

Cultivating Dialogue in Higher Learning Institutions in Zambia within the Context of Academic Freedom

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Abstract

This article will provide an entry into the cultivation of policy dialogue skills between lecturers and students, and university authorities within the context of academic freedom. The position that is strongly advanced is that an understanding of, and experience with policy dialogue is critical to the attainment of academic freedom in higher learning institutions. Therefore, this paper will raise an argument in favor of this position. In this regard, this article will present an understanding for integrating dialogue and academic freedom. Furthermore, this article will highlight intersecting themes; dialogue as a competency for achieving academic freedom, dialogue as a primary value for academic freedom and dialogue as constitutive of academic freedom itself. These themes will help to position dialogue within the context of academic freedom.

Key Words: *Academic Freedom; Dialogue Skills, Policy; Cultivating Dialogue*

INTRODUCTION

Academic freedom is often regarded as an absolute value of higher learning institutions but according to Altbach (2001); ZANEC, (2020); Lisulo, Nsama, Mukalula-Kalumbi and Hamweete (2021), academic freedom in public universities has been undermined and poorly understood. For instance, according to Lisulo et al., academic freedom in Zambia is undermined as it is not defined in the Constitution but it falls under freedom of expression. Research has also shown that academic freedom had received little attention. This state of affairs calls for a legal framework to support the noble cause. This view is supported by Owusu-Ansah (2015) who observes that the concept of academic freedom was not well understood due to lack of publicity, a view shared by Kantini (n.d) who observes from the Academic Freedom Index (AFI) that, though states and universities worldwide had long committed to respecting and protecting academic

freedom, it remained poorly understood. Furthermore, Jere (2021), argues that the definition of academic freedom was fraught with contestations, some informed, but others less so. Therefore, this article will raise awareness on the need to uphold and recognize academic freedom in order to promote inclusive and equitable access to tertiary education as provided for in the Sustainable Development Goal number 4 through dialogue.

One would argue that the goal of democratic dialogue is not merely to exchange information, but rather to transform through dialogue. This means that dialogue will create action and change among those involved in the dialogue process. Dialogue brings an orientation towards constructive communication and criticism, the dispelling of stereotypes, honesty in relaying ideas, and the attention to listen to and understand each other [National Coalition Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD), 2015]. Further, NCDD argues that dialogue is a process that brings about the use of critical thinking and reasoned argument as a way to make decisions in public policy. This means that dialogue has the potential to address society policy issues and connect the individual concerns with public policy but if there is interference in academic freedom, then policy formulation may not reflect the wishes of the citizenry. This study argues that policy should be informed by research.

The Concept of Academic Freedom

Academic freedom in Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) is necessary for the academics

and academic institutions to engage in deeper inquiry that can produce solutions to social and economic problems. The non-observance of academic freedom is said to have a direct effect on the quality of education as well as research, and it has an impact on society in the long term. Academic Freedom means full autonomy of thought and practice at the service of knowledge production and it is also about facilitating unlimited access to the knowledge thus produced (Nyamnjoh, 2016). This means that academic freedom gives rights to lecturers and students to teach, study and pursue knowledge and research without unreasonable interference or restriction from law, institution regulation or public pressure. The definition by Njamnjoh relates to HLIs autonomy, “free from the logic and practice of those who expect to call the tune merely because they finance research, publication and teaching p. 7).

According Kantini (n.d), Academic Freedom is defined in Article 27 of the UNESCO 1997 recommendation as the right that higher education teaching personnel have without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies. Furthermore, academic freedom entails the right to fulfil functions without discrimination or fear of repression by the state or

any other source. This means that the goal of academic freedom can only be achieved if scholarly community is allowed to pursue knowledge without interference or fear of reprisal. This definition is supported by Britannica (Editors of Encyclopedia) (2020) where academic freedom is defined as the freedom of teachers, students and academic institutions to pursue knowledge wherever it may lead, without undue or unreasonable interference. Academic freedom in this sense entails that HLIs have the right to produce knowledge, determine what to teach, presenting research findings and publishing research findings. It follows that academic freedom empowers academicians with the freedom of inquiry which is essential to the mission of academics. This is a motivation to explore more as well as to enhance their moral and intellectual integrity. Manan (2000), contends that academic freedom is the conscience of the university which affects the rights and responsibilities of lecturers and students, and colors the nature of teaching and scholarship. Academic freedom in Indian Higher Learning Institutions encourages students and faculty members to think creatively, do innovative research and engage in quality teaching-learning activities (Sethy, 2021). However, a study by Hashim, Azman and Azman (2014) in Malaysia revealed that there were various restrictions imposed on members of the academia. Lisulo et al. (2021), established that at the University of Zambia, there were challenges to academic freedom and among them was political

interference. Historical examples also show that there is need for academic freedom. For example, Socrates was put to death for what was termed corrupting the youths of Athens with his ideas. Galileo (1564 – 1642), was sent to imprisonment for his view of the solar system.

