From ivory tower to fishbowl: Towards restoring academic freedom and institutional autonomy in public higher education in South Africa

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Abstract

Corruption and maladministration at public universities in South Africa have severely eroded public trust, posing a threat to the very foundations of these institutions. This paper addresses the issue on restoring academic freedom and institutional autonomy while universities regain their credibility and status within the community. Using qualitative methodology, a secondary thematic analysis of literature and interview was followed. Five prominent leaders at public higher education institutions were interviewed. The findings shed light on strategies for institutions to adopt to rebuild stakeholder confidence. The data indicated that institutions of higher learning could rebuild trust by increasing transparency and accountability to the public and engaging with their surrounding communities through various community engagement activities. By prioritising transparency, fostering accountability, and actively engaging with their communities, public institutions of higher learning can reclaim their status as revered institutions and ensure their vital contributions to society are duly recognised and valued.

Keywords: *academic freedom, institutional autonomy, community engagement, credibility, universities' reason for existence*

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1. Introduction

In the past few decades, there has been considerable debate about the role of universities, sparking questions about their fundamental purpose and claims of crises, including an identity crisis (Saidi, 2023). In fact, Swartz et al. (2019) note that the pressures universities face have led to contemplations regarding the essence of these establishments and the fundamental principles they ought to adhere to. According to Saidi (2023), universities should serve as anchors for towns and regions, act as development engines in their respective geographical areas, and champion social causes. Saidi further elaborates that universities fundamentally serve society, stressing their social responsibility. The 21st-century evolution of the global higher education system emphasises a significant decrease in state oversight of universities and an expansion of their autonomy and accountability (Rayevnyeva et al., 2018). However, recent scrutiny of public higher education institutions in South Africa exposes a troubling pattern characterised by misconduct, financial mismanagement, corruption, and inefficiency (Fongwa, 2023). This negative exposure has led to a substantial decline in public confidence, posing a threat to the very essence of these institutions.

According to the South African Department of Higher and Training (DHET, 2024), there are currently only 25 universities registered in the country. However, South African universities have observed a decline in student registrations since the 2021 academic year, which contrasts with the enrolment plan approved by the Minister for the years 2020 to 2025 (DHET, 2023:71). Given that public funding sustains these institutions, public universities in South Africa must regain accountability and subject themselves to public scrutiny. The responsibility lies with these institutions to restore public trust, mend their damaged reputation, and reclaim institutional autonomy and academic freedom, which have suffered in recent years. This article delves into strategies for universities to achieve this essential goal and outlines the path towards rebuilding public confidence in higher education institutions.

2. Research Background

Today, universities are busy searching for a new identity. Democracy and the transfer of the cost of higher education to the student and taxpayer, as well as the rise of the engaged university, have caused a seismic shift in the status of the university from the ivory tower to the engine of economic growth and innovation (Chantler, 2016). Taxpayers seek

accountability, while students expect to be treated as customers who demand quality service. The traditional Humboldtian model of the university and the German idealistic notion of "knowledge for its own sake" have faded away. The secluded atmosphere of the ivory tower and the university as a fortress have given way to the engaged university, where students, employers, community partners, and academics collaborate equally in creating knowledge.

According to Barber et al. (2013), entities outside of traditional universities, also called non-university providers, now offer traditional university functions, such as research, teaching, providing student experiences, and contributing to regional development. Private laboratories, businesses, and foundations are conducting research activities, think tanks, and consultancies, while learning experiences are expanding beyond campus boundaries, occurring in corporations, urban settings, and online platforms. Moreover, other education and training options are now available, eroding a degree's market value. If universities want to survive, they must transform the classic traditional university and integrate it with the fabric of society. Thus, Vlasova (2018) states that in order for the successful development of universities, institutional autonomy in higher education must be considered.

According to Aithal and Kumar (2019), institutional autonomy allows institutions to have the freedom to make decisions in various areas, such as academic, financial, and organisational matters. Robinson and Moulton (2002) propose that the central principle of institutional autonomy emphasises that higher education institutions should be accountable to society at large, not essentially and exclusively political structures. In this instance, society does not exclude political structures and/or government as important sectors of society. As institutional autonomy binds higher education institutions' accountability to society, it necessitates vigilant protection from all segments of society, including government, students, academia, and higher education administrators.

South African education, particularly academic personnel, should undergo monitoring and evaluation, ensuring accountability upwards to management, downwards to students, and outward to communities (Kori, 2016). As outlined in his book "Corrupted: A Study of Chronic Dysfunction in South African Universities", Jansen (2023:11) wrote that: "*there are social, economic and political contexts outside universities that play a critical role in influencing what happens inside them*". Recently, universities' autonomy, credibility, and freedom have been under attack due to political interference, corruption, and other factors, as illustrated in table 1.

