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# United States accreditation in higher education: does it dilute academic freedom?

Michael H. Romanowski[a] and Ibrahim M. Karkouti[b]

[a]Educational Research Center, College of Education, Doha, Qatar University; [b]Department of Educational Studies, The American University in Cairo, Cairo, Egypt

**ABSTRACT**

US higher education accreditation agencies provide external quality evaluation for institutions and programmes to deliver quality control and assurance. Although there is ample discussion about the benefits and drawbacks of the accreditation process, this article reviews the academic literature to consider the impact that accreditation might have on the academic freedom of the teaching staff. Specifically, this article centres on how standardisation, assessments and the fundamental elements of accreditation affect academic freedom in higher education and how these might dilute academic freedom.

## Introduction

Historically, academic freedom in the United States (US) has been linked with the fundamental beliefs of the First Amendment free-speech clause of the US Constitution (Benedict, 2015). Academic freedom refers to the civil right of academicians to engage in research, teaching and scholarly production free from control or restraint from their college and university employers (Felman & Merron, 2019). Embedded in this understanding of academic freedom are autonomy and faculty rights (where faculty refers to teaching staff throughout this article) regarding what and how to teach and what research to conduct and publish (Kraft *et al.,* 2017). Byrne (2009) contended that a healthy structure of academic freedom protects higher education's essential values and functions. The American Association of University Professors and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (AAUP/CHEA, 2012) suggested that American higher education's success and high regard worldwide are credited to the observance of academic freedom. Contemporary threats to

CONTACT Michael H. Romanowski michaelhr@qu.edu.qa

academic freedom, such as accreditation, could slowly erode academic freedom (Holt, 2020). Scholars argue from both sides of this issue (Harvey, 2004; Pavlakis & Kelley, 2016; VanZandt, 2018; Holt, 2020).

Academics contend that the accreditation of higher education institutions does not impinge on faculty's academic freedom (Elman, 1994; Woolvard, 2004; Smith & Katz, 2008; Gaff, 2010; Abbott *et al*., 2018; VanZandt, 2018). The basic argument is that maintaining accreditation is vital for the institution and faculty members to participate in the various components of the accreditation process. Therefore, accreditation is not an infringement on the faculty's academic freedom. However, others argue that higher education governance through the accreditation process threatens academic freedoms by placing various programme requirements (Harvey, 2004; Baez, 2009; Bullough, 2014; Holt, 2020; Romanowski, 2020, 2021; Romanowski & Alkhatib, 2020). Holt (2020, p. 2006) stated that 'the accreditation process continues to handicap the college/university faculty by distancing them from their defined academic responsibilities (free inquiry, free service, and free teaching/learning) and placing them in a subservient position of tedious task accountancy'.

The current generation of professors entering academia have 'grown up' with accreditation, are engrossed in a narrative of quality assurance and may have forgotten the critical importance of academic freedom in higher education and their roles as professors. As Baez (2009, para 3) explains, he finds himself surrounded by faculty who seem not to understand 'core academic values such as academic freedom, professional autonomy, and shared governance'. Based on experience, Baez's thoughts are supported when he argued that any discussion on academic freedom and how the process dictates teaching, assessing and even developing syllabi colleagues suggest 'no one is forcing anyone to do anything and, more patronizingly, that I need to understand that if we do not get accredited, we are going to have to close our college' (Baez, 2009, para 4).

With that in mind, the purpose of this paper is to review the existing literature to continue the discussion of accreditation and academic freedom. Specifically, this article focuses on how standardisation, assessments and the fundamental elements of accreditation affect academic freedom in higher education and how these could dilute academic freedom. This article begins by developing a brief overview of the accreditation process, followed by a working definition of academic freedom. Then, an overview of arguments in the academic literature that contend accreditation protects and harms academic freedom is provided. Finally, there is a discussion about the two possible threats to academic freedom embedded in accreditation, standardisation and assessment.

