

ACADEMIC FREEDOM UNDER OUTCOMES-BASED EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (HEIs)

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates a general perception amongst academics that outcomes-based education and training (OBET), together with the prescriptions around the national qualifications framework, (NQF) have an inhibiting impact on academic freedom in higher education in South Africa. It proposes an alternative view, namely that academic freedom is, in fact, greatly enhanced by the architectural design of OBET. This argument is built around the distinction between educational inputs and outputs, which represent the domains of academics and quality assurance agencies respectively. It acknowledges that freedom should be exercised within the context of national imperatives, as long as these imperatives themselves are not educationally restrictive. These views crystallise in the recognition that the right of academics to enjoy academic freedom presupposes an obligation of discretion — a phrase coined to describe the peculiar responsibilities imposed on academics by that particular educational paradigm.

INTRODUCTION

Various references to the subject of academic freedom suggest the following range of liberties (by no means exhaustive) implied by the concept: the freedom to express contradictory, even controversial views; the latitude to extend debate beyond what is generally accepted as morally, religiously, socially or politically correct; the licence to challenge policies, principles and even founding tenets of the entrenched establishment and, *inter alia*, the privilege to bend the rules (as in the case of the employment of poetic licence).

Academic freedom is necessary not just for academics to conduct their research and teach their subjects, but so that they can enable students to acquire the learning they need to contribute to society. At the same time, academics take responsibility for the quality of their scholarship, teaching and student learning.

Dworkin (2002:1) emphasises the importance of distinguishing between academic freedom and freedom of speech. His definitions of these two concepts coincide with popular opinion, namely that the former is ‘a privilege of certain academic institutions . . .’, while the latter is ‘widely considered to be a general right’.

Dworkin (2002:1) warns that a fine line separates freedom of speech as a desirable human right from its application as an undesirable infringement on the rights of others. Somewhere across the blurred zone that defines the frontiers of politically — and other — correct speech lies the prohibited zone often encroached upon under the guise of freedom of expression. Depending on context, this area is becoming increasingly sensitive — it is the source of, amongst others, ‘anti-Semitism, sexism and political extremism’ (Dworkin, 2002:1).

The above opinion suggests that academic freedom can be employed as a tool for the purpose of justifying extremist notions. At best, it may reflect insensitivity towards its target; at worst, it may provide the platform for expression of blasphemy, sexism, racism and so on.

Academic freedom is a qualified freedom, which designates liberties within an academic context. As such, it serves as an antidote to intellectual parochialism in institutions of higher learning. It can be stated that academic freedom belongs to the discretion of the responsible

academic — the balanced, integral champion of the common good of mankind in whose care the progress of a nation is entrusted. In the hands of anyone less endowed, it can become a tool capable of dismantling the very foundations upon which nation building is premised.

A critical, underlying stance of this article is that responsible academic freedom is integral to the healthy maintenance of academic enquiry. It should be entrenched in institutions of learning. It should be encouraged so that the knowledge and attitudes that govern lives are continuously interrogated to ensure growth, development, and liberation of the mind, the spirit and, in general, the lives of mankind.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY

Academic freedom is sometimes confused with autonomy, thought and speech freed from all constraints. But academic freedom implies not just freedom from constraint but also freedom for academics and students to work within a scholarly community to develop the intellectual and personal qualities required of citizens in a vibrant democracy and participants in a vigorous economy.

In an attempt to narrow down the focus of this article, a brief reference to Dlamini's distinction between *academic freedom* and *institutional autonomy* in South African universities is employed. He warns that government funding of higher education is a major threat to institutional autonomy — and that institutional autonomy is a prerequisite for academic freedom (Dlamini, 1997:3). Dlamini and others seem to concur that higher education institutions in South Africa generally enjoy institutional autonomy. In contrast, it is proposed that, during this transitional phase of democracy in South Africa, certain laws and government decrees introduced to address injustices inherited from its apartheid past will necessarily impact on the autonomy of institutions, broadly defined as 'the freedom of the university to choose (on academic grounds) who should teach, what should be taught, how it should be taught and who should be admitted as students' (1997:3).