Table 1

Negative media reports on public universities

Incident	Source
"At the University of Cape Town (UCT), we witnessed a crisis which was located in the offices of the chair and deputy chair of the council who failed to act, says a report on governance, on multiple complaints centred on the university executive."	Jansen (2024)
At Unisa, the council failed to impose a stable and healthy governance regime on core university functions, such as technology infrastructure, to the extent that educational services to almost 400,000 students collapsed; a recent assessor's report found "a council that is reckless in the execution of its fiduciary duties" and recommended that the governing authority be disbanded.	Jansen (2024)
A group of aggrieved Unisa staff and students alleged that honorary degrees awarded to Chief Justice Raymond Zondo and his deputy Mandisa Maya were a plan by Unisa bosses to influence cases at the Pretoria High Court after an independent assessment report advocated for the appointment of an administrator. A government-appointed assessor advised the minister to place the open distance learning institution in administration and to relieve its management and council of their duties. The situation at Unisa has been summarised as a "cauldron of instability characterised by a culture of fear, intimidation, bullying, maladministration, financial irregularities, poor student services, academic malpractices, leakage of confidential records and questionable management and council decisions".	Fengu (2023)
Poor leadership regarding student protests at UCT has cost the institution their reputation.	Jack (2023b)
Gender-based violence at the University of Stellenbosch	Jack (2023b)
Pretoria's Sefako Makgatho, Health Sciences University, was shut down by protests for months in 2021, yet thousands of students still received their degrees as if nothing had happened.	Jack (2023b)
The most famous recent example of this can be seen at the University of Fort Hare, where members of staff have been killed (the university's fleet manager and bodyguard) threatened and kidnapped in the past year. It is believed that these incidents directly resulted from vice-chancellor Sakhela Buhlungu's attempts to stamp out fraud and corruption within the institution. Buhlungu previously told CHE that the troubles at Fort Hare are evidence of the phenomenon of "university capture" by rogue elements intent on lining their pockets through corrupt dealing.	Jack (2023a) Jack (2023b)
Public institutions, including universities, were increasingly "captured by corrupt elites and then utilised via networks of patronage", mainly focused on tendering processes, said Alexander Beresford, associate professor in African politics at the University of Leeds.	Jack (2023a)
Thuli Madonsela, a professor of law at Stellenbosch University and a former public protector of South Africa, noted other graft allegations across the sector, including academic appointments, student marks, and sexual harassment. She alleged there was often an "unwritten deal" between a vice-chancellor and ringleaders not to get in each other's way. However, she said that greater solidarity was needed in higher education and that more colleagues should support those affected.	Jack (2023a)

From table 1, it is clear that a real problem and negative perception regarding universities exist. Because of university capture and other corrupt activities, universities' image and credibility have been negatively affected. The problem that needs to be addressed, and the aim of this article, is how academic freedom and institutional autonomy can be restored and how can institutions such as universities regain their credibility and status within the community.

3. Methodology

The methodology employed in this study followed a thematic analysis of secondary data including literature review and interview data following Ip et al. (2020). This qualitative secondary analysis involves repurposing existing data collected by others for a different research objective. Data gathered from literature mainly focused on the various facets of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. On the other hand, interviews sourced from media publications were also utilised in this study. Media interviews serve as a valuable data reservoir, offering insights into various stakeholders' experiences, opinions, and perspectives on a particular subject matter. Ip et al. (2020) suggest that the secondary analysis of pre-existing datasets is increasingly recognised as an effective means of maximising knowledge. However, Hughes et al. (2020) raise concerns about utilising qualitative secondary analysis (QSA), particularly regarding the extent to which insights generated can transcend the original research's context-specific circumstances. They argue that repurposing interview data may sometimes lean more towards synthesis than genuine analysis. Hughes et al. (2020) also emphasise the importance of reflexive engagement when reusing data, urging researchers to consider how datasets are reconceptualised as theoretical entities critically and to acknowledge their original production context and the reasons for their reuse.

