

# **Institutional Autonomy Revisited: National Dimensions, Cross regional Experiences.**

## **IAU/IAUP Presidents' Symposium**

**Chiang Mai, Thailand  
December 8-9, 2006**

### **BACKGROUND**

In some of the world's regions, strengthening Institutional Autonomy has been one of the major strategic developments in higher education policy this decade past. New responsibilities have been placed on higher education. Functions previously exercised by direct government oversight have been delegated to the individual university. Institutional Autonomy reinforced has seen the universities take on new responsibilities for revenue generation, for satisfying students, now presented as 'customers', for mastering funding flows through institutional performance, through demonstrated efficiency and for working out, implementing and attaining individual strategies to meet the rapidly-evolving priorities that economic change, society, government throw up, identify and wish to see advanced.

Other regions face a very different experience: government intervention has grown, become more pervasive. Yet, whether rhetorical or real, Institutional Autonomy is one of the basic principles that underpin the ties between higher education and society. Today just as in the past, the ways this principle is interpreted, operationalized and legislated, vary considerably between different national systems.

It is against this fundamental variation that the Knowledge Society develops.

As a general concept, Institutional Autonomy involves very real and substantive differences that national purpose - expressed through a country's history, culture, economic progress and social advance - sets upon higher education. Yet, national purpose also changes. And such changes in priority are reflected in the legislative framework governing higher education.

The legislative framework defines the administrative level – national, sub national region or institution - where higher education is coordinated. It defines and distributes other functions – funding, latitude to raise additional revenue - and assigns responsibilities – staff recruitment and promotion, for instance, within the individual university. Thus, the legislative framework lays down the boundaries within which Institutional Autonomy is exercised.

Though Institutional Autonomy is an abiding and identifying element in the special relationship between the polity, the economy, society and the university, the boundaries defining Institutional Autonomy are very far from being permanently fixed even in those periods when public expectation did not attach such weight to universities rapidly adapting – and rapidly contributing to - developments in the productive process. Its boundaries shift, sometimes to bring new groups into the inner process of institutional decision-making. As one illustration amongst many of boundary shift, legislatively redefined, one may refer to the reforms of thirty years ago in Western Europe, which added the principles of 'participatory democracy' and 'tripartite participation' to university decision-making. The principle of Institutional Autonomy was strengthened officially by extending it to the 'Student Estate'.

Whilst Institutional Autonomy remains a condition central to the efficient functioning of universities, today its basic rationale has altered, radically and some would say, irrevocably.

The classic relationship between university and society rested on the separation of academia and society and, in certain systems an explicit notion of distance between State and University. Against this one sees other forms: - the State acting in a Guardian relationship, as the protector of the University as a public good against private interests. To this, a third strand may be added. Found in Latin America, it takes the form of the medieval notion of the University as a physically autonomous space where the concept of freedom often emerges as a culture of dissent, of oppositional politics and partisanship.

How far is today's redefinition of Institutional Autonomy conditioned by a contrary rationale – that of proximity and closeness, of responsiveness and relevance to 'social partners' and 'stakeholders'? The idea of the 'Service University' – of the University answerable to Society's demands and accountable for carrying them out - that some see as part of the Neo Liberal agenda for higher education, has been a powerful lever of change. With the 'Service University' comes the notion of 'conditional autonomy', that is institutional autonomy subject to rendering accounts to public and to financial providers. How far have finance and the utilitarian ethic reshaped Institutional Autonomy across the different world regions? How far does the convergence around a similar agenda in higher education impact on establishments where the established model of Institutional Autonomy rests on other cultural assumptions, beliefs and perceived primary values and beliefs?

Institutional Autonomy no longer rests on a notion of Knowledge as sacred. On the contrary, its 'desacralisation' finds an ultimate expression in commodification and in the culture of immediacy. To this, the university is no longer an exception. Institutional Autonomy in an age of Globalisation is no longer a condition whose basic purpose is to ensure continuity. It is increasingly seen as a prior condition to ensure higher education's capacity continuously to mutate, interact with and sustain, external forces - the market, the innovation system, or the imperative drive of science and technology.

For reasons such as these, the boundaries of Institutional Autonomy in many systems of higher education are undergoing deliberate modification. The forces for modification are many: neo liberalism, the demands of New Public Management and, in developing countries as part of more general conditions posed by the World Bank in return for development assistance. Institutional Autonomy becomes a contingent item in a broader political and economic agenda. Because a University's ability to uphold its own agenda is increasingly conditioned by its performance and its resources, so its degree of real Autonomy is similarly constrained. The individual university finds itself having to pay close attention to the risks its decisions may entail for the viability – or survival - of the establishment. Risk and boldness replace the earlier emphasis upon stability and organic change. Are long-established practices and understandings between government, society and the university that once underwrote Institutional Autonomy appropriate both to justify and to uphold it when change is both rapid and continuous? Are new forms of Institutional Autonomy emerging? How do they differ from earlier agreements? What are the conditions shaping such alternative models?

The two-day IAU/IAUP Symposium is designed to answer these questions and perhaps raise new ones as participants from widely different institutional and national contexts come together to discuss these themes.

The symposium organizers hope to shed some light on very old and perennial questions. By offering this initial forum to higher education leaders to learn from each other, IAU and IAUP hope to advance and strengthen both the theory and the practice of institutional autonomy, a condition of a strong higher education system.