

# The university and a free society

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*The DCS Oosthuizen Memorial Lecture given at Rhodes University on 28 July 1992. We publish Professor Bengu's lecture as a matter of record.*

Mr Chairperson, the Vice-Chancellor Dr Henderson, Ladies and Gentlemen

1. 1.1 I accepted the invitation which was extended to me to present this Academic Freedom Memorial Lecture with a sense of honour. The Universities of Rhodes and Fort Hare are neighbours, and it is therefore necessary for us to develop common thinking on certain issues affecting our institutions. It is also necessary for us to develop common, and not uniform, thinking on issues affecting the region that is served by our Universities. It is for that reason that I am grateful to the Chairman of this University's Academic Freedom Committee for the opportunity I have been given to speak to you tonight.

1.2 This is my second visit to this campus. My first visit to Rhodes University was in June 1978, when I addressed the plenary session of the "Future of South Africa" Conference. Those of you who participated at that Conference will recall that I presented my vision of what would happen on freedom day in South Africa, little knowing that freedom day would take so long to come to our country. Here I am now, after 14 years' exile, to speak at this campus on a freedom-related subject. Our quest for freedom, academic or otherwise, has grown stronger and more seasoned over the years.

1.3 I have become aware of the late Professor Oosthuizen's activism on this campus in support of human rights, university autonomy, and academic freedom. It is in memory of this valid contribution that I have chosen to

speaking on "*The University and a Free Society*".

2. The subject of "*The University and a Free Society*" can best be explored as a vision and a dream in the South African context, because whilst we have universities, we do not yet have a free society. It would be worth our while, therefore, to explore the role South African universities have played in portraying the vision of a new society and in taking a lead in the struggle for a new society in our country. Rather than have me pass judgement on the role that has been played or not played by our universities in the struggle for freedom and justice, we might well rather call for a critical self-examination by every one of the universities in this country with respect to the role they have played to bring about a free society in South Africa. The relationship between Rhodes University and Fort Hare ought to be based on our joint commitment to bring about a free society in our country. To what extent are our two Universities, even as late as 1992, prepared to support the struggle for a free society? It is not enough for me to have been asked to speak on the topic of "*The University and a Free Society*" in theoretical terms if our two Universities do not commit themselves to certain principles which would undergird the emergence of that free society in this country.

3. You will excuse me for raising disquieting questions in my speech. Has the clamour for University autonomy and academic freedom in our country not served to legitimize repression in the hands of a narrow, undemocratic "oligarchy"? Has the narrow understanding of academic freedom and university autonomy excluded the freedom of individuals and groups such as women, black communities, students, and non-academics? Before

we consider the relationship that will, hopefully, exist between universities and a free society that is going to emerge in this country, we ought to accept the fact that university autonomy and academic freedom are hollow in an oppressed society such as we still have in our country.

4. At this point I would like to make some observations on the purpose of a university, its values, and constitution. As a former colony of Britain it might be interesting for us to examine the present-day "liberal" concept of a university in Britain relevant to its intellectual and social purposes, covering contributions which a university makes to a free society. Writing in 1852 in *The Idea of a University*, Newman gave a classic exposition of the liberal ideal of a university as follows:

"Its aim is the cultivation of the intellect, giving it a talent for speculation and original enquiry. This is achieved by study in an intellectually-balanced community where the mind is broadened by contact with those representing the whole circle of knowledge."<sup>1</sup>

In relating the university's intellectual function to its social purpose, Tasker and Packham argued that:

The values and ethos of the education system will influence, and be influenced by, those of society as a whole<sup>2</sup>

4.1 On a European level, H Carrier, formerly Rector of the Gregorian University, emphasised the importance of the universities' humanist mission and cultural role in enlivening social and economic development. The link between the nature of a State and its system of education was recognized by Aristotle, who argued that "the citizens of a State should always be educated to suit the constitution of their State". It follows, then, that in a free society a university has a moral purpose in the sense of upholding certain standards of truth, freedom, and democracy. These

may best be arrived at through rational debate and the practice of intellectual rigour in addressing questions which are of major significance to society. The university has the responsibility of extending these values to society at large, and not confining them to an ivory tower.<sup>3</sup>

4.2 As you know, the original understanding of academic freedom grew out of a mythical model of what a university is. The university was viewed as a very special place, an enclosed place surrounded by high walls that set it apart from the larger society. Academics used to be proud of living in an ivory tower. The myth that an institution of higher learning is sheltered from the stormy motions of society and from the corrupting passions and influences of the larger society still holds sway in some of our universities in South Africa.

"The university is thus depicted as a monastery. And, within the sheltered enclave of the monastery, scholar-monks pursue their sacred mission, preserving the accumulated wisdom and technique of our culture, transmitting it to new generations, and pushing ever outward the boundaries of ignorance and darkness in our understanding of the nature of the universe and human existence. Academic freedom is an important part of this mythic model, for it is by nurturing and celebrating the capacity for reason and free enquiry that learning is preserved, transmitted, and expanded. And reason and enquiry can rule only because the university is a protected place, sheltered by high walls that prevent the intrusion of those worldly concerns for wealth, or for power, or for privilege, that have always been at war with the search for truth."<sup>4</sup>

Much as we can understand the different political situations within which this image of the structure and mission of the university developed, in which the ideal of academic freedom is lodged, it is completely unrealistic and, therefore, unacceptable in our time.

5. Ellen Schrecker, in her essay on "Academic Freedom: The Historical View", points out that if we look at the academic freedom cases of the past 100 years, it becomes clear that we are dealing with not one but three separate concepts. The first is what most of us would immediately recognize as the classical form of academic freedom, that type of civil liberty which relates

to the specific work of the Professor: the freedom to teach, do research, and publish without interference. The second type of academic freedom protects individual university teachers, and allows them to exercise the same civil and political rights as other citizens without endangering their academic status. This type of freedom is far from absolute, and in many cases only guarantees the teaching jobs of people who do not challenge the status quo. Students have a similar claim to academic freedom, particularly with regard to their civil and political rights, but the stake of faculty members is greater. The third type of academic freedom is corporate. It is a collective right that, roughly defined, is a set of practices guaranteeing the autonomy of the academic profession as a whole. These practices ensure that academics control the conditions