A case in point could be laws governing equity issues, which directly impact on who should teach and who should be admitted as students. Any discussion on academic freedom in the South African context should bear in mind the distinction between academic freedom and institutional autonomy, so that arguments or deliberations can remain appropriately focused. All too often diatribes on the demise of academic freedom in South Africa are essentially arguments lamenting a perceived encroachment on institutional autonomy. This does not imply that institutions of higher learning should not defend their independence, especially in this time of increasing stakeholder involvement. As has been mentioned earlier, institutional autonomy and academic freedom are mutually dependent. In this context, higher education institutions are not insular entities. They need to produce the human capital needed to achieve a nation's strategic goals at given points in time. As such, they are accountable to the nation that sustains them. In South Africa, more than ever before, institutions of higher learning need to gear themselves to produce manpower according to the Human Resources Strategy, which is formulated around a transformational agenda. This agenda, infused in all sectors of the nation, should be evident in the manner in which higher education institutions conduct their business as well. To this extent, institutions of higher learning are obliged to function within the ambit of national strategic goals.

INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY AND INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The distinction between institutional accountability and institutional autonomy is often blurred. Institutions of higher learning should be autonomous, but this does not mean that they are not accountable to the nation that spawns them. Institutional accountability should not be perceived as an erosion of institutional autonomy, as long as institutions strive to achieve overarching national strategic objectives, as they manifest in the core business of education and training. When this obligation (to account to the nation) is taken too far by national quality assurance agencies,

especially if it becomes an interference in the specialist expertise of academics, the institution's autonomy is encroached upon, and academic freedom would then be compromised.

IN SEARCH OF THE SPACE FOR ACADEMIC FREEDOM

The National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

The world is an ever-changing place, politically, geographically and technologically. The rapid technological advances of the 20th century have placed education systems under extreme pressure as they try to adapt and incorporate these changes in an effort to produce more creative, effective and adaptable people. Success, or even survival, in such a world demands that South Africa has a national education and training system that provides quality learning, is responsive to the ever-changing influences of the external environment and promotes the development of a nation that is committed to life-long learning.

The introduction of a national qualifications framework (NQF) in South Africa, which is intended to incorporate both vocational and academic qualifications, is generally perceived amongst academia in higher education circles as cumbersome. (RSA, 2003:8) This view is often expressed with reference to the prescriptions within national policy that perpetuate outcomes-based education and training (OBET) as the preferred approach to education and training in South Africa. Outcomes-based education is a process that relies on, first, determining the required results and, second, identifying the skills and knowledge needed to achieve those results. The emphasis on skills-based learning based on unit standards and demonstrated competences is perceived, especially within higher education circles, as a fragmentation of the learning process, accompanied by an over-emphasis on practical competences (RSA, 2003:8). In a nutshell, vocational competence is perceived to enjoy pre-eminence over cognitive astuteness. The pre-eminence of outcomes over knowledge (or 'content') in the design of learning programmes is interpreted as a critical flaw in the reconfiguration of higher education in South Africa (Allais, 2003:17).

It is not the purpose of this article to enter into a protracted defence of each component of OBET and the NQF. In this context, it will be argued that within the architecture of this new higher education paradigm lies the space for promoting academic freedom.

Allais (2003:4) suggests that the problems with implementation are associated first with a marginalisation of curriculum and, second, with pedagogic issues within the NQF approach including its tendency to close down debate.

The two criticisms mentioned here are:

- The marginalisation of curriculum and pedagogic issues. Allais joins a growing number of HE commentators who question the shift from a content-based curriculum design to an outcomes-based one. Essentially, she voices the sentiments of a significant number of critics who are not convinced that the perceived neglect of input variables, such as subject matter, is justified in the new outputs-oriented, assessment-based learning philosophy.
- Its tendency to close down debate. This view is based on her claim that the NQF has been marketed in the rhetoric of emancipation heralded by the post-1994 democracy. This euphoria, she maintains, has insulated the new educational paradigm from surgical scrutiny.

Words such as 'restrictive', 'reductionism' (Allais, 2003:11;17), which refer to the South African NQF, reflect her view that academic freedom has been neutralised in the current educational dispensation. The rest of this article will examine these perceptions.

