

ACADEMIC FREEDOM STATEMENT FROM THE ACADEMY OF SCIENCE OF SOUTH AFRICA (ASSAF)

Academic Freedom is not only constitutionally protected, but rests on the capacity for independent commentary that is crucial to the evidence-based work that is unique to Academies. Indeed, the Academy of Science of South Africa's mission of "Science for Society" cannot be realised without the exercise of the freedom to research, write, and speak robustly and professionally, without fear or favour on any topic including the impact of science on society.

Academic freedom and the freedom of scholarly research are guaranteed by the South African Constitution of 1996. Their inclusion, under the 'freedom of speech' clause, is one of the many reasons why South Africa's Constitution is considered to be unique. Academic freedom was identified as a core principle for the governance of higher education by the 1997 *White Paper* on the transformation of Higher Education. This, too, is unusual because in most countries struggles over academic freedom have stood apart from both the institutionalisation and the practice of higher education.

Under apartheid, academic freedom was routinely violated in various ways, especially under the system established by the Extension of University Education Act, which was passed fifty years ago. This piece of legislation amongst other iniquities restricted the possibility of access, except by Ministerial permission, of black South Africans to those universities in South Africa that were open to the admission of students on merit without consideration of race, class, national origin, and gender.

In response to these restrictions, a strong tradition of activism in defence of academic freedom took root within some of South Africa's universities. The idea that academic freedom is a valuable principle to be guarded jealously continues within the country's institutions, and annual ceremonies/lectures to mark academic freedom are an established tradition at several universities. In a democratic South Africa, academic freedom in all higher education institutions is integral to the intellectual life of the country.

Given our history, it is not surprising that the issue has been so prominent in the transformation both of this country and its higher education system.

Nonetheless, new threats to academic freedom have recently emerged in South Africa. The new threats are in three areas: (1) the averredly intrusive effects of government regulations, (2) apparently excessive influence of private sector sponsorship of the universities, and (3) perceived limitations of freedom of speech within the universities. The right of academics to criticise university administrations has been particularly contentious. Taken together, these concerns suggest that the values entrenched in the constitution and in education practice are being eroded by government policy, funding agencies, sponsors and donors, and by institutional management.

These (and related) topics were addressed in a report issued by the Council on Higher Education in 2008, which offers a wide-ranging analysis of a variety of issues surrounding academic freedom and the cognate concerns of institutional autonomy and public accountability. Conducted by an independent task team, this report – *Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy and Public Accountability in South African Higher Education* – provides a comprehensive guide for many debates and offers thirteen conclusions to improve the debate and buttress the values which South African universities attach to academic freedom. ASSAf supports this analysis and its conclusions.

Furthermore, ASSAf believes that researchers and teachers within higher education and the research community at large should be free to follow their own ideas, arguments, insights and findings, conditional only on the avoidance of scholarly misconduct such as plagiarism, falsification of data and unethical research practice. The intellectual case for this is clear. Only open and unfettered inquiry by creative and highly trained professionals can deliver research of the highest quality. This work must be subjected to the established testing and confirmation processes which are provided by peer review and publication in the open domain. No interference can be permitted in the chain of intellectual authority that runs between researcher, reviewer and published result.

On the issue of the right of academic free speech within the university context, ASSAf believes that the university and the research community function best within a collegial system of governance and an intellectually free environment. Guided by enquiry and the quest for knowledge, administrators and academics must share the same professional and ethical principles in pursuit of the core mission of higher education and research institutions.

The achievement of this positive institutional climate is invariably assured by open and honest exchanges on the issues that best serve institutional interests and lead to unfettered scientific inquiry through teaching and research. Indeed, ASSAf believes that it is through high-quality teaching and research, in a climate of academic freedom and social responsiveness, that higher education best fulfils its accountability to society.

ASSAf deplores any managerial or state policy that has the effect of limiting the open publication and discussion of ideas, arguments, insights and findings within institutions of research and higher learning. ■