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Pendulum has swung too far to state authority

Philip G. Altbach and Gerard Postiglione

The latest flap in Hong Kong's contentious world of higher education concerns the unwillingness of the government-appointed Council of the Hong Kong Institute of Education to reappoint Paul Morris as president. The Hong Kong academic community sees this action as a severe violation of academic freedom - the latest in a number of high-profile cases over the past decade where government authority has tried to limit academic freedom by putting pressure on the universities and their top leaders to silence or remove professors who were perceived as disconcerting or obstreperous.

But is this case a matter of academic freedom? However loyal to Professor Morris the academic community may be - and however unwelcome the non-reappointment may be - it is nonetheless important to provide an accurate analysis.

Academic freedom relates to guarantees of free expression for professors and students. The original 19th century German definition of academic freedom was limited to such protection within the classroom in fields of the expertise of the professor. It did not protect expression on other topics. In the early 20th century, Americans expanded the idea to guarantee expression on any topic and in any context. Academic freedom protected the jobs of professors. They could not be fired or disciplined because of their writings or expression, on campus or off.

This expanded definition is by and large accepted everywhere - that is, where academic freedom is respected. Academic freedom does not assure that professors will control the university, nor does it protect institutional autonomy. Academic freedom does not insulate either professors or institutions from accountability accessible to those who provide funding and who, through legal arrangements, control institutional decisions.

Thus, the charge of restricting academic freedom may not be justified. Professor Morris has pointed out that he had to protect the autonomy of academic staff to express their views publicly. This differs from the 1997 case in which a Legco official publicly aimed to have two professors removed, and the 2001 case when a university head succumbed to government pressure and tried unsuccessfully to silence a professor's research.

The Morris crisis has been cast as a result of the alleged desire of the government to merge the HKIEd with the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Morris supporters attribute the non-renewal of his contract to his resisting a merger. The academic freedom of staff was not limited by government and no HKIEd staff was fired or disciplined for expression of views.

The government provides most of the funding for higher education in Hong Kong and has the legal power to determine broad policy directions. In Europe, such power is called "steering" and is subject to considerable debate. As European academic systems expanded, governments, which fund higher education, took increasing control over how these systems are organised.

In the US, colleges and universities have always been subject to the control of boards of trustees or regents. In general these boards have no academics on them. These boards, which in the public universities are generally appointed by government authorities, appoint presidents and other top administrators and determine institutional policy.

Many in the global academic community argue that academic staff should have a large measure of control over their universities. Before the age of mass higher education,

academic institutions did have a significant measure of institutional autonomy. But since massification, the power of the academic community to shape the destiny of their universities and of higher education has been diminished.

Academic freedom or not? Definitions make a difference. If this latest crisis in Hong Kong is in fact a matter of governance and control rather than academic freedom, the attention should be placed on what is the proper role of the government in "steering" the academic system. Should the academic community and leaders of the institutions have a major role in shaping academic policy? If so, how should a shared governance arrangement be organised? Alternatively, should universities and their academic staff be treated like the employees of any company or government? We are convinced that the pendulum has swung much too far in the direction of government authority and managerial power, to the long-term detriment of the strength of the system.

Philip G. Altbach is Monan professor of higher education and director of the Centre for International Higher Education at Boston College, USA. Gerard Postiglione is professor of education at the University of Hong Kong.