

2 Deterritorialising academic freedom when realising the global university⁷ By Kris Olds

2.1 Introduction

On Friday 12 October 2007, New York University (NYU) confirmed that it would open up a campus (NYU Abu Dhabi) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). NYU stated that this would be the “first comprehensive liberal arts campus established abroad by a major US research university”.⁸ Whilst one could argue that this might not be true (think, for instance, of Temple University’s campus in Tokyo, which was established in 1982), NYU Abu Dhabi is noteworthy for its sheer size, scale, and ambition. Of course, other major US research universities also have institutional presences abroad, including in the Middle East (e.g., Qatar Education City includes programme-specific branches of Carnegie Mellon, Texas A&M, Cornell, Georgetown, and Virginia Commonwealth) and Asia (Singapore hosts programme-specific branches of the University of Chicago, Duke, Cornell, Georgia Tech and NYU).

In venturing abroad, these universities are generating a series of impacts, both in destination territories, and within their own institutions and home bases. The stretching out of the institutional fabric of a university across global space needs to be made sense of at a range of scales and levels of abstraction. As Susan Robertson notes in “Realising the Globally Competitive University: A Battle for ‘Minds’, ‘Markets’ and ‘Models’”, such developments are partly an outcome of shifts in the nature of global higher education service markets, with universities seeking new streams of students, income, and research funds. In aggregate, the actions of NYU, Duke, Cornell, *et al.*, help to construct the broader forces to which all universities are concurrently adapting.

However, it is also important to make some links between macro and micro levels, and simultaneously pursue a fine-grained level of analysis. Structural forces, after all, are enabled by a myriad of intimate transformations in transnational academic practices, albeit that some are more important than others.

One critically important transformation taking place as a result of attempts to realise the global university is the ‘deterritorialisation’ of the principle and practice of academic freedom. What I mean by ‘deterritorialisation’ is that when research-intensive universities venture abroad, they commonly establish a bilateral university – host government understanding regarding how the potentially sensitive topic of academic freedom will be framed in the host territory. The process of negotiation and reformulation leads to the transplantation of elements of original understandings of academic freedom, though these understandings are inevitably reworked, and sometimes substantially so, in host territories.

In this brief position paper I argue that this development process, and its implications, need to be better tracked, analysed and discussed, for universities are galloping forward (and understandably so), but in the process some key bedrock principles governing academic life and knowledge production are being rapidly rethought, though not in a manner or scale that enables general learning nor informed transnational governance.

⁷ Selective elements of this piece were published in my chapter titled ‘Articulating agendas and travelling principles in the layering of new strands of academic freedom in contemporary Singapore’, in: Czarniawska, B. and G. Sevón (eds.) *Where Translation is a Vehicle, Imitation its Motor, and Fashion Sits at the Wheel: How Ideas, Objects and Practices Travel in the Global Economy*, Malmö: Liber AB, pp. 167-189.

⁸ See New York University Press Release “NYU to Open Campus in Abu Dhabi”, Friday 12 October 2007. URL: <http://www.nyu.edu/public.affairs/releases/detail/1787>. Last accessed 13 October 2007.

2.2 Academic Freedom

The origins of academic freedom have been traced back to the Middle Ages and debates about the relationship between scientific inquiry and religious doctrine.⁹ Pushes forward included the establishment of the University of Leiden in 1575 in the search for freedom and more enlightened forms of government in the State of Holland. Yet, the contested cases over the knowledge produced by Copernicus and Galileo in the 16th and 17th centuries, or the tight 17th and 18th century era controls over faculty and administrators in universities such as Harvard or Oxford, belie the point that academic freedom was, for the most part, extremely limited in the West in this period.¹⁰

In the West, the direct and indirect effects of the Enlightenment, Darwinism, industrialisation, urbanisation, and of abolitionist, suffragist and pacifist movements, destabilised intellectual contexts, and laid some of the critical foundations for the institutionalisation of the principles that shape the variants of academic freedom that now exist in many parts of the world¹¹. German universities, in particular, acted as model spaces of new forms of academic freedom at the level of research, teaching, student life, and university self-governance, with these newfound freedoms underlain by a drive for universities to become more research-intensive. It is noteworthy that Johns Hopkins University (est. 1876), one of today's more globally active universities, was the first university to be established in the US on the basis of the German model (Metzger, 1955).¹² The condition of academic freedom has played a key role in the link between Johns Hopkins, the production of knowledge and creativity via scholars such as Thorstein Veblen and John Dewey (later one of the most eloquent spokespersons of the principle of academic freedom¹³), and the creation of institutions (e.g., the American Association of University Professors) that developed one of the more globally influential definitions of academic freedom.¹⁴