Africa has had its share of state repression on academic freedom. For instance, in 1990, the Nigerian government empowered the Minister of Education to sack academics from any university for political comments. Between 1996 and 2006, in Zimbabwe, the government sent police to universities on several occasions where they deployed tear gas and rubber bullets to suppress academic freedom. In North Africa, a professor of public health discovered that his country's infant mortality rates figures were higher than government figures indicated. He lost his job and was imprisoned (Owusu-Ansah, 2015).

Prof. Steven Simukanga, Director General [Higher Education Authority (HEA)] in his address at the '*National Symposium on Academic Freedom*' reiterated that academic freedom is the essential factor that will ensure that the establishment categories of HLIs excel and contribute to the growth of the nation. He however warned quoting the widely recognized '1940 Statement on Academic Freedom and Tenure' made in the United States of America that "scholars should be careful to avoid controversial matters that were unrelated to the subject." By implication, Academic Freedom had limits and comes with academic responsibility and applies to

both faculty freedom and student freedom. Essentially, academic freedom is the right of individuals working in the academia. This means that HLIs were particularly well positioned to teach students skills necessary to engage in challenging dialogue when national social issues demand. It is important to note that in order to engage with issue affecting learning institutions holistically, there is need to engage in dialogue.

The Concept of Dialogue

According to Gigliotti and Dwyer (2016), dialogue is a conversation between two or more people and is often used as a synonym for discussion. Similarly, Bohm (1996), defines dialogue by tying it directly to communication. This means that dialogue is about creating a shared meaning between people or groups. Meaningful and authentic dialogue is an essential competency for effective academic freedom. Amidst findings by Student Academic Freedom Regional Advocacy Programme (SAFRAP), the Youth Empowerment and Transformation Trust (YETT) of Zimbabwe, with regional partners such as the Zambia National Education Coalition (ZANEC) and the Swaziland Youth Empowerment Organisation that about half (57.8%) of students were not aware of any platforms to engage with decision makers (Student Situation Analysis (SSA), (2020), there is need to cultivate dialogue skills between students and university authorities within the context of academic freedom.

This view is in agreement with a study by Nurul, Suyanto, Caly Himawan (2020) in Indonesia

where it was observed that dialogue is the most common way lecturers do when faced with restrictions in academic freedom. Thus, it is important to formulate a broader and a more detailed conceptualization to minimize the interpretation of misuse of interests (p. 4671). Strengthening networks between lecturers and students, and institutions concerned with academic freedom is a form of academic policy.

The Concept of Higher Learning Institution (HLIs) in Zambia

HLIs refers to any structured and systemized learning that takes place in formal learning institutions that award certificates, diplomas and degrees acquired after secondary school (Mkandawire and Ilon (2019). This entails that HLIs in Zambia include; universities, colleges, trade institutions, seminaries and specialized job training institutions. According to Verbitskaya (2002), HLIs are a hub of knowledge production and dissemination and, should always aim to seek and transmit the truth.' The view by Verbitskaya is supported by Neave (2002) who argues that HLIs should pursue the truth whatsoever it shall lead. This means that academic freedom should be where truth is.

According to Mkandawire and Ilon (2019), HLIs in Zambia were autonomous as they have freedom of choice and action, select their own staff and students, determine their own curriculum and can review courses anytime to meet societal needs. Though, the issue of autonomy carted across private and public universities, Mkandawire and Ilon noted that this autonomy was more prominent

in private institutions that fund themselves. This means that public universities were not fully autonomous because they were funded and owned by the state.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by Social Capital Theory. According to Abebe (2014), social capital is defined as activities of society such as collaboration, engagement and support between individuals. Thus, cultivating dialogue. Furthermore, the social capital theory postulates that social networks provide the opportunity for exchange of information. Within the education system, social capital is the relationships between students, institutions and teachers available to support education achievement. Gigliotti and Dwyer (2016), argues that when people develop relationships, they can collaborate to accomplish great things. This means that with academic freedom, seasoned academicians may offer skills of academic freedom and information on research, consultancy and publication. This will inform policy.