Two types of data were generated from interview. The academic leaders wrote some articles about a higher education institution; some were written by journalists or academics who did the initial interviews. The interviewers (academics and journalists) aimed to get information on the autonomy and credibility of universities in light of the corruption and other negative publicity that universities receive in the media. The purpose of their interviews correlates with this study's aim and seems applicable to be reused for this article. The interviews were reported in newspapers. However, using media interviews as data also poses some challenges and limitations, such as the fact that the quality and reliability of the data may

vary depending on the source, the interviewer, the interviewee, and the context of the interview. The data may not be representative of the population or the phenomenon under study, as media interviews often focus on specific cases, events, or individuals. The data may be influenced by the agenda, bias, or framing of the media outlet, the interviewer, or the interviewee, which may affect the validity and objectivity of the analysis. The listed aspects could be regarded as limitations of the study. In this instance, the context created by the journalists in their articles painted the same scenario against which this research has been undertaken. The interviewees are well-known people in Higher Education in South Africa. The same incidents have been published by various newspapers and on different media platforms. The researcher read and compared the reported data with the other sources where the same incidents were published. Only direct quotations from the interviewees have been used as data for this article, and not the interpretation or analysis of the interviewer, in this case, the journalist.

Table 2

Published interviews that were used for secondary data analysis

	Interviewee	Designation
1	Prof Andre Keet	Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Nelson Mandela University
2	Prof Jonathan Jansen	Professor in Education, University of Stellenbosch
3	Prof Buhlungu	Vice-Chancellor of Fort Hare University
4	Prof Thuli Madonsela	Professor in Law, University of Stellenbosch
5	Prof Francis Petersen	Vice-Chancellor, University of the Free State

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Academic Freedom

Du Toit (2000) reminded the reader of T.B. Davie's position in the 1950s, stating that academic freedom is "our freedom from external interference in who shall teach, what we teach, how we teach, and whom we teach". Olsson (2023) discusses UNESCO's view on academic freedom. According to their recommendation in Article 27, universities and academic freedom are defined as institutions of higher education where communities of scholars preserve, disseminate, and freely express their opinions on traditional knowledge and culture and pursue new knowledge without constriction by prescribed doctrines. The concept of a prescribed doctrine is problematic in its definition because how does it affect a faith-based

university or a university with a policy of decolonising the curriculum, Africanisation, or social justice promotion? Do policies like these create tension with a philosophy such as academic freedom? The question is also whether academic freedom itself is not a prescribed doctrine.

Academic freedom, grounded in various rights like education and expression, grants significant leeway when incorporated into national legislation. This discretion becomes particularly apparent when academic freedom is associated with the right to education, making it susceptible to extensive state regulation and policy influence (Lyer et al., 2023). For instance, in Poland, the restructuring of the University of Szymona, Szymonowica without consultation, serves as an example of the diminishing institutional autonomy in favour of state directives, resulting in the de-prioritisation of certain themes, notably in free research and history education (Lyer et al., 2023).

Academic freedom is embedded in the right to education (Kori, 2016), which reflects an absence of outside interference, censure or obstacles in the pursuit and practice of academic work. It is a precondition for critical, experimental and creative thought and, therefore, for advancing intellectual inquiry and knowledge. Higgins (2000a) and Robinson and Moulton (2002) characterise academic freedom as the liberty to teach and research in any area without constraint, to discover and promulgate new ideas no matter how controversial. In this vein, academic freedom is linked with human rights such as freedom of speech, association and thought. Consequently, the right to education can only be enjoyed if accompanied by the academic freedom of staff and students.

Academic freedom is a defining feature that distinguishes universities and is an essential prerequisite for effectively fulfilling their societal responsibilities (Petersen, 2023). It encompasses the allowance granted to scholars and researchers to delve into novel concepts, conduct thorough investigations, disseminate their discoveries, and articulate opinions grounded in facts and evidence without the fear of censorship or reprisal. Excessive governmental intervention in university operations, including governance and academic content, curtails the academic freedom of the university community (Lyer et al., 2023). As per the findings of Taye and Alduais (2022), the University of Abay in Ethiopia outlines academic freedom in its official documentation as the entitlement to engage in open discussions and freely articulate viewpoints concerning ideas, current local and global challenges, and contentious topics. This freedom extends to classroom settings, campus-wide academic activities, discussion forums, and written materials, provided that the expression of opinions

remains generally pertinent to the subject matter and aligns with principles of rationality and intellectual inquiry. Levine and Smith (2022) thus associate academic freedom with intellectual freedom, a concept also referred to as intellectual autonomy by Davids (2021). This freedom encompasses the practice of intra-mural criticism, which involves the examination and critique of university governance. It underscores the entitlement of both faculty and students to engage in intellectual discourse and debate without fear of censorship. According to Lyer et al. (2023), the absence of a universally agreed-upon international legal definition for academic freedom presents a significant obstacle, hindering the assessment of state actions against a standardised criterion.