## Accreditation in higher education

The US accreditation is a process of external quality evaluation for universities and programmes to deliver quality control and assurance (Eaton, 2006). The process is used to assess university programmes across the academic discipline spectrum, for example, law (American Bar Association), engineering (Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology), business (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) and education (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation). The accreditation process centres on an amalgamation of inputs, processes and outputs used to assess educational institutions and programmes (Harvey, 2004; Eaton, 2006). There are differences in accreditation organisations and their methods but most operate with the US Department of Education (DOE), which provides a basic accreditation framework (Hegji, 2020). Hegji (2020) offered several of the functions of accreditation based on this DOE framework. These include but are not limited to assessing

> the quality of academic programmes at institutions of higher education; create a culture of continuous improvement of academic quality at colleges and universities and stimulate a general raising of standards among educational institutions; involve the professors and staff comprehensively in institutional evaluation and planning and establish criteria for professional certification and licensure and for upgrading courses offering such preparation. (DOE, p. 2)

The scope of their work defines various categories of accrediting agencies. This article's two fundamental categories are institutional accreditors and programmatic accrediting agencies. Institutional accreditors grant accreditation to entire institutions, which includes all the universities' programmes. There are national and regional accrediting agencies, for example, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (Colleges and Degrees, 2022). There are also programmatic accrediting agencies that review programmes and single-purpose institutions, for example, engineering, psychology and law.

Eaton (2006, p. 1) suggested that accreditation has played several central roles in U.S. society. The process 'sustains and enhances the quality of higher education; maintains the academic values of higher education, is a buffer against the politicizing of higher education, and serves the public interest and need'. The accreditation process has been essential to US higher education's commitment to excellence.

## Academic freedom

Providing a fixed definition of academic freedom is challenging since no single definition can address all the complexities associated with the concept (Romanowski & Nasser, 2010). Instead, a working definition of academic

freedom is developed by addressing the relevant aspects for this discussion that draws upon various scholars' understandings and documents of academic freedom. Finkin and Post (2009, p. 7) wrote that 'academic freedom is conventionally understood as having four distinct dimensions: freedom of speech and publication, freedom in the classroom, freedom of intramural speech, and freedom of extramural speech'. These dimensions define consent for American higher education, generating knowledge and educating young adults to think for themselves (Finkin & Post, 2009). Freedom in the classroom is the focus for this discussion about accreditation and academics.

Gaff (2010) suggested that academic freedom is essential for research and students' education. According to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP, 2006, para 3),

> faculty are responsible for establishing goals for student learning, designing and implementing general education and specialized study programmes that intentionally cultivate the intended learning, and assessing students' achievement. In these matters, faculty must work collaboratively with their colleagues in their departments, schools, and institutions, as well as with relevant administrators.

Champagne (2011) identified academic freedom as curriculum control, including course design and content. This includes control over what content and how content is taught in classes. Byrne (2009, p. 143) wrote that academic freedom includes 'the scholar's freedom to choose topics and methods of investigation and the teacher's ability to shape assignments and pedagogy, subject to the criteria of their fields and the evaluation of their peers'. Academic freedom is necessary for faculty to teach their courses so students, in relationship to the entire college programme, can develop the learning essential to contribute to society (AAUP, 2006).

## The accreditation process and academic freedom: an overview

The premise that accreditation maintains academic freedom has been supported by various scholars and organisations. Abbott *et al.* (2018) suggested that colleges and universities' accreditation is established to preserve academic freedom. The AAUP (2006) claimed that because the accreditation review process depends on the knowledge of academic matters possessed by the faculty, faculty members should be involved in accreditation, both in preparing the institutional self-study and in the work of regional accreditation commissions. In this sense, accreditation seems not only to maintain academic freedom but also to be an essential dimension of the accreditation process. Eaton (2010, para 5) stated, 'Accreditation reflects three core values of higher education, all essential to academic quality: institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and peer and professional review'. The American Council on Education (2012, pp. 11–12) contended that the accreditation process

protects academic freedom 'by ensuring institutional missions remain at the heart of the process and that faculty define what students should learn, thereby honoring the shared value of educating the diverse populations served by institutions with differing missions'.

