

This article looks at the interplay between accountability and autonomy in university governance, and how this tension impacts on the management of universities and on the academic voice in the university and in public discourse.

University governance is an important issue for many reasons, not least of which is the centrality of academic freedom to democratic institutions. While university governance must provide for the efficient deployment of resources and the transparent use of funds – especially public funds – the focus on the university’s moral purpose, particularly the requirement that it speak truth to power, must not be lost or diluted.

As Seery (2011, p. 28) points out, ‘despite all attempts to reduce traditional liberal ideas to the science and technology of efficient delivery, value neutrality and evidence-based measurables, the view that education is fundamentally an ethical and moral undertaking is still widely held’. While Seery’s comment has relevance to all education, its significance is all the more acute for higher education.

Nixon (2008) expects universities to contribute to the ‘good society’: one that aspires ‘to be civilised, decent and just; civilised in its relationship between citizens; decent in its relations between institutions and their members; and just in its commitment to combat social and economic inequality’. In this construct of a good society, Nixon sees universities as the ‘means whereby society understands itself, questions its values, defines and squabbles over its ends and purposes, and accrues the knowledge, understandings and insights necessary to inform the debate’.

Academic freedom is at the core of any such ethos. While the concept is not without complexities or limits (see for example Deeks, 2018), it is at the heart of a university’s claims for the disinterested pursuit of truth. As expressed by the US Supreme Court, the ‘nation’s future depends upon leaders trained through wide exposure to that robust exchange of ideas which discovers truth “out of a multitude of tongues [rather] than through any kind of authoritative selection”’ (cited in Euben, 2002). The practice of academic freedom usually means that:

# Reflections on University Governance in Ireland

Navigating the accountability–autonomy continuum and the changing role of the university



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- Faculty and students can engage in intellectual debate without fear or retaliation.
- It preserves the intellectual integrity of the education system, thereby supporting the public good.
- Faculty and students are free of governmental surveillance or censorship in their professional sphere.
- Faculty are not punished for holding contrarian or oppositional voices to university management.
- It provides for peer regulation in matters of academic quality – be it research, teaching, or scholarship.

With regard to institutional autonomy, the US Supreme Court (1978) has also recognised the First Amendment right of institutional autonomy, citing the four essential freedoms of a university as the right to ‘determine for itself, on academic grounds, who may teach; who may be taught; how it shall be taught; and who may be admitted to study’.

So, in the context of this discussion, it is clear that the university’s claim to public trust rests on its avowed commitment to a disinterested, impartial, critical, and civic-minded voice in the public discourse. The public therefore rightly expects the institution to act virtuously in the public interest. This expectation extends to include a requirement that the university act as custodian of the public good and speak out where that is being compromised or undermined.

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Given such expectations, the task of constructing an appropriate governance model for universities is not without its complexities. A balance must be struck between, on the one hand, the needs of institutional autonomy and the protection of academic freedom for faculty, and, on the other, the public’s need for accountability in the disbursement of public funds and for prudent and transparent internal management of the institution. With the passing of the Universities Act in 1997, the Irish state sought to square this circle by a reasonably sophisticated system of checks and balances in the institutional scaffolding of universities.

In his seminal study of higher education in Ireland, Clancy (2015) refers to Burton-Clark’s ‘triangle of co-ordination’, whereby the co-ordination of HE systems can be best understood ‘with respect to the relative importance of state authority, academic oligarchy and market forces’ (p. 246). The contestation between these three differing forces is often publicly ventilated in Dáil Public Accounts Committee hearings where university management are brought face to face with the personal nature of public accountability in university management. In his review of the evolution of university governance in Ireland, Clancy concludes:

*there is a clear pattern whereby universities have experienced a sharp decline in autonomy in the face of a more interventionist state, which seeks to define more precisely what their role should be and how their outputs should be evaluated. While for several decades this was a gradual transformation with periods of successful resistance by the academy, since the publication of the Hunt Report it has become the defining policy direction whereby institutional accountability will be measured with*

*respect to the achievement of objectives set out in performance contracts entered into with the HEA [Higher Education Authority]. (ibid., p. 270)*

If this pattern is as Clancy suggests, it can also be posited that as state and market forces become increasingly preeminent in university affairs, this has facilitated – if not required – the rise in managerialism in the university at the expense of faculty. While both the Universities Act (1997) and the more recent Technological Universities Act (2018) accord statutory recognition to the Academic Council in both types of institution, in practice the sense is that the academic voice is increasingly displaced in the academy by a proactive executive thoroughly inserted into the realpolitik of the market, the economic drivers, and government funding strategies.

This leads Shattock (2017) to conclude that since the 1980s the ‘transfer to a “marketised” system of funding has changed the internal balances ... further strengthening the role of the executive and rendering both the governing body and the academic community increasingly dependent upon its expertise in managing risk, interpreting and exploiting the market and taking advantage of external opportunities’ (p. 13). Shattock bemoans this development, suggesting that ‘university reputation, research success and brand image are closely associated with adherence to an earlier governance model ... and that the loss of collegiality, the growth of top-down management and the disengagement of academics from the machinery of institutional self-government is prejudicial to academic performance’ (ibid., p. 16).

As Bergan (2018) suggests, with regard to the kind of higher education we need, ‘knowledge is essential, and we have both citizens and leaders who help us remember why. But knowledge without understanding is not second best; it can be downright harmful’ (p. 27). The university’s role in providing a safe space where truth can be spoken to power is one of democracy’s important safeguards and is an indication of the health of the democracy.

As countervailing, deliberative voices and institutions, particularly in the media, have become increasingly anaemic in western societies, it is important that the contrarian, thoughtful, and disinterested academic voice is reinvigorated such that, under the guise of accountability, the existential character of the academic contribution to a healthy democracy is not also lost.

[Note: This article draws largely on the author’s previously published work at Collins, 2019.]

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### New stamp from An Post celebrates 'Jane, Lady Wilde'

In advance of International Women's Day on 4 March, 2021, An Post issued a new stamp celebrating the renowned 19th century Irish nationalist and feminist writer, Jane, Lady Wilde (1821–1896), whose pen-name was 'Speranza'.

Unveiling the stamp, Debbie Byrne, Managing Director of An Post Retail, said that Jane, Lady Wilde was a woman who epitomised the meaning of #ChoosetoChallenge, the theme of this year's International Women's Day.

"She was a tireless and outspoken campaigner for women's rights, equality and other causes."

Aside from her writing under the pen-name 'Speranza', Jane, Lady Wilde was a multi-linguist, translator and staunch advocate of women's rights. In 1851, she married William Wilde, an ophthalmic surgeon, and their second-born son was the playwright and novelist Oscar Wilde.