Table 3

Summary of definitions of academic freedom

Reference	Definition
T.B. Davie (1950)	Academic freedom is our freedom from external interference in who shall we teach, what we teach, how we teach, and whom we teach.
UNESCO Article 27	Where communities of scholars preserve, disseminate and freely express their opinions on traditional knowledge and culture and pursue new knowledge without constriction by prescribed doctrines.
Higgins (2000); Robinson and Moulton (2002)	The liberty to teach and research in any area without constraint, to discover and promulgate new ideas no matter how controversial.
Kori (2016)	The absence of outside interference, censure or obstacles in the pursuit and practice of academic work.
Taye and Alduais (2022). University of Abay in Ethiopia	The right to discuss and openly express views on ideas, immediate national and global problems, and issues, as well as other controversial matters in class, in connection with academic work on campus in discussion groups or print, provided the expression of views is generally relevant to the subject under discussion and is consistent with rational and intellectual inquiry.
Levine & Smith (2022)	Academic freedom includes intra-mural criticism, which relates to criticism about the university and how it is governed.
Petersen (2023)	Academic freedom is a prerequisite for fulfilling universities' society-focused role. It is the space to explore new ideas, engage in rigorous research, share their findings, and express fact- and evidence-based opinions without the fear of censorship or reprisal.

Table 4

International context of academic freedom

Country	Author	Main narrative of the article	Summary of key concepts
Academic Freedom in Bangladesh	Hasan and Ahasan (2022)	Over the past 12 years, academic freedom in Bangladesh has declined, as evidenced by its Academic Freedom Index scores. While there was a brief improvement after the military-backed interim regime, the situation worsened as the Awami League government tightened its grip. Though widespread repression of academics has not occurred, there is significant government intervention in universities and increased self-censorship among scholars due to a prevailing atmosphere of fear. The academic community is divided, with some exercising their rights to protest despite threats, while others align with the government, leading to the politicisation of academic and administrative positions.	Economic Progress and Political Shifts Impact of Political Leadership on Academic Freedom The trend of Declining Academic Freedom Levels Government Intervention in Universities Increased Self-Censorship Culture of Fear and Repression Exercise of Democratic Rights Influence of Government Supporters Political Influence in Academic and Administrative Positions
Academic Freedom in India	Jayal (2022)	Historically, higher education institutions (HEIs) in India have been subject to state control despite maintaining decent academic freedom. However, recent years have seen a significant decline in academic freedom, as evidenced by drops in the Academic Freedom Index scores. This decline coincides with India's shift from democracy to electoral autocracy. While HEIs have historically faced centralisation, bureaucratisation, and politicisation, academic freedom was somewhat safeguarded, albeit passively. However, recent governmental control over universities has intensified, leading to severe consequences for academic freedom. This assault encompasses politicised appointments, constraints on teaching and research, and threats of violence against students and faculty. Low institutional autonomy and a lack of legal protections for academic freedom have facilitated these actions.	Decline in academic freedom The trend of Decreasing Academic Freedom Governmental control Politicised appointments Impact of Political Shifts on Academic Freedom Centralisation, Bureaucratisation, and Politicisation Intensification of Governmental Control Assault on Academic Freedom Constraints on Teaching, Research, and Dissemination Threats to Campus Integrity Absence of Legal Protections for Academic Freedom Practical restrictions in leadership appointments and funding Low Institutional Autonomy
Academic Freedom in Mozambique	Zavale (2022)	Mozambique's academic freedom and institutional autonomy have evolved alongside political and economic changes. Initially restricted under one-party rule and civil war, there was a brief improvement during the transition to democracy. However, in recent years, rights have declined under a more	Historical and evolving context of Academic Freedom Practical restrictions in leadership appointments and funding Impact of Political and Socio-economic Changes

Country	Author	Main narrative of the article	Summary of key concepts
		authoritarian regime. While institutional autonomy is recognised constitutionally, practical restrictions persist, particularly in leadership appointments and funding. Academic freedom lacks explicit legal protection and faces challenges, including surveillance and censorship, especially in social media.	Restriction of Institutional Autonomy Constitutional Rights vs. Practical Limitations Pedagogical and Scientific Autonomy Restrictions on Academic Freedom Protection of Academic Freedom vs. Human Rights Consequences of Authoritarian Regime
Academic Freedom in Poland	Bucholc (2022)	Since 2009, Poland's higher education system has been undergoing neoliberal reforms, intensified under the national-conservative government since 2015, leading to increased political interference in academic freedom. Recent regulatory proposals prioritise national-conservative and Catholic values, conflicting with European cooperation frameworks promoting equality and diversity. This tension, compounded by a redefinition of academic freedom to favour conservative and national values, threatens the autonomy of Polish universities, as they are increasingly seen as serving state interests rather than pursuing academic goals.	Neoliberal reforms Increased political interference Conflict of values Threat to University Autonomy Worsening State of Academic Freedom Focus on Identity Politics Redefined concept of Academic Freedom
Academic Freedom in Turkey	Hünler (2022)	Turkish higher education witnessed brief academic freedom and autonomy until the 2016 coup attempt, followed by severe restrictions during the subsequent state of emergency. Despite past fluctuations, the Academic Freedom Index score hit its lowest point in 1981 after the 1980 coup. The post-coup period saw the establishment of foundation universities alongside public ones, leading to increased accessibility but also commercialisation. While the 2000s saw relative democratisation benefiting higher education, the 2016 coup attempt led to another decline in academic freedom. President Erdoğan's continued authoritarian rule has further eroded judicial independence, with dissenting voices, including academics and journalists, silenced through terrorism charges.	Brief academic freedom and autonomy Increased Accessibility and Commercialization Democratization Impact on research Authoritarian rule Loss of Judicial Independence