Smith and Katz (2008, p. 7) contended that 'the institutions decisions to institute comprehensive assessment programmes or to seek and maintain professional accreditations should be considered necessary for the optimal organization and maintenance of the institution and free from academic freedom infringement claims by faculty'. They continued, stating that

> When administered fairly amongst the faculty, justified in its application and fruitful in its results, assessment and maintenance of professional accreditations are necessary for the survival of institutions and should be considered a vital part of the professor's duties and not an attack on academic freedom. On the contrary, making the academic institution effective, capable and respected only serves to promote and preserve academic freedom. (Smith & Katz, 2008, p. 7)

VanZandt (2018, p. 12) pointed out that the AAUP, which she suggested is 'the guardian of individual academic freedom rights', sees no conflict between accreditation and the assessment mandates and faculty individual academic freedom rights.

Conversely, scholars from all fields are outspoken, claiming accreditation challenges academic freedom (Pendleton, 1994; Harvey, 2004; Johnson *et al.,* 2005; Elmore, 2010; Ledoux *et al.,* 2010). Harvey (2004, p. 207) argued that the accreditation processes 'are not benign or apolitical but represent a power struggle that impinges on academic freedom, while imposing an extensive bureaucratic burden in some cases'. That is, the structure and process of accreditation impact on academic freedom. For example, Pendleton (1994, p. 11) stated that the assessment movement is a result of 'well-intentioned but intellectually poorly informed people acting through bureaucratic structures to achieve high-sounding goals'. Finkelstein *et al.* (2016, p. 481) stated, 'the changes in accreditation—and quality assessment measures more generally—that have been implemented have served to diminish the faculty's influence over the academic core of postsecondary education'. Elmore (2010, p. 3) contended that accreditation agencies' requirements pushed on to institutions, programmes and faculty push academic freedom to the edge, diluting academic freedom in the 'name of efficiency'. In what follows, the fundamental elements of the accreditation process that could concern educators regarding academic freedom are discussed.

## *Accountability and standardisation*

The purpose of accreditation is to provide accountability for higher education institutions. Romanowski and Alkhatib (2020) addressing accreditation in

teacher education, contended that accreditation processes use professional standards to advocate the essentials of teacher education. This standardisation delivers predictable content for all education programmes. Standardisation provides a set of processes that govern what programmes offer and how they function. More importantly, standardisation increases efficiency and programmes across all disciplines dedicate significant time to improving efficiency by standardising their programmes (Romanowski & Alkhatib, 2020). This results in accreditation placing an 'ever-increasing set of demands on programmes, dictating content, required experiences and "measurable" outcomes that simply leave no time nor space for academic freedom' (Elmore, 2010, p. 3).

This focus on standardisation affects the various aspects of higher education under the realm of professors' rights and responsibilities. For example, Graves (2021) suggested that one part of academic freedom is designing courses and deciding what and how students are taught. However, scholars argue that demands of accreditation invade academic freedom by often imposing on and dictating to professors the methodology in which they must teach and assess students, the objectives accreditation determines as valuable and the development of syllabi which are all essential to the academic profession (Johnson *et al.*, 2005; Baez, 2009; Holt, 2020; Romanowski & Alkhatib, 2022). Romanowski and Alkhatib (2020) contended that faculty syllabi are rewritten and standardised for all courses, including the accreditation language. Course content must be 'aligned' and 'mapped' to the standards and courses follow a predetermined organisation of selected content that represents efficient and effective instruction. Accreditation agencies

> Ignore or marginalize the expertise of the faculty in these programmes. The regulations force professors to teach a curriculum that is driven by standardized assessments, rubrics and quantifiable outcomes developed by individuals and corporations not directly connected to those programmes, resulting in violation of academic freedom. (Academic Freedom Safeguarded, n.d., p. 2)

