political influences.

Institutional autonomy was previously untouchable in Hungary, which can be seen in this principle's strict interpretation by the Hungarian Constitutional Court. After 2010, the Hungarian government re-defined the constitutional term of

autonomy and has narrowed it to the teaching and scientific autonomy, and after it has been stepping forward with newer arrangements restricting that freedom, like the reorganisation of the state universities' management, the case of Central European University, the termination of gender studies, and the establishment of direct government control above the former research institutions of the Hungarian Academy of Science and with it restricting the financial conditions of the Academy (Rónay, 2018, 2019; Ziegler, 2019).

In connection with the current Hungarian situation, scholars note that the regulations and government orders clearly show the leading power's relationship to values is linking strongly to academic autonomy and freedom. As explained above, there is a consent between scholars that academic freedom, the individual level of the university's autonomy, cannot be imagined without the full emergence of institutional autonomy. With the new frameworks, the Hungarian regulations ensure that the state during the newly established legal institutions like chancellor and consistory (Rónay, 2018) can practice indirect influences on academic work within the university. Besides this, free speech, pluralism, free, and critical thinking are continuously in the crosshair of the government (Scheiring, 2019), which affects the position of universities and narrows the possibilities of academics. In Hungary, the larger part of external sources is under the direct control of the government. While previously, funding agencies operated more or less independently from the government, today, all of them (except the directly available EU funding) belong to the government. So, the government can favour some themes while ignoring others. Moreover, the system of state institutions' financial support is not transparent. The regulation ensures freedom for the government, neglecting the detailed description of the support system of the scientific activity.

To sum up, the Hungarian system of funding and subsidies is contrary to the internationally required freedom of scientific life. Furthermore, the government used not only financial tools but direct political arrangements to influence academic activity when the State stigmatized universities addressing political interventions against them (Benková, 2019). Ziegler (2019) also reports phenomena like banning academic programmes, and direct political attacks against professors, which he assessed as an attack against the freedom of thought and the limitation of free speech.

## South Africa

South Africa like many other colonized nations experienced a difficult journey to democracy. Institutional and individual researchers' autonomy and South African higher education need to be understood within the context of post-apartheid realities. Post-apartheid, after 1994 the educational system was restructured and new educational framework introduced. The developed framework was grounded on cooperative governance in higher education which allowed for institutional autonomy (Kori, 2016).

In order to provide a framework for the post-apartheid transformative agenda for higher education system, Education White Paper 3 (CHE, 1997) was published. The paper was guided by values of democracy and social justice as well as commitment to quality education, institutional autonomy, and academic freedom (Bothma, 2015). The White Paper 3 (CHE, 1997, p. 12) defines institutional autonomy as follows:

*The principle of institutional autonomy refers to a high degree of self-regulation and administrative independence with respect to student admissions, curriculum, methods of teaching and assessment, research, establishment of academic regulations and the internal management of resources generated from private and public sources.*

As reported by Bothma (2015, p. 66), the transformative agenda required changes in several areas including government funding; transformed institutional governance; increased access to education for all students regardless of race, gender, (dis)ability; and policy changes to reconceptualise the government-higher education-society relationships. Bothma (2015) also indicated that current South African HEIs are over regulated and the state interference limits institutional autonomy. Other scholars (Du Toit, 2000) add that such constraints on institutional autonomy can be external, state interference related as well as internal.

As indicated by Akor and Roux already in 2006, higher education in South Africa was confronted with diminishing state funding and increased interference by government in terms of management and administration.

*Government's policies on increased access and participation rates and meeting the developmental needs of the country may be in jeopardy as a result of the steady decline in the funding of higher education. (Akor & Roux, 2006, p. 423)*

Habib, Morrow and Bentley (2008) claim that:

*Higher education must be supported by diverse income streams... (p. 147)*

*State financing of higher education enhances the power of state bureaucrats and political elites. While public funding will inevitably comprise a sizeable component of the university system, it is important that managers tap other income streams (apart from student fees) to support their institutions and that this be seen as providing opportunities, where necessary, to speak with an independent voice. This means accessing resources – as some already do successfully – from the private sector, individual benefactors and domestic and foreign foundations. (p. 149)*

The reality is that in recent years South Africa's research at universities has experienced significant underfunding due to political and economic struggles. For instance, the National Research Foundation (NRF) accounting for the largest government support for research done at universities and development of researchers was highly hindered by cuts to its research budgets. Scholars warn that cuts of research funds go beyond damage to the prosperity of universities. As reported by Bikwani (2016), State subsidy to universities is divided into block and earmarked grants. Block grants are consolidated into a single transfer and the funds can be used for any legitimate university purpose. However, universities have a responsibility to use subsidies raised from all taxpayers in South Africa wisely and be accountable to society. In terms of subsidy for research outputs, the Department of Higher Education annually awards universities for "number of research publications in DHET-approved journals as well as the proportional contribution of authors from the university" (Harley et al., 2016). Overall, the subsidy serves as a financial incentive to increase research outputs within the country. It is worth noting that the subsidy system does not consider research quality or impact (other than specifying that journals must be DHET accredited).

## Conclusion

It is noteworthy that Hungary and South Africa share similar challenges. In both contexts, the government strongly influences academic activities and limits institutional autonomy. As evident in the text, the level of freedom depends on the level of the democratization of a given country and whether its constitution guarantees the universities' and researchers' autonomy (Rónay, 2018). As Marginson (2019) states, even in an EU member democratic country like Hungary the autonomy can be under suppression, which is also the case in other countries including South Africa. Akor and Roux (2006, p. 423) warn that:

*The extent of government involvement in higher education's autonomy and academic freedom may also lead to the loss of universities' identity and ability to determine their directions, roles and functions.*

It is also evident in both contexts that institutional autonomy and individual researchers' autonomy are conditioned by funding. The funding is becoming limited and processes are very competitive. The universities are in a vicious cycle of fundraising and producing research outputs in order to secure a desired ranking. Meanwhile, researchers' autonomy is increasingly restricted due to the interference of funding agencies. Although multiple funding streams may enhance autonomy, it is essential to be vigilant not to solely service the agenda of a specific funder.

It is our stand that quality research productivity is not possible in the absence of institutional and individual researchers' autonomy. Researchers whose performance appraisal and promotion highly depend on publication record may feel trapped in the research productivity race. Since the institutional and individual autonomy intertwine and to a great extent institutional autonomy impacts individual autonomy, it is essential to promote institutional practices and regulations that support academic freedom.

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