Interesting to note is the evolution of the definition to include community engagement, which is currently a relevant and much-debated topic. For many years in the past, it was never pertinently mentioned. The decline of academic freedom has become increasingly evident in numerous countries worldwide over the past decade, a trend widely acknowledged by scholars (Klaus et al., 2016; Lyer & Suba, 2019; Spannagel et al., 2020). The implications of this decline extend far beyond academia, impacting societal discourse, innovation, and the pursuit of knowledge across diverse fields. Hence, examining the literature about academic freedom on a global scale holds great significance.

Existing international standards inadvertently allow for broad government interference, undermining academic freedom. To address this issue, international agreements on academic freedom should explicitly limit governmental discretion and prioritise robust self-governance. Striking a balance between overseeing state funds and adhering to national regulations while safeguarding academic freedom poses a challenge, further compounded by the diverse governance structures of higher education globally (Lyer et al., 2023). Table 4 examines the international contexts of academic freedom. The literature was gathered from diverse sources to encompass a wide range of perspectives on academic freedom across the globe. Subsequently, a column was incorporated into the table to identify specific themes within each country of interest. This approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of the various dimensions of academic freedom within different cultural, political, and institutional contexts.

4.2 Institutional Autonomy

Institutional autonomy pertains to self-regulation or the entitlement to self-governance, self-determination, and independence regarding local or internal affairs. Academic freedom, along with institutional autonomy, is constitutionally protected in South Africa (Kori, 2016). The history of academic freedom and university autonomy is contentious and longstanding (Kori, 2016). Autonomy is contextually and politically determined, reflecting the realities of the context and political landscape, which shape the redefinition of university autonomy (Anderson, 2022). Roberts et al. (2023) define the principle of university autonomy as the requisite level of independence from external intervention needed by the university concerning its internal structure and governance, financial resource allocation, staff recruitment, curriculum development, and the freedom to conduct teaching and research.

The suppression of academic freedom dates back to ancient times. Socrates (c. 470-399 B.C.) put to death for allegedly corrupting the youth of Athens with his ideas. Galileo (1564-1642) received a life sentence for promoting the Copernican model of the solar system. Descartes (1596-1650) withheld his writings to avoid similar repercussions. Educators were terminated for discussing Darwin's theories with their students (Kori, 2016).

Over the centuries, religious, political, and governmental authorities have sought to limit the academic community's teaching, research, and public expression (Kori, 2016). The concept of university autonomy, codified in the Cordoba Reforms of 1918, holds significant sway in Latin America. In Europe, institutional autonomy was introduced through the Bologna Declaration and further delineated in the 1988 Magna Charta Universitatum. This charter affirmed that the university is an independent entity at the core of societies shaped by diverse geographical and historical backgrounds. It generates, evaluates, and transmits knowledge through research and teaching. In order to effectively serve the needs of society, its scholarly pursuits must remain morally and intellectually separate from any political or economic influence (Kori, 2016). In modern times, Iraq during Saddam's reign, Egypt before the Arab Spring and Ethiopia, Indonesia, and Serbia (Kaya, 2006; Altbach, 2007) all suppressed academic freedom and autonomy.

According to Rónay and Niemczyk (2022), institutional autonomy encompasses the dynamic interplay between the state and higher education institutions, with the extent of state control varying based on national contexts and circumstances. It can be measured by evaluating an institution's decision-making capacity across different domains. Therefore, it can be argued that an autonomous institution may have the right to determine its organisational and administrative structure, decide its priorities, manage its budget, hire its personnel and admit its students, decide the content and forms of its teaching and research - or at least a number of these rights (Robinson & Moulton, 2002; Pityana, 2010). These liberties enable universities to advance knowledge, effectively impart it to their students and the wider community and serve as incubators for fresh and constructive ideas. Institutional autonomy refers to the condition that allows HEI to govern itself free from external influence, particularly from governmental bodies. Olorunsola (2018) asserts that university autonomy is the fundamental principle underpinning the university system, providing stability to the institution's strategies towards its objectives and aspirations.