The goals of the NQF

It is well known that the NQF has been erected as a tool for educational, social, economic and related reform. This transformation of the provision of learning in SA cannot be separated from the political agenda — nor should it. The liberating political agenda inherent in the NQF is itself a mechanism capable of transforming the educational landscape from the prescriptive, insular,

teacher-centred, rote-learning approach of the previous dispensation. A brief scrutiny of international trends in education will reveal that the OBET system, given its weaknesses, is comfortably positioned to meet the challenges of learning in the 21st century. Much in this regard can be inferred from the objectives of the South African NQF:

- To create an integrated national framework for learning achievements;
- Facilitate access to, and mobility and progression within education, training and career paths;
- Enhance the quality of education and training;
- Accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities;
- Contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large.

A critical analysis of the above objectives reveals a balanced framework for expanding learning opportunities in an equitable manner for the purpose of nation building and individual growth. It is an opening up — a dismantling of barriers of control — rather than a closing in or narrowing down for the sake of satisfying a political agenda. The NQF has advantages for both the learner and the employer. The learner has access to a national qualification, a choice of what and where to study, recognition of previous studies, and inclusion in a national record of studies. The employer has the options of in-service training and evaluation, training based on measurable outcomes and a more accurate skills profile of employees.

It should be noted that the national objectives of the NQF do not contain an element of intent that is discordant with the ethos of a true academic in the 21st century, who accepts ethical social engineering as one of the ultimate outcomes of education. Admittedly, the project is an ambitious one, given the fragile condition of the socio-economic platform on which to implement it. It can be stated that the test of validity would only be evident in practice, at an operational level, when objectives translate into practical implementation. Nevertheless, the intention of releasing the human spirit to the benefit of the individual and society, through education and training, is an honourable one which needs to be supported.

This expansiveness reflected by the goals of the NQF is not limited to a national strategic level, but is evident in structural details of templates that guide the teaching and learning process — from programme design to final assessment guidelines. This category, namely teaching and learning (including research), constitutes the core business of higher education institutions. It is here that national imperatives should manifest themselves — but it is equally important that the academic's autonomy should be upheld in this category. By drilling down to the operational level, where academics are involved in teaching and learning activities, it can be demonstrated that academic freedom to experiment, to employ initiative — essentially to expand the frontiers of chosen disciplines — does exist in OBET.

Inputs and outputs

The flexibility of OBET lies in its design as an outputs-based approach to the delivery of education and training. In the past, academics highly specialised in their disciplines were inhibited by prescriptions that mapped the content requirements (syllabi) for a specific subject and learner group. This preoccupation to standardise content matter is typical of an inputs-based approach to education and training — and is in direct contrast to OBET.

OBET does not impose such prescriptions on academics, and is therefore more suited to the development of programmes in higher education. Academics need to constantly incorporate research-led knowledge in curricula, rather than be bound by archaic theories and outdated information that have little or no bearing on current technological advancements. Knowledge is in flux — and academics should be allowed the flexibility to offer relevant learning material. OBET ensures that the inputs (subject content) of a learning programme are left to the discretion of the educator, who is assumed to be the best suited to decide on the latest and most current material

appropriate to her subject. This sovereignty constitutes the space for the exercise of academic freedom within the new educational paradigm.

The outputs (outcomes) on the other hand represent the framework within which education and development should occur. They are the manifestation of national goals and imperatives in the lecture theatre. Educational *outcomes* therefore represent the educational end-products, achieved through a cascading process which originates from a national strategic plan. They depict the alignment of the learning event with national goals — for which the institution will assume accountability. They do not impose on the educator's primary area of responsibility, namely the inputs. Academics have striven hard to maintain autonomy over their disciplines. In this context, the country's conversion to OBET represents an achievement on this front for academics, and should be celebrated as such.

