

Academic Freedom, University Autonomy and Social Responsibility

Recalling that at the International Conference convened by UNESCO in 1950, in Nice, the Universities of the World stipulated three indissociable principles for which every university should stand, namely:

the right to pursue knowledge for its own sake and to follow wherever the search for truth may lead;

the tolerance of divergent opinion and freedom from political interference;

the obligation as social institutions to promote, through teaching and research, the principles of freedom and justice, of human dignity and solidarity, and to develop mutually material and moral aid on an international level.

Recognising that over the ensuing half century much has changed: new forms of higher education have developed; the numbers of universities, of academic staff, of students and not least the place the University now occupies in Society have evolved; the emergence of a world economy, with its benefits and its dangers, brings with it further responsibilities of a highly practical nature alongside the University's historic and abiding commitment to universalism, pluralism and humanism;

Acknowledging that in the course of the 20th Century, which has seen an unparalleled growth in knowledge, in research and in their diffusion, Society has entrusted to the University immense responsibilities in the common endeavour of human development, social, economic, technical and cultural advance, and in responding to major planetary problems such as the preservation of the environment and the eradication of poverty, violence and social exclusion; and that in its turn the University is, and will remain, vital in meeting Society's evident need to accommodate and steer rapid if not radical, change;

Convinced that human development and the continued extension of knowledge depend upon the freedom to examine, to enquire and to question, and that Academic Freedom and University Autonomy are essential to that end; that moreover the University does not exist for itself or even for the sake of knowledge but for the benefits it brings to Humankind and to Society by virtue and in view of its social utility;

Emphasising that neither Academic Freedom which encompasses the freedom to enquire and to teach as well as the freedom of students to learn, nor University Autonomy are privileges but that they are the basic and inalienable conditions which enable the University as an institution of scholarship and learning, as too its individual members to meet, fully to assume and optimally to fulfil the responsibilities Society confides to both;

Considering that Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Articles 13 and 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights stipulate that "higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit", underlining the importance of the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and the maintenance of peace, and that States "undertake to respect the freedom indispensable for scientific research and creative activity";

Observing that the fundamental principles on which universities are founded and which form the basis of their work for the common good have been reiterated by the international academic community on several occasions in the recent past (viz. the Declarations of Sienna 1982, Lima 1988, Bologna 1988, Dar Es Salaam 1990, Kampala 1990, Sinaia 1992, Erfurt 1996) and that they are also specifically highlighted in the Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel, adopted at the 29th Session of the UNESCO General Conference 1997;

We consider it timely, at the occasion of the UNESCO World Conference of Higher Education, to reaffirm these principles and to redefine their implications within the framework of a new **Social Contract** which sets out mutual responsibilities, rights and obligations between University and Society so that they may meet the challenges of the new Millennium:

1. The principle of Institutional Autonomy can be defined as the necessary degree of independence from external interference that the University requires in respect of its internal organisation and governance, the internal distribution of financial resources and the generation of income from non public sources, the recruitment of its staff, the setting of the conditions of study and, finally, the freedom to conduct teaching and research.
2. The principle of Academic Freedom can be defined as the freedom for members of the academic community - that is scholars, teachers and students - to follow their scholarly activities within a framework determined by that community in respect of ethical rules and international standards, and without outside pressure.
3. Rights confer obligations. These obligations are as much incumbent on the individuals and on the University of which they are part, as they are upon the State and Society.
4. Academic Freedom engages the obligation by each individual member of the academic profession to excellence, to innovation, and to advancing the frontiers of knowledge through research and the diffusion of its results through teaching and publication.
5. Academic Freedom also engages the ethical responsibility of the individual and the academic community in the conduct of research, both in determining the priorities of that research and in taking account of the implications which its results may have for Humanity and Nature.
6. For its part, the University has the obligation to uphold and demonstrate to Society that it stands by its collective obligation to quality and ethics, to fairness and tolerance, to the setting and the upkeep of standards - academic when applied to research and teaching, administrative when applied to due process, to the rendering of accounts to Society, to self-verification, to institutional review and to transparency in the conduct of institutional self-government.
7. For their part, organising powers and stakeholders public or private, stand equally under the obligation to prevent arbitrary interference, to provide and to ensure those conditions necessary, in compliance with internationally recognised standards, for the exercise of Academic Freedom by individual members of the academic profession and for University Autonomy to be exercised by the institution.
8. In particular, the organising powers and stakeholders public or private, and the interests they represent, should recognise that by its very nature the obligation upon the academic profession to advance knowledge is inseparable from the examination, questioning and testing of accepted ideas and of established wisdom. And that the expression of views which follow from scientific insight or scholarly investigation may often be contrary to popular conviction or judged as unacceptable and intolerable.
9. Hence, agencies which exercise responsibility for the advancement of knowledge as too particular interests which provide support for, or stand in a contractual relationship with, the University for the services it may furnish, must recognise that such expressions of scholarly judgement and scientific inquiry shall not place in jeopardy the career or the existence of the individual expressing them nor leave that individual open to pursuit for *délit d'opinion* on account of such views being expressed.
10. If the free range of inquiry, examination and the advance of knowledge are held to be benefits Society derives from the University, the latter must assume the responsibility for the choices and the priorities it sets freely. Society for its part, must recognise its part in providing means appropriate for the achievement of that end. Resources should be commensurate with expectations - especially those which, like fundamental research, demand a long-term commitment if they are to yield their full benefits.
11. The obligation to transmit and to advance knowledge is the basic purpose for which Academic Freedom and University Autonomy are required and recognised. Since knowledge is universal, so too is this obligation. In practice, however, Universities fulfil this obligation primarily in respect of the Societies in which they are located. And it is these communities, cultural, regional, national and local, which establish with the University the terms by which such responsibilities are to be assumed, who is to assume them and by what means and procedures.
12. Responsibilities met within the setting of 'national' society, extend beyond the physical boundaries of that society. Since its earliest days, the University has professed intellectual and spiritual engagement to the principles of 'universalism' and to 'internationalism' whilst Academic Freedom and University Autonomy evolved within the setting of the historic national community. For Universities to serve a world society requires that Academic Freedom and University Autonomy form the bedrock to a new Social Contract - a contract to uphold values common to Humanity and to meet the expectations of a world where frontiers are rapidly dissolving.

13. In the context of international cooperation, the exercise of Academic Freedom and University Autonomy by some should not lead to intellectual hegemony over others. It should, on the contrary, be a means of strengthening the principles of pluralism, tolerance and academic solidarity between institutions of higher learning and between individual scholars and students.

14. At a time when the ties, obligations and commitments between Society and the University are becoming more complex, more urgent and more direct, it appears desirable to establish a broadly recognised International Charter of mutual rights and obligations governing the relationship between University and Society, including adequate monitoring mechanisms for its application.

(April 1998)