Currently, state regulation poses a threat to institutional autonomy. The enactment of the Higher Education Act of 1997 in South Africa granted the Minister broader authority to establish higher education institutions, consolidate multiple public higher education institutions into one entity, or shutter an institution following consultation with the Council on Higher Education. Moreover, the legislation mandated that the minister appointed up to five members of university councils, indicating a degree of oversight over these institutions. Since 1999, the predominant trend in governance has been a consistent escalation in direct state intervention in higher education (Lange, 2013). In 2008, an incident involving racism surfaced at the University of the Free State. In response, the Minister of Education established an investigative task force to address transformation in higher education institutions. Surprisingly, the vice-chancellors were not consulted regarding this initiative and never deliberated upon the terms of reference. The task force visited the university and published a report (Kori, 2016). Groups affiliated with the African National Congress (ANC) launched an unprecedented campaign to compel the resignation of the Vice-Chancellor of Unisa. This action stemmed from his expression of political views perceived as sympathetic to another political party. Similarly, the Vice-Chancellor of Free State University in South Africa faced criticism after announcing, during his inauguration, that former students accused of racist behaviour would be readmitted to the university as a gesture of goodwill and reconciliation. This decision prompted a flurry of attacks and visits to the university, including from the ANC Youth League and the labour union COSATU, along with demands for reports from the Ministry of Higher Education and Training. Such interventions are viewed as state interference at worst and steering at best (Kori, 2016).

The government, through various bureaucratic structures, decides on what can be taught, which institutions will offer what programmes, who can be taught, how students will be taught, which programmes will be funded at what levels; and can now displace a Vice-Chancellor based on a review and install its administrator to run the institution. It is a matter of record that academic freedom has not been defended or advanced with the same vigour post-1994 as it was when the liberal university was at loggerheads with the apartheid state (Higgins, 2013). In South Africa, 'academic freedom' has become widely accepted. However, there is a tendency to brand those advocating for it as 'reactionary' or 'conservative' (Kori, 2016).

Bergan et al. (2020) contend that the autonomy of African higher education institutions seems to face numerous obstacles, such as political interference, influence and capture from

vested interest groups. According to Jonathan Jansen (2024), a professor in education at the University of Stellenbosch, there can be little question that South African higher education has faced its most severe governance crisis since the dawn of democracy in the mid-1990s. Student protests do not cause the crisis at this time for free higher education or union demands for insourcing. It is a governance challenge, and the university council is at the heart of the problem. The council, recall, is the highest decision-making body of a university responsible for governance. It establishes a university's policy infrastructure, oversees the institution's financial well-being, and appoints the vice-chancellor. The university collapses if a council fails in one or more of its core duties.

According to Aithal and Kumar (2019), HEIs aspire to attain the status of "autonomy," which grants significant freedom and flexibility to enhance the quality of education and engage in global branding efforts. This autonomy is vital for their survival and growth amid challenges and competition. Aithal and Kumar (2019) stated that autonomy entails the freedom to adopt self-sustaining practices in academic and administrative domains. Tasks such as developing new courses, designing curricula, setting fee structures, admitting students, hiring and retaining faculty, managing teaching and learning processes, conducting examinations and evaluations, and grading fall within the scope of autonomy. Ultimately, autonomy leads to increased responsibility and accountability. According to Petersen (2023), institutional autonomy grants universities the authority to govern themselves through their leadership structures, usually in the form of councils and senates made up of democratically elected members of staff, alumni, members of the student representative council, and other stakeholders. It also allows universities to define their academic programmes, curricula, and admission criteria.

In democratic societies, academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and adherence to the rule of law in the interactions between public authorities, higher education institutions, and students are deemed essential values within the European Higher Education Area. European governments acknowledge university autonomy as a prerequisite for the effective advancement of higher education. The European Commission prioritises the establishment of a new framework for universities characterised by heightened levels of autonomy and accountability. This approach is reaffirmed by the Council of the European Union, which links autonomy directly to universities' capacity to fulfil societal expectations (Vlasova, 2018). Yerande (2018) also highlighted that in other countries, such as India, the deterioration of higher education quality underscores the significance of institutional autonomy.

Table 5 summarises the threats to institutional autonomy.