The relationship between the past and the present is a reciprocal one. In the past, inputs were controlled by educational authorities, to the extent that educators were evaluated according to their faithful adherence to content prescriptions in syllabi. The effect was that 'textbook-bound teachers' emerged. In worst-case scenarios, they simply ensured that they were a page ahead of the class in order to qualify to teach. Such educators, protected by a teacher-centred philosophy, were unable to offer the crucial basic principles underpinning the disciplines that they taught, thereby discouraging deep and lifelong learning. Yet they enjoyed more favourable evaluations than the experts in the field. Subject experts, who often felt it necessary to deviate from the dictates of the syllabus in order to consolidate crucial foundational concepts, were frowned upon. Teaching 'mechanics' did well in this environment; subject experts and academics failed. Teaching conformists excelled; progressive non-conformists were often censored. Experimentation and research were hampered. The result was that academic creativity was severely stunted under the old dispensation, as was academic freedom.

OBET effectively addresses this unsatisfactory state of affairs, by ensuring autonomy around core business of educational institutions, while at the same time providing a framework within which the educational goals of a nation can be pursued. In summary, inputs, the domain of the academic experts, are left to the discretion of such experts, while outputs, the domain of national strategic planning, ensure that all learning events are aligned towards the achievement of the national goals of the NQF.

The purpose of outcomes is to ensure alignment to national objectives. They are a critical component of curriculum planning in higher education. At present, there appears to be no justifiable reason why higher education institutions in South Africa should not embrace the OBET paradigm. OBET promotes academic freedom in the autonomy around its inputs, while it ensures accountability to the 'extended agenda' of the NQF through its outputs.

Assessment according to the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA)

According to Mokhobo-Nomvete (2008:1), the SAQA Act 58 of 1995 prescribes the formulation of policy, guidelines and criteria as a primary function of SAQA. Among such policies, guidelines and criteria that SAQA has to formulate is a system of assessment. Such a system is an imperative element of the quality assurance policy of SAQA. The formulation of an assessment system for the NQF occurs within the context of OBET broadly and OBET assessment specifically, as the NQF is an OBET framework for standards and qualifications. In addition, the underlying principles and objectives of the NQF underpin the assessment system.

Taking cognisance of the fact that the NQF is an OBET framework, the rationale for the establishment of the NQF is rooted in the history of South Africa and the reconstruction and development goals of the democratic government of the country. The NQF is a framework for transformation and quality. The principles underpinning the NQF are in part a response to the inequitable education and training policies of the previous dispensation. They embody the social, political and economic goals of the current democratic order which are fundamental to the

government policies for reconstruction and development. They carry notions of transformation and point to transformation imperatives. They also carry notions of quality and point to quality assurance practices, of which assessment is a part. Finally, they inform the objectives that the NQF should be a vehicle for the eradication of unjustness, the achievement of reconstruction and development goals, transformation, and the promotion of quality in education and training. To ensure the credibility of an assessment system for the NQF, these principles cannot be ignored, particularly as the NQF, as other OBET frameworks, is essentially an assessment-driven framework (Mokhobo-Nomvete, 2008:1).

In addition to the above, according to Mokhobo-Nomvete (2008:1), the NQF is not a uniquely South African phenomenon underscored by parochial concerns. The international trend (as witnessed in such countries as Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, England, Ireland, and Wales) is towards the establishment of national qualifications frameworks underpinned by the principles listed below — principles that underpin the objectives of the NQF:

- *Integration*: form part of a system of human resources development which provides for the establishment of a unifying approach to education and training;
- *Relevance*: be and remain responsive to national development needs;
- *Credibility*: have international and national value and acceptance;
- *Coherence*: work within a consistent framework of principles and certification;
- *Flexibility*: allow for multiple pathways to the same learning ends;
- *Standards*: be expressed in terms of a nationally agreed framework and internationally acceptable outcomes;
- *Legitimacy*: provide for the participation of all national stakeholders in the planning and co-ordination of standards and qualifications;
- *Access*: provide ease of entry to appropriate levels of education and training for all prospective learners in a manner which facilitates progression;
- *Articulation*: provide for learners, on successful completion of accredited prerequisites, to move between components of the delivery system;
- *Progression*: ensure that the framework of qualifications permits individuals to move through the levels of national qualifications via different appropriate combinations of the components of the delivery system;
- *Portability*: enable learners to transfer credits of qualifications from one learning institution and/or employer to another;
- *Recognition of prior learning*: through assessment, give credit to learning which has already been acquired in different ways;
- *Guidance of learners*: provide for the counselling of learners by specially trained individuals who meet nationally recognised standards for educators and trainers.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