The fundamental concern is that when accreditation requirements become too prescriptive and invasive, they limit 'faculty in defining their students' intended learning outcomes and otherwise impinge on academic freedom' (Cain, 2014, p. 9). For example, Weidner (2001) contended that the American Bar Association places pressure on law schools concerning what should be taught and how it should be taught, particularly in skills training. In addition, teacher educators face the problem that the standardisation of curriculum reduces the academic freedom of teacher education faculty (Pullin, 2004). Aydarova and Berliner (2018) argued that the increase in standardisation results in a curriculum driven by external and performance assessments constraining the work of educators and restricting the curriculum they can teach.

Some argue that accreditation does not impinge on faculty's academic freedom. Smith and Katz (2008) say that the institution's decision to seek and maintain professional accreditation should be considered essential for the organisation's quality and free from academic freedom infringement claims by faculty. They continue by arguing that if the maintenance of accreditation is fairly governed among the faculty, justified and provide useful in its results, accreditations are vital for the endurance of the university and 'should be considered a vital part of the professor's duties and not an attack on academic freedom. On the contrary, making the academic institution effective, capable and respected only serves to promote and preserve academic freedom' (Smith & Katz, 2008).

## Assessment of learning outcomes

A fundamental component of any higher education accreditation process is learning outcomes assessment. Cain (2014) suggested achieving accreditation requirements is the real driver of assessment efforts. Higher education institutions and programmes must report student assessment outcomes and meet requirements to attain and maintain external professional accreditation. This reporting includes a well-thought-out systematic process for continuously collecting and analysing student learning data to improve educational quality. This typically results in faculty constructing assignments that rubrics must accompany to provide standardisation (Romanowski & Alkhatib, 2022), resulting in a curriculum driven by exterior entities and performance assessments constricting the work of professors and restricting the curriculum they can teach (Aydarova & Berliner, 2018). Baez (2009) argued that accreditation demands an assault on academic freedom by imposing standardisation and standards on professors' teaching methods and assessing students, all essential to the academic profession.

Scholars argue that assessing learning outcomes could be considered a fundamental abridgment of academic freedom (Carnicom & Snyder, 2010; Snyder & Carnicom, 2011; Cain, 2014; VanZandt, 2018; Ledoux *et al.*, 2010). Cain (2014) contended that historically, faculty have claimed significant authority over the college's programmes and curriculum and its implementation and 'have expressed concern over the potential for and reality of assessment's infringement on academic freedom' (Cain, 2014, p. 4). Carnicom and Snyder (2010) argued that faculty must possess all rights to 'course-level decision making'. Champagne (2011, p. 2) argued that when faculty are required to develop learning outcomes and assessments, this is 'an attack on academic freedom—both the teacher's and the students—and a clear attempt to further discipline faculty members who resist the model of the corporate university'.

Based on the fundamental pillars of academic freedom, it seems that professors, as experts in their fields, teach and assess students as they think fit. Holt (2020, p. 2006) argued that accrediting bodies 'often "dictate" the objectives academics determine as valuable, the methodology in which an academic must teach and often the way academics assess their students'. Johnson *et al.* (2005), discussing accreditation for teacher education, argued that the required assessments are oppressive and limit the freedom of thought for instructors and students. Nelson (2009, para 3) stated that 'the recent pressure to codify outcomes assessment and to produce demonstrably comparable outcomes has only increased institutional willingness to override individual instructors' academic freedom'. Finally, VanZandt (2018) contended that there is little doubt that classroom assessment is at the centre of how professors teach.

