

ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES OF CANADA

STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY

Introduction

It is the essence of a university freely to pursue knowledge and understanding and to search for the reasons for things. This search implies that some of the reasons are unknown or uncertain and that opinions about them must be questioned. The right and the responsibility to raise such questions is the justification for academic freedom.

Constraints on academic freedom may arise both from inside and from outside universities. It is a major responsibility of university governing bodies and senior officers of universities to maintain an environment in which academic freedom is realized.

Threats to freedom of inquiry, independent judgement and free expression may come from administrators, students or faculty members, sometimes in groups, who attempt to require all members of a department or faculty to adhere to a particular version of orthodoxy. The reliance of universities on government financing and private donations may create pressures on the institutions and on their members to conform to short-sighted or ill-advised political, corporate or personal interpretations of what should be studied and how it should be studied. It is the obligation of faculty members in particular, supported by their administrations, senate and boards, to ensure that these pressures do not unduly influence the intellectual work of the university. When conflicts arise because of such pressures, it is essential that a full airing and consideration of a broad range of viewpoints be possible.

It is essential that universities have the freedom to set their research and educational priorities. How the members of universities will teach and impart skills, conduct research and the pursuit of knowledge, and engage in fundamental criticism is best determined within the universities themselves. It is here that academic freedom, in its collective form of institutional autonomy, can ensure freedom of inquiry for individual faculty members and students. Historically there has been a struggle for university autonomy, arising from the conviction that a university can best serve the needs of society when it is free to do so according to the dictates of the intellectual enterprise itself.

Freedom of inquiry must have as its corollary a high degree of respect for evidence, impartial reasoning and honesty in reporting. It should include a willingness to make known the underlying assumptions and the results of the inquiry. All research and scholarship must be conducted ethically, with full consideration of the implications and in ways that respect fully human rights as defined in law.

In their relations with students, faculty members and others who work in the universities have an obligation to ensure that the students' human rights are respected and that they are encouraged to pursue their education according to the principles of academic freedom embodied in the university itself. In relation to the wider society, universities should accept the obligation to account for their expenditure of funds, through their boards and through public audits of their accounts.

Principles

1. The AUCC believes that the principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy are essential to the fulfillment of the role of universities in the context of a democratic society.
2. The AUCC believes that academic freedom is essential to the fulfillment of the universities' primary mandate, the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge and understanding. Freedom of inquiry is fundamental to the search for truth and the advancement of knowledge. Freedom in teaching, justified by the special professional expertise of the faculty members, is fundamental to the protection of the rights of the teacher to teach and of the student to learn. Academic freedom is essential in order that society may have access to impartial expertise for knowledgeable comments on all issues studied in universities, including those surrounded by controversy.
3. The AUCC recognizes the obligation of universities to ensure the academic freedom of individual faculty members to conduct inquiries, to make judgements, and to express views without fear of retribution. The practice of tenure is one important means of meeting this obligation. In addition, decisions relative to appointments and the granting of tenure and promotion must be conducted according to principles of fairness and natural justice.
4. The AUCC recognizes that the universities should ensure that students are treated according to principles of fairness and natural justice and are encouraged to pursue their education according to the principle of academic freedom.
5. The AUCC recognizes that historically the universities of Canada have struggled to achieve institutional autonomy and must continue to do so. The Association affirms that this autonomy provides the best possible condition for the conduct of scholarship and higher education essential to a free society. As centres of free inquiry universities have an obligation to society to resist outside intrusion into their planning and management and to insist that institutional autonomy be recognized by governments and others as the necessary pre-condition to their proper functioning. Institutional autonomy includes, inter-alia, the following powers and duties: to select and appoint faculty and staff; to select and admit and discipline students; to set and control curriculum; to establish organizational arrangements for the carrying out of academic work; to create programs

and to direct resources to them; to certify completion of a program of study and grant degrees.

6. The AUCC recognizes that the academic freedom of individual members of universities and the institutional autonomy accorded to the institutions themselves involve the following major responsibilities to society; to conduct scholarship and research according to the highest possible standards of excellence so that society may benefit; within the constraints of the resources available to them, to ensure high quality education to as many academically qualified individuals as possible; to abide by the laws of society; and to account publicly through Boards and audits for their expenditure of funds.

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