An integral function of any higher education institution is to maintain, monitor and account for the quality of its education and training. The assurance of quality is incumbent upon any academic charged with that responsibility. Allais (2003:16) has the following to say about quality assurance under OBET:

... what appears to be happening is that individuals with subject expertise in the area to be 'quality assured' are not involved in the quality assurance processes; instead, people who are experts in 'quality assurance', who understand the 'quality assurance system', will evaluate programme delivery. Specialists, people who actually know their field, whether that is an occupational field such as construction or a curriculum field such as physics, are given very little responsibility within this system ... (Allais, 2003:16)

What Allais describes as a shortcoming within the new quality management systems under the

ETQAs could be viewed as a strength. Externally imposed quality assurance should focus on the outcomes, while the subject expert enjoys the academic freedom to manage the quality of the inputs.

Allais (2003:16) identifies two practitioners in the above extract: the subject expert and the quality assurer, and, in the same context, she infers that the subject expert's role is diminished in the quality assurance exercise. While the assurance of quality is an integral element of any system, including the educational system, one needs to bear in mind that the academic is not only a professional educator but a highly specialised subject expert as well, hence best qualified to pronounce on quality issues within his or her field of expertise. The delivery of knowledge in the lecture theatre is the sole responsibility of the lecturer. Any questioning of an academic's choice of learning material should be limited to its relevance to the prescribed outcomes. This ensures that the paths (not path) to attaining those outcomes are decided by academics, who have the freedom to impose their specialist knowledge on the learning programme, unhindered by content prescriptions. Academics could be seen to have *carte blanche* to exercise their subject expertise as required. Personal research, current research and tailor-made interdisciplinary designs to subject offerings are all examples of learning packages that only the expert in the field is able to deliver — and should be allowed to deliver, as long as *the outcomes of the programme are achieved*.

In the above context, it seems appropriate that the quality assurance expert need not (necessarily) be a subject expert, for the quality assurance process is not primarily directed at inputs (the academic as the champion of the specific discipline is best suited to decide on its quality) but at outputs. This re-focusing is critical. The apparent oversight around content, as suggested by Allais (2003:16), is understood to be a statement of confidence in the ability of academics to quality-manage their own disciplines. The quality assurance process is intended to make pronouncements on a host of deliverables which include alignment to national objectives. It ensures that, while the scholarly freedom of academics remains uncompromised, their outputs are monitored in terms of institutional and national objectives. The specific focus of the quality assurance process on outputs, rather than inputs, should be a deciding factor in the development of a brief for quality assurance agencies in higher education, and can constitute the subject of further research.

In the above context, it can be stated that the design of prescribed outcomes, rather than the design of content syllabi, distinguishes OBET as an educational philosophy that enshrines academic freedom. Specialists in their fields of study should have a free reign to offer their courses unencumbered by previously defined subject matter and material prescribed by academic planners.

CONCLUSION

The scope for academic freedom within the teaching and learning environment is visualised in this article to be well beyond the potential offered in the previous educational dispensation. This places a particular responsibility on the academic — an obligation to apply his or her discretionary powers when choosing learning material and deciding on methods of delivery. The concerns around standards, access and assessment of competences and language as barriers can be effectively addressed through an imperative requirement within the armoury of the new-age educator: an *obligation of discretion*. This concept relates to the pivotal, critical role accorded an educator in the current dispensation and is the direct consequence of being afforded academic autonomy. Those who have embraced the obligation of discretion will develop mechanisms to deal with diversity, to incorporate personal and collaborative research findings in their offerings and to offer developmental trajectories as well as enrichment and fast-tracking opportunities to learners, thereby promoting competence-based rather than time-based learning. In short, the destinations of learners are defined for them by the outcomes, but the paths that lead to them are determined through a symbiotic engagement between the academic, as guide, and the learners. The different paths of learners striving towards a common destination represent the broadened scope for academics within which to exercise academic freedom, while the achievement of outcomes affirms that the learning process will contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large.

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