Over the course of the 20th century, the principle of academic freedom has travelled far, and mutated into a plethora of forms, before becoming institutionalised in a myriad of different ways. In many contexts, the travelling process has actually been facilitated by controversies associated with the control of professorial activities. For example, the 1894 Richard T. Ely case at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (a member of the Worldwide Universities Network), has been identified as a key event in the reframing of the rights and responsibilities of academics and the institutions they work for. Ely, a Johns Hopkins professor of political economy, moved to Madison in 1892. Two years later, an ex-officio member of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Board of Regents (the institution's governing body) attacked Ely for "supporting labour union strikes, organising boycotts of non-union businesses, and teaching socialism and other "dangerous" theories".¹⁵ After much consideration and debate, the Board of Regents (1894) issued this now seminal statement:

In all lines of investigation ... the investigator should be absolutely free to follow the paths of truth, wherever they may lead. Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere, we believe the great state of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found.

Whilst it is inevitable that there will be arguments about the nature and definition of academic freedom, and the rights and responsibilities of faculty and students, it is clearly the case that academic freedom has enabled world-class universities to become research powerhouses

⁹ Metzger, W. (1955) *Academic Freedom in the Age of the University*, New York: Columbia University Press.

¹⁰ Stone, G. (1995) 'Academic Freedom and Responsibility', The Aims of Education Address, *The University of Chicago Record*, 12 October 1995. URL: <http://www.ditext.com/stone/aims.html>. Last accessed 16 October 2007.

¹¹ Metzger, W. (1955) *Academic Freedom in the Age of the University*, New York: Columbia University Press.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Storr, R. (1966) *Harper's University: The Beginnings*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁴ See '1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure'. URL:

<http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/contents/1940statement.htm>. Last accessed 17 October 2007.

¹⁵ Hansen, L. (ed.) (1998) *Academic Freedom on Trial: 100 Years of Sifting and Winnowing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison*, Madison: Office of University Publications.

because of the intellectual space that has created; space that enables faculty and students to pursue the search for the truth in a relatively unfettered way. In doing so, creativity, intellectual advancement, and human development, can be more easily furthered.

2.3 Venturing Abroad and the Deterritorialisation of Academic Freedom

As noted above, institutions are on the move. Universities, especially from the US, the UK, and Australia, are establishing programmes and campuses abroad. A variety of 'hotspots' are emerging in which these universities are establishing their presences abroad, including, as noted above, Qatar and Abu Dhabi, but also Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, the Shanghai city region in China, and Singapore.

What happens, then, to the principle and the practice of academic freedom when Western universities stretch their institutional fabric out across global space, especially when they reach into more politically restrictive contexts that have traditionally sought greater control over academics, students, and institutions of higher education?

Take the case of Singapore. This vibrant global city-state, at the tip of the Malay peninsula, is in the middle of an attempt to become a "Boston of the East", a global knowledge-based hub associated with innovation, 'creativity', relatively more open debate, and significant university-industry linkages. Universities including Duke, Johns Hopkins, NYU, Chicago, INSEAD, Cornell, Carnegie Mellon, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the Technical University of Munich have established campuses, set up formal joint ventures, research labs, and joint degrees, all since the "World Class University" (WCU) programme was launched in 1997.¹⁶ The development process, however, has not been completely smooth with the University of Warwick pulling out of a prospective deal (in 2005) to establish a comprehensive university in Singapore, and the unexpected closure of the campus of the University of New South Wales (UNSW Asia) after only three months of operations in 2007.

The issue of academic freedom is taken seriously by most foreign universities when negotiating with the Government of Singapore, though the outcome of these negotiations has created a landscape that could be characterised as *multitudinous strands of variable conceptions of "academic freedom", unevenly codified (if at all, in fact) in regulation and law, and in a manner where learning from best practices is not facilitated.*

When foreign universities seek to establish an institutional presence in Singapore, the issue of academic freedom is inevitably a priority item to deal with. The following pattern is now relatively clear.