METHODOLOGY

This research was desk research. Desk research is one that explores data from existing documents and previous research. In this type of a research, secondary data is used to gather information over a particular topic. In this case, data on academic freedom was reviewed. However, care was taken to make sure that only data which was accurate and from reliable sources was reviewed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study was primarily meant to raise awareness on the need to uphold and recognize academic freedom in order to cultivate dialogue. Three themes emerged and these are; dialogue as a competency for academic freedom, dialogue as a primary value of academic freedom and dialogue as a constitute of academic freedom.

Dialogue as a Competency for Academic Freedom

Dialogue is communicating with the goal of understanding others, and is therefore distinct from debate and discussion (Gigliotti and Dwyer (2016). Through dialogue, communication skills related to careful listening and meaningful dialogue are cultivated among students and lecturers, and university management. Through the process of academic freedom, HLIs grow their understanding of dialogue and listen attentively to one another.

The goal of dialogue as a competency for academic freedom is to build relationships, understanding conflicts and encouraging civic participation and engagement in social change (Dessel and Rogge, 2008). Dialogue in the name of academic freedom focusses on inequalities, engagement that is intellectual, affective, and self-reflective and in dialogue relations with others to establish the truth. Therefore, dialogue is a competency for academic freedom as the process is designed to involve individuals and groups in an exploration of societal issues about which views differ and of conflict.

Societal injustices reflect a need for academic freedom. According to Gigliotti and Dwyer (2016), these injustices are indicative of lack of respect, understanding and concern for others. One way of engaging with these injustices is through dialogue which is academic freedom. Dialogue emerges when individuals through an appreciation and deep respect for what the other has to offer, can be heard despite the distractions of everyday life. It is argued in this study that one cannot understand one's truth without dialogue. According to Bohm (1996:3) "dialogue can lead to the creation of something new only if people are able to freely listen to each other, without prejudice, and without trying to influence each other. Each has to be interested primarily in truth and coherence" This means that when dialogue is cultivated, learning emerges. Dialogue may be understood to be an appropriate means for engagement about social injustices through the lenses of academic freedom.

Dialogue as a Primary Value of Academic Freedom

The emphasis on cultivating dialogue skills is situated within HLIs. In practice, it is difficult to divorce these skills from academic freedom. The values of listening, empathy and understanding are critical to academic freedom. This entails that dialogue is essential to the enactment of academic freedom. "Meaningful dialogue within HLIs gives forces that unhinge the way we harm each other, opening us towards a more accepting and empathic understanding of one another (Ferch,

2005: 107)." In this study, dialogue emerges as a primary value and practice of academic freedom.

Dialogue as a Constitute of Academic Freedom

This study is in line with the conceptualization of dialogue by Bohm (1996) which captures dialogue as the interaction between individuals involved in the communicative interaction whereby two people are making something in common. Dialogue in this sense may be seen as an element to this communicative interaction. If academic freedom is understood to be constructed between university management with lecturers and students, then dialogue may be critical in understanding the in between. If academic freedom is seen to be a selfless way, then dialogue may be one important way to operationise this way of being. If a communication-oriented understanding of academic freedom was to be adopted, then dialogue may be identified as a constitute of academic freedom.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Academic freedom is a core value of higher learning institutions in Zambia, though not clearly spelt out in the constitution. This indicates that the concept of academic freedom was at threat. However individual institution have policies that protect academic freedom. For instance, Kwame Nkrumah University in Kabwe – Zambia thrives through its vision of providing quality education that is responsive to the changing needs and values of learners and firmly believes that the values of effort, integrity, excellence, team work, professionalism will lead individuals and

institution to achieve its mission to become a leading university in the provision of quality higher education and research at national and international level. Section three (3) of Research Policy affirms that it will promote academic freedom. The university recognizes that an atmosphere in which freedom of engaging in intellectual inquiry, thought, creativity, innovation, publication, expression and peaceable assembly are protected is key to the university's central functions of teaching, learning, research and service to the community. The study established that academic freedom is the freedom lecturers and students have in their disciplines with regards to teaching, research, publication and community service without interference, but in Zambia, according to a study by Lisulo et al. (2021) at the University of Zambia (UNZA), academic freedom was violated. Therefore, commitment to academic freedom requires to privilege dialogue and effective communication, where dialogue is understood to be the competency for achieving academic freedom.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, this study makes the following recommendations;

- a. Since the study has established that the concept of academic freedom was not explicit in the Zambia Constitution, the government and other stakeholders should ensure it comes out clearly in the constitution.

- b. Higher learning Institutions should develop frameworks for an approach to academic freedom that privileges dialogue.

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