



# Comment on Yunus Ballim’s “The place of teaching, learning and student development in a framework of academic freedom: Attending to the negative freedoms of our students”

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## Abstract

In this commentary, we engage with Yunus Ballim’s article in this issue that explores how academic freedom can enhance teaching, learning, and institutional culture in South African universities. Ballim uses the concept of negative freedom to show how the institutional culture and everyday practices of universities can play a vital role in shaping students’ learning and development. Negative freedom is the degree to which an external power interferes or constrains the choices that people have, limiting the area of action in which they are free to be or do what they want. This creative approach to the issue of academic freedom takes the debate beyond the freedom to choose what is taught or researched at universities and the relationship between universities and the state. We call for further exploration into how student agency is conceptualised from this perspective, questioning how university-society relations intersect with forms of academic freedom.

**Keywords:** academic freedom, negative freedom, institutional culture, students

## Introduction

Yunus Ballim's article, based on his 2021 T.B. Davie lecture, focuses on how academic freedom can enhance teaching, learning, and institutional culture in South African universities. He uses the concept of negative freedom to argue that the institutional culture and everyday practices of universities can shape the kinds of education students receive and, potentially, enhance their learning, development, and humanity. We appreciate this creative approach to the concept of academic freedom that moves beyond classic understandings of the term. We also call for further exploration into how student agency is conceptualised from this perspective, questioning how university-society relations intersect with forms of academic freedom.

Ballim's article, based on his lecture, hints that debates on academic freedom should move beyond deliberations on external interference to focus on promoting academic freedom "as value" expressed through teaching and learning, institutional culture, and its effects on student development. This approach to academic freedom moves beyond classic understandings of the term that were contested in South Africa during apartheid, when some liberal universities demanded the freedom to choose what was taught, who should teach, and who should attend their institutions. The classic perspective perceives academic freedom as being similar to a universal human right, like freedom of speech (Du Toit, 2001; Hall, 2006. Ballim "pause[s] briefly at the shrine" to pay homage to T.B. Davie and other defenders of university autonomy who advocated for the classic view of academic freedom. This "pause" should perhaps be somewhat longer since the African university remains plagued by political influence, with critical voices regularly silenced, student agency constrained, and certain campuses militarised. In some African countries Vice Chancellors are still appointed by a country's president, raising questions about the independence of institutional leadership and university autonomy. Such circumstances make professional autonomy, freedom, and the pursuit of truth difficult. Academic freedom, in its classic form, is limited across much of the continent, with political sanctions and restrictions impeding the ability of universities to cultivate and nurture critical voices, intellectual contestation, and agency. This situation requires urgent support from South African scholars.

With his focus on democratic South Africa, however, Ballim appropriately takes a contextual rather than a classic approach to academic freedom, acknowledging that institutions need to be accountable to the societies in which they operate and, to some degree, the state that funds their existence. As Owusu-Ansah (2015, p. 174) noted,

[E]ach community of academic intellectuals and students must wrestle with the problem of what academic freedom in that society at that time actually is and should be.

While many articles that adopt the contextual rather than classic perspective consider critically the domains in which the state may be involved acceptably in universities (see for example. Du Toit, 2001, Hall, 2006, and Jansen, 2005), Ballim's article does not focus on

state intervention. Instead, he zones in on the core business of the university, namely teaching, learning, and research over which most scholars agree universities should have substantive autonomy.<sup>1</sup> Ballim, drawing on Isaiah Berlin's (2017) distinction between positive and negative freedoms, shows how these issues may contribute to academic freedom; for Berlin,

the 'negative' sense, is involved in the answer to the question 'What is the area within which the subject—a person or group of persons—is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons? . . . The second, which I shall call the 'positive' sense, is involved in the answer to the question 'What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?' (p. 34)

Negative freedom is the degree to which an external power interferes or constrains the choices that people have, limiting the area of action in which they are free to be or do what they want to do. On the one hand, the ways in which governments enforced mask-wearing and closed national economies during the Covid-19 pandemic are examples of negative freedoms. On the other, positive freedom is the capacity or opportunities that people have to obtain the things they desire, with poverty or addiction, for example, restricting positive freedoms. This may be seen as two sides of the same coin, but Berlin argues that the question, "[W]ho governs me?" is logically distinct from "[H]ow far does government interfere with me?" (Berlin, 2017, p. 42).

The answer to the question "Who governs me?" produces answers like "Myself, the government, or my circumstances" that pertain to positive freedoms, whereas that which relates to how far and in which ways governments intervene exists in the realm of negative freedoms.

Applying these concepts, Ballim argues that the role of the university should be to use negative freedoms, through the liberating value of education and the institutional culture of the university, to develop students' capacities as thinking and moral beings. Negative freedoms can inculcate a healthy scepticism and the ability to deal critically with dogma, prejudice, and false claims. This is an unusual but creative way of framing the issues since the use of the term negative means that certain things interfere with students—with their thinking, values, and aspirations—but these interferences are not negative in the normative sense. The term negative, in this context, implies that interferences are intended to have a constructive effect on student development.

Negative freedoms are fostered through three levels of institutional culture, according to Ballim. The first is the most basic experience visitors have of the institution, observed in the physical grounds and in the messaging found at the university. The second is the way in

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<sup>1</sup> Helpfully, Hall (2006, p. 12) divides university autonomy into "substantive autonomy" and "procedural autonomy", the former referring to objectives and academic programmes and the latter to the procedures that enable academic programmes to happen.

which relationships are regulated through formal policies and practices. The final and most important level of institutional culture that may promote negative freedoms is the thick and complex network of unwritten rules that shape how choices are made, norms are maintained, and members of the university community understand their place in the institution.