On the other hand, some contend that accreditation and learning outcomes assessment do not impinge on faculty's academic freedom (Elman, 1994; Smith & Katz, 2008; Cain, 2014). The central pillar of this argument is that there is no threat to academic freedom insofar as faculty are provided the opportunity to offer professional and creative input in the process. Gaff (2010) suggested that the accreditation review process dramatically depends on faculty members' knowledge of academic matters. They must be involved in accreditation, especially in assessing programmes and students. Since faculty are given an opportunity for professional and creative input, there is no conflict with accreditation's demand for assessments and academic freedom (Elman, 1994). Elman continues, arguing that if there were 'an imposition of common assessments across disciplines' (Elman, 1994, p. 96), this would be an infringement of academic freedom. However, she argued that the contemporary accreditation agencies across all academic disciplines try to preserve an equilibrium between authorising those institutions to implement assessments and 'refraining from imposing specific, designed methods of assessment that would stifle faculty initiatives to develop qualitative and quantitative assessments that best reveal student performance' (Elman, 1994, p. 96).

In summary, there is a minor threat to academic freedom because accreditation provides opportunities for faculty's full participation in developing and assessing learning outcomes. If the faculty create the standardised assessment, regardless of course content, merely requiring faculty members to implement the assessment is unlikely to violate a faculty member's academic freedom (VanZandt, 2018). If accreditation assessments are conducted correctly and do not require professors to repress knowledge, judgments, or speech, this would not concern academic freedom (Woolvard, 2004).

## Balancing accreditation and academic freedom

Worldwide, there are threats to academic freedom in the current political climate. Academic freedom is valued in various socio-political environments but numerous cases worldwide exist where it is limited or even suppressed. De Wit and Hanson (2016, para 1) contended that assuming that threats to academic freedom are only found in emerging and developing countries would be naïve. There are increasing examples in 'so-called developed countries where academic freedom, free speech and the right to an individual opinion are challenged'. In countries where academic freedom is well-established, it is often contested, resulting from an increase in authoritarianism, anti-intellectualism and neoliberalism.

Faculty should understand that the accreditation process is not a designed assault on academic freedom. Instead, academics should view accreditation not as a planned attack on academic freedom but as a system, if not checked, that can by default dilute professors' academic freedom. Accreditation is a system embedded in a culture of accountability, standardisation and instrumentality where the emphasis is placed on 'certainty, objectivity, the "scientific method" of measurement, efficiency and control and these are transferred to understandings about education and teaching' (Tuinamuana, 2011, p. 74). The accreditation process has changed the culture of higher education (Morest, 2009; Hersh & Keeling, 2013) and these changes have created a system where accreditation could infringe on academic freedom. This results in a curriculum propelled by external performance assessments that constrain the work of professors by restricting the curriculum that can be taught and how that curriculum can be assessed and taught (Aydarova & Berliner, 2018) and by default could possibly dilute professors' academic freedom.

Scholars have argued that faculty are the informal gatekeepers of academic freedom teaching and scholarship (Bell, 1993; Baez, 2003; Maher & Tetreault, 2009; Aarrevaara, 2010). This requires that faculty be aware of the possible direct and indirect threats to academic freedom. If faculty shun this responsibility, academic freedom could be weakened, raising questions about the reasons for its importance (Dea, 2019). Accreditation ultimately influences faculty to conform. As previously suggested, younger faculty have been accustomed to the accreditation process, often not considering the influence accreditation may have on academic freedom. These faculty members must revisit and engage in academic freedom and accreditation discussions. Instead of limiting dialogue that centres on how to achieve and maintain accreditation, faculty must be vigilant to question and discuss if and when accreditation impinges on academic freedom.

At this point, it is essential to distinguish between collective responsibility and faculty autonomy. For example, as VanZandt (2018) asked, if an

institution adopts standards, procedures and policies to comply with accreditation requiring faculty to provide specific assessments, does that implicate a faculty member's academic freedom rights? Does it dilute institutional autonomy and individual academic freedom? Several scholars argue that higher education institutions have been willing to dilute academic freedoms by agreement and participation in accreditation (Elmore, 2010; Romanowski & Nasser, 2010), using national curriculum frameworks (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Duncan, 2020) and by providing greater efficiency that requires assessment of 'measurable' student learning outcomes (Elmore, 2010; Lynch, 2012: Stein, Scribner & Brown, 2013; Duncan, 2020). Specifically, Duncan (2020) suggested that faculty fear that requiring assessment of student learning outcomes dilutes academic freedom is not unique to that faculty member.