Table 5

Threats to institutional autonomy in South Africa

Reference	Threat
Higher Education Act of 1997	The Minister has extensive powers to merge two or more public higher institutions… or to close an institution. The Act also requires up to five university council members to be ministerial appointees.
Lange (2013)	Since 1999, there has been a systemic increase in direct state control over higher education.
Kori (2016)	After an incident at the University of the Free State, the Minister of Education did not consult the Vice-Chancellors but set up an investigating task team on transformation.
Kori (2016)	ANC forced the Vice-Chancellor of Unisa to resign after he expressed views sympathetic to another political party.
Kori (2016)	The vice-chancellor of the University of the Free State announced in an inauguration speech that former students accused of racial conduct would be allowed back into the university as a gesture of goodwill and reconciliation. Protests from the ANC Youth League, COSATU, and the Ministry of Higher Education met this.
Kori (2016)	Through CHE processes, the government decides what can be taught, which institutions will offer what programmes, etc.

4.3 Community Engagement

Community engagement, or engagement, has traditionally been regarded as a less important aspect of universities. Some have even labelled it as the "stepchild" (Saidi, 2023). Nevertheless, there has been a growing demand for engagement to be placed on par with learning, teaching, research, and innovation (Paphitis & Kelland, 2016), especially as it must be seen as a core function of universities (Saidi, 2023). Thus, at certain South African universities, community engagement is now incorporated into performance agreements, policies, and promotion criteria for academics and professional staff (Keet, 2023).

According to Fongwa (2023), the universities actively engaged in their communities view themselves as essential to the larger societal framework. They pledge to serve society, thereby ensuring their relevance to the advancement of local communities. These universities collaborate with diverse stakeholders, including local communities, government entities, industries, private sectors, non-governmental organisations, activist groups, and local and international higher education institutions. They embrace the concept of convergence, wherein stakeholders unite to address the nation's significant challenges. This fosters a collective sense

of ownership of universities and effectively addresses the growing inquiry: "What is the purpose of universities?"

Swartz et al. (2019) emphasise that universities bear considerable responsibility as institutions fulfilling a pivotal societal role and meeting diverse expectations. Fongwa (2023) underscores universities' implementation as anchor institutions within their communities. Functioning as anchors, they tackle the increasing developmental requirements of towns and cities while offering stability. As anchor institutions, universities foster collaborations, harness diverse talents across disciplines and sectors, empower local voices, and create platforms for driving essential factors of prosperity, such as educational achievement, environmental sustainability, and economic opportunities (Cortright, 2008).

Despite initiating various community engagement initiatives in universities, only a few institutions have implemented substantial, enduring structural changes necessary to foster an academic environment that prioritises community involvement (Paphitis & Kelland, 2016). Rayevnyeva et al. (2018) assert a clear correlation between institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and the research undertaken by scientists. The scientist's work is aimed at analysing the relationship between the development of society and university education. Examples of active engagement in South Africa are Rhodes University's "Reviving Grahamstown Schools" policy. As part of the university's mission to be responsive to the needs of its community, Rhodes University recognised that the future and sustainability of the university are closely tied to the future and sustainability of Grahamstown (Fongwa, 2023). This commitment was institutionalised through various programs and structures, including the school's revitalisation project and an Early Childhood Development project developed in partnership with local stakeholders and academics.

In 2015, the University of Pretoria adopted a plan to improve infrastructure, enhance security and promote socio-economic development in the Hatfield precinct. This plan is called the City Improvement District (CID), and it has successfully revitalised the area, making it safe for students to live and developers to invest. The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) Tshimologong Digital Innovation Precinct initiative in Braamfontein, Johannesburg, is a collaborative effort between the university, government partners, the City of Johannesburg, businesses, and industries. The initiative aims to revitalise the surrounding areas of the university by creating affordable and secure housing for students and introducing new spaces for retail, restaurants, music clubs, and bookshops. The ultimate goal is to establish a digital

innovation precinct and the Wits Tech hub in the area, making it an attractive destination for the Wits and Braamfontein community (Fongwa, 2023).

Table 6

Examples of successful and ongoing community engagements

University	Project
Rhodes University	Reviving Grahamstown Schools
University of Pretoria	City Improvement District
University of the Witwatersrand	Tshimologong Digital Innovation Precinct

4.4. University Strategies to Rebuild Stakeholder Confidence

The published interviews of five leaders within the higher education space at universities related to the topic of this article could be found. After the secondary interview, data was analysed and synthesised, as Hughes et al. (2020) suggested. The following summary can be provided, indicating the common themes identified:

Table 7

Synthesis of secondary interview data

Participant	Themes	Contribution
Two	The current state of universities	Corruption at universities makes people doubt the validity of the institutions.
Three	The current state of universities	Criminality flourishes currently at universities. Corruption and violence lead to the suffering of teaching and learning.
Four	The current state of universities	Greater solidarity is needed to fight corruption.
Five	Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy	Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are there to promote the well-being of society. It is not a shield to cover up unethical behaviour.
Four	Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy	Academic freedom and institutional autonomy do not absolve universities from accountability.
One	Role of universities	Universities that do not engage with stakeholders and their communities at all levels of research, learning, teaching, and practice will lose their social legitimacy and put their survival at risk.
Five	Role of universities	Universities have a role to play as centres of innovation, research, dissemination, and application of knowledge, contributing towards finding sustainable solutions to the world's many complex and interrelated challenges.