Institutional culture may promote negative freedom, with positive effects, through challenging students to think in new ways. However, it may also increase negative freedoms, through, for example, inhibiting changes to the status quo, with damaging effects. Ballim offers the example that junior academics are regularly rebuked by more senior colleagues who make statements like “This is not how we do things at [institution X]”, illustrating how institutional patterns of identity-based exclusion and inclusion may operate through the university community’s most mundane comments and mores, thus resisting change.

Problematically, members of a university community may try to protect negative freedoms, warning newcomers or outsiders not to agitate for change. Institutional culture may therefore be used to protect privilege and prevent new practices.

Ballim rejects these kinds of practices, countering exclusionary tendencies to argue that the effects of negative freedoms “must permeate the walls of the institution so that all can recognise its presence and feel its effects” in shaping choices and behaviours in constructive ways. Most importantly, this should be infused with and shape teaching and learning practices at the institution, providing students with the tools to navigate the contexts through which they move in an increasingly ambiguous and confusing world. Such pedagogical practices should not tell students how to answer the big existential questions but should endow them with the capacities to answer these for themselves. This will enable “students to engage positively with the unfamiliar while also helping them see the familiar in unfamiliar ways and encourage in them a sceptical attitude towards all received knowledge, including the theories and hypotheses that they receive from their lecturers.”

Teaching and learning should value knowledge for its own sake, promote the ability to hold opposing ideas or truths simultaneously, celebrate diverse views, and embrace critique as an opportunity to learn and enrich one’s perspective. Lecturers should encourage these values, generate dialogue with students, and engage with their diverse cultural and epistemological worlds. Students’ education is enhanced when teachers are aware of complexities and differences in the ways of seeing the world. Ballim therefore argues that scholars should engage regularly with ideas outside of their disciplinary locations since this practice exposes them to different, unfamiliar concepts and ways of reasoning.

While Ballim helpfully points out that academics need to embrace student diversity as a fertile source of teaching and learning, the agency of students, in this account, is somewhat reduced to their potential to contribute to diversity. Rather than viewing students as passive recipients who bring diversity into the university for academics to use and act upon, students could, alternatively, be thought of as mediants (Appadurai, 2015), a concept that highlights the dynamic and fluid relationship between human beings and the worlds they inhabit. Instead of thinking of people as acting on their environments in a mechanistic way, mediants partly constitute systems, in this instance forming a bridge between universities and the

outside world. Students have often used this role to agitate for liberatory social change. While Ballim correctly points out that some of the cruder decolonial arguments negated the complexity of, for example, scientific versus traditional knowledge, the #FeesMustFall and decolonisation movements in South Africa pointed helpfully to untransformed institutional cultures at universities in the post-apartheid era, and curricula and institutions that were experienced as alienating by many students. Andre Du Toit (2001, p. 9) pointed out, many years before these movements, that

[p]erhaps efforts towards de-colonisation and de-racialisation are perceived as threats on the assumption that these are likely to be external impositions. Let us turn the question around then: is the intellectual colonisation and racialisation of our intelligentsia and academic institutions not a historic reality, and if so are these not threats to academic freedom? . . . It is difficult to realise that the enemy had been within the gates all this time!

The 2015 South African student movements protested the lack of transformation at many South African universities, they demanded that universities engage more urgently with the deep structural and systemic injustices that exist in the wider South African society, and they pointed out that redress has been slow. These events demonstrated that students might contribute to enhancing negative forms of academic freedom in ways that transcend their potential role as agents of diversity. In the light of these events, would it be possible to understand negative academic freedom as a co-constructed set of relations, rather than as a benevolent force that institutions may use, somewhat paternalistically, to protect students from harm? Negative academic freedom could be understood as the ways in which all members of the university community, students included, work productively towards liberatory forms of knowledge production that enhance both the university and society.

For this to happen, negative academic freedom needs to be conceptualised as transcending the university's institutional culture in exploring the relationship universities have with the wider society. University-student interactions indicate that universities have a porous relationship with society, and we believe that theorising negative academic freedom should include ideas about how the kinds of freedoms universities aspire to promulgate are enhanced and also inhibited by the broader society. Universities are not immune to wider societal ideologies that currently include neoliberal managerialism that infiltrates all aspects of life, inhibiting negative academic freedoms. While it might be argued that a separation can be made between "substantive autonomy" and "procedural autonomy" (Hall, 2006, p. 12), between the content of academic programmes and the procedures that allow them to happen, the ever-expanding effects of neoliberal ideologies constrain universities, producing a form of techno-rationalism that impinges on the substance of teaching, learning, and research. Universities are increasingly characterised as places dominated by competition, funding cutbacks, the need to keep pace with emerging technologies, prestige, and rankings. They are forced to graduate large numbers of students and demonstrate agility in relation to the market. The pressures of managerialism, performativity, and accountability therefore rub off on teaching, learning, and forms of public engagement, shaping the freedoms academics possess to design their own

teaching, learning, and research agendas. Negative forms of academic freedom need to theorise these relationships between universities and society.

Yunus Ballim's article, therefore, challenges us to examine how academic freedom is fostered through the people who move through the university embracing diverse forms of knowledge and being willing to learn new, unfamiliar things, rather than protecting their scholarly patches from interference. In this way, academic freedom can become embedded in how things are done at the university, transcending policies, practices, and the everyday classroom interactions that form the bedrock of university life. This requires sensibilities that are open to change and newness, understanding the historical contexts in which we live and the ways in which they connect with everyday life. This is an emancipatory form of academic freedom, but it also requires further theorisation of the relationship between the university and what is perceived as lying beyond its walls.

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