Conversely, universities and academic freedom are characterised by their collective and individual responsibilities (Woods, 2016). Ewell (1994) has argued that it is the joint responsibility of the institution's faculty to maintain the content and credibility of academic degrees. Fisher *et al.* (2003) pointed out that although faculty members value autonomy, their home department has a set of collective responsibilities relating to other departments in the college, the university and external groups, such as accreditation agencies. This includes establishing goals for student learning and assessing students' achievement since this is at the core of academic activities and the primary responsibility of faculty. Although student assessment plans often face faculty resistance (Cain, 2014), the American Association of Colleges and Universities (2006) pointed out that academic freedom moves beyond conducting research and teaching courses, it is necessary so that students, through college programmes, acquire the learning to contribute to a society that includes assessment of learning.

Finally, based on experience with the accreditation process in numerous ways, it can be argued that most concerns about accreditation are pragmatic. For example, Hail *et al.* (2019) and Lewis (2016) reported that most faculty were concerned with time engaged in carrying out accreditation duties such as aligning syllabi with standards and other responsibilities for the accreditation process that takes away from research agendas (Lewis, 2016; Hail *et al.,* 2019). Other faculty discussions focus on the bureaucratic process, accreditation requirements, curriculum standards, self-assessment, the legitimacy of accreditation and the impact on teaching and learning. Based on these experiences, one could argue that little discussion occurs regarding accreditation and academic freedom beyond informal conversations among faculty. As Holt (2021, p. 4527) recommended, 'encroachments on academic freedom are likely to occur if new faculty [all faculty] are not committed to (or even aware of) their freedoms'.

With that in mind, several actions might be considered by faculty to keep issues of academic freedom in the accreditation discussions. As a possible example, The AAUP/CHEA (2012, para 6) offers several actions to sustain and enhance the importance and centrality of academic freedom in relation to the role of accreditation. These are as follows:

1. Emphasise the principle of academic freedom in the context of accreditation review, stressing its fundamental meaning and essential value.
2. Affirm the role that accreditation plays in the protection and advancement of academic freedom.
3. Review current accreditation standards, policies, and procedures with regard to academic freedom and assure that institutions and programmes accord with high expectations in this vital area.
4. At accreditation meetings and workshops, higher education practitioners should focus on challenges to academic freedom, with particular attention to the current climate and its effect on faculty, institutions, and programmes.
5. Explore developing partnerships among accreditors to increase attention on academic freedom and further secure the commitment of the entire accreditation community.

It is difficult to predict the success of applying the above actions. Still, it could be argued that these actions can effectively keep academic freedom issues in the foreground. If accrediting organisations work with institutions and programmes, possibly considering the above actions, the importance of academic freedom can be sustained and enhanced.

In closing, there is a concern that universities have resigned to accreditation entities, causing this fear. In this article, various scholars' work on accreditation and their arguments are drawn upon to demonstrate that the accreditation process might dilute academic freedom. Accreditation should not be viewed only as institutional development and quality assurance tool. Still, accreditation should allow for amplifying faculty voices, empowering faculty and protecting their rights since diluting academic freedom negates what institutions of higher learning have always preached. Academic freedom demands that there is shared governance demonstrated in every step during the accreditation process. This will instil confidence in the viability of accreditation as a process assuring that academic freedom does not continue to erode. It is anticipated that this article will further the critical debate about the role and influences of accreditation on academic freedom.

## Disclosure statement

## Funding

## ORCID

Michael H. Romanowski ⬤ http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2454-3571

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