First, universities acquire knowledge about the history of intellectual life, knowledge creation and the governance of academic freedom in Singapore. The quality of this research is highly variable, with some administrative entrepreneurs curiously disengaged from the regional (area studies) units within their own universities. Contract researchers have sometimes been commissioned to produce reports on the issue, though these are generally not available for public consumption.

Second, the issue of academic freedom is raised by foreign universities, and dealt with "head-on" during the negotiations process with the Government of Singapore. The Singaporean state does not seek to shy away from the issue; instead, it seeks to (a) disagree with the academics associated with previous high profile controversies (in the Western press, at least), whilst (b) laying out its principles for the practice of teaching and research in Singapore. The Government makes it very clear that universities have complete control over hiring of staff, curriculum development, and

¹⁶ Olds, K. 'Global assemblage: Singapore, Western universities, and the construction of a global education hub', *World Development*, Volume 35, Number 6, pp. 959-975.

general administration. “Out of bounds” (OB) markers (primarily related to “local politics” and racial/ethnic relations) are clearly delineated in exploratory conversations.¹⁷ Mutual understandings of what academic freedom is defined as are then built up during the intense decision-making and planning phases. Thus, whilst academic freedom exists, it is a variable shade of grey compared to the territory the university was originally created in.

Third, depending on how far universities choose to push the issue, outcomes vary significantly, ranging from:

- *Verbal agreements* between foreign universities and the Government of Singapore. This requires mutual equivalencies with respect to the agreements that are made, as well as significant levels of trust; and
- *Written agreements* signed between Singaporean institutions (including local universities) and Western universities incorporating reference to guarantees of academic freedom in the Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) and Agreements, which also establish contingency procedures to deal with potential problems, should they emerge.

Further, some of these agreements (both verbal and written) have incorporated complicated micro-geographies, with differential activities allowed on-campus versus off-campus, or with the ultimate resolution (should serious conflicts emerge), sometimes designated to Singaporean space, often thousands of kilometers away within foreign universities’ home jurisdiction. This dimension is partly determined by the residential and contractual base of the faculty member working in Singapore. The outcome is an opaque and ever evolving thistle, a patchwork of academic freedoms, layered on top of a national Singaporean system for local universities, and one which is difficult to understand in an overall way, unless you are a senior official representing the Government of Singapore.

2.4 Who Knew?

Academic freedom within any one university, region, or nation, is a concept that has historically been fought over, pulled and tugged in this direction or that, honoured and despised, appreciated and attacked, viewed with disbelief and with pride. Despite this conflict-laden history, the principle of academic freedom is an undeniably important foundation of the emergence of high-quality research-intensive universities, the production of innovative knowledge, and the process of human advancement. However, the product of academic freedom – free inquiry – can unsettle powerful actors, institutions, and taken-for-granted ways of life.

Agreements between foreign universities and the Singaporean state have splintered academic freedom, ‘deterritorialising’ it, and unsettling a core principle in quite significant and hitherto unexamined ways. The same process is underway in Qatar, Abu Dhabi, China, and Malaysia, with complexities emerging continuously as new overseas campuses and programmes emerge.

Is the status quo regarding the way in which academic freedom is being reworked a satisfactory one? Universities are inevitably going to focus on the pursuit of their institutional agendas in this development process, just as host governments are going to focus on the pursuit of their development-related agendas. To date though, the story is one of significant action on rethinking the principle of academic freedom (although on a bilateral university to host government basis), and in a manner that is relatively opaque. What responsibilities do globalising universities have to facilitate learning about new forms of academic freedom? Do other types of institutions need to play a more significant role in ensuring that the globalisation of higher education respects the core dimensions of academic freedom? In some ways, whilst these are early days in the ‘realisation’

¹⁷ Olds, K. and N. Thrift (2005) ‘Cultures on the brink: reengineering the soul of capitalism – on a global scale’, in A. Ong and S. Collier (eds.) *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 270-290.

process, ad-hoc project-specific decisions are creating path dependency. Is this what we really want?