



Africa: Challenges in promoting Magna Charta Universitatum fundamental principles and values

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The café session on academic freedom in Africa was preceded by a short introduction by the host who outlined the fact that academic freedom on the continent has had a chequered history in the life of university governance, the conduct of teaching and research and the working conditions for academics on the campuses of African universities and other institutions of higher education. He noted that during the colonial period, scant attention was paid to higher education, such that at the time of independence, Africa could boast of just 18 universities in Africa in sub-Saharan Africa). Yet, the few that were established did not conform to the peculiar needs of African States. The indigenisation/Africanisation process to correct this imbalance, however, swept away the notions of academic freedom which was implanted in the colonial universities, especially as African States switched its governance system at the same time from liberal democracy to African Socialism. Coupled with the imposition of the Structural Adjustment Policies (SAP) of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the consequences for higher education in Africa were very devastating, among others in the area of research output. The return of democracy to Africa, following the fall of communism in Europe led to, saw the crafting of new constitutions wherein were entrenched bills of rights which included, explicitly or directly, references to 'academic freedom'. At the same time, the post-Cold War era witnessed an incremental attention by African States to becoming States Parties to the major international human rights instruments, in particular the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 1966 (ICCPR) and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, 1966 (ICESCR); as well as, developing their own regional human rights instrument prominent among which is the *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*, 1981.

The changing trend in the respect for academic freedom falls in line with the major reforms African States have undertaken to enable the university to meet the demands and concerns of the 21st century, which include internationalisation, privatisation, massification, harmonisation and corporatisation. These reforms can successfully take off and realise their objectives only where the enabling environment has been created through entrenching a culture of respect for academic freedom in the universities.

The discussions that followed over three sessions recognized at the outset that it is impossible to generalize all of Africa, which has a wide range of higher education institutions and systems. Nevertheless, various concerns were discussed including:

- Increased presence of foreign universities in Africa and their impact on local institutions, especially with international higher education following more of a business approach, which may conflict with core values.
- Ongoing challenges with brain drain and the sometimes poor rate of return of Africa academics going abroad for study or research projects, while recognizing the good that such opportunities can also do. There was agreement that states could do much to encourage return by providing better conditions of work for returning scholars and students. These include monetary and career prospects, and well as greater academic freedom and autonomy.
- Toward these goals, there was discussion about training rectors and vice-chancellors about autonomy and academic freedom, although there would in some cases still be problems with state interference, especially in political appointment of university leaders.
- Suggestion that Magna Charta Observatory partner with local universities and organizations in higher education, such as CODESRIA.