Participant	Themes	Contribution
Five	Restore credibility, status, academic freedom, and institutional autonomy	Universities must make a concerted effort to restore public trust. They can only do so by becoming increasingly involved with the communities surrounding them, using their core business of teaching, learning, and research to collaborate with communities to create innovative, sustainable, and workable solutions to the issues that confront them. Universities must also produce the next generation of ethical leaders.
Two	Restore credibility, status, academic freedom, and institutional autonomy	Universities must adopt a culture of transparency. They have to be involved in their communities to build relationships and trust.

The data provided valuable information to construct an answer to the research question and accomplish this article's aim. The main findings shed light on strategies for institutions of higher learning to adopt to rebuild stakeholder confidence. The data indicated that institutions of higher learning could rebuild trust by increasing transparency and accountability to the public and engaging with their surrounding communities through various community engagement activities.

Academic freedom, autonomy, and community engagement are integral to establishing dynamic and socially responsible universities. Academic freedom empowers scholars to delve into societal issues, participate in critical discourse, and contribute to societal improvement (Taye & Alduais, 2022). Autonomy is a foundational pillar, enabling universities to create environments conducive to free inquiry, diverse perspectives, and intellectual curiosity, thereby supporting academic freedom (Kori, 2016). Furthermore, community engagement flourishes when universities possess the academic freedom to address pertinent issues and the autonomy to design and implement programs aligned with community needs (Fongwa, 2023). This engagement allows academics to apply their expertise to real-world problems, establishing a reciprocal relationship that benefits both the university and the community. The reciprocity between academic freedom, autonomy, and community engagement is symbiotic. Academic freedom and autonomy allow universities to engage meaningfully with communities. In contrast, community engagement offers a context for applying academic expertise and enhancing the educational experience for students (Petersen, 2023).

The nexus between academic freedom, autonomy, and community engagement is crucial for developing vibrant institutions that actively contribute to intellectual and societal advancement. When these elements are interconnected, universities are pivotal and act as

anchors in addressing complex challenges and fostering a collaborative, mutually beneficial relationship with broader society. This interconnectedness is fundamental to the mission of universities as critical contributors to the betterment of society. From the findings, it is evident that if universities fulfil this role, they will regain the trust and credibility of the broader society.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Community engagement reflects a university's recognition of its broader social responsibility. It also emphasises how academic freedom allows institutions to explore innovative solutions through research into issues that will benefit local communities and build trust through collaborations. These engagements can lead to positive media coverage that can help restore and reshape their public image damaged by negative newspaper headlines. The recommendations from the study are that the recovery path for public institutions of higher learning is undeniably challenging but attainable. By prioritising transparency, fostering accountability, and actively engaging with their communities, public institutions of higher learning can reclaim their status as revered institutions and ensure their vital contributions to society are duly recognised and valued. Restoring institutional autonomy and academic freedom becomes not just a goal but a foundational pillar for revitalising public trust in these essential education centres. Thus, a compelling connection exists between institutions' engagement with their communities and restoring their autonomy and academic freedom.

The implications of these research findings for the education industry are significant and multifaceted. Universities need to prioritise their involvement with the communities they serve. This entails recognising their social responsibility and actively engaging with local stakeholders to address pressing issues and foster collaboration. Public universities can reclaim their status as revered institutions by actively engaging with communities and demonstrating their value through tangible contributions. Community engagement efforts can also lead to positive media coverage, which helps repair and reshape the public image of universities that negative headlines may have tarnished. Prioritising transparency and fostering accountability are also crucial for rebuilding trust in public institutions of higher learning. This involves openly communicating with stakeholders about decisions and actions and holding individuals and institutions accountable for their responsibilities.

Restoring institutional autonomy and academic freedom is not just a goal but a foundational pillar for revitalising public trust in higher education. This involves safeguarding

universities' independence to pursue research and teaching without external interference, thus ensuring the integrity and quality of education. Academic freedom allows institutions to conduct research that directly addresses community needs. This means universities should encourage and support faculty and students in exploring innovative solutions through their research endeavours.

In summary, these findings underscore the importance of community engagement, transparency, and autonomy in rebuilding public trust in higher education institutions. By prioritising these principles, universities can reaffirm their vital role in society and ensure that their contributions are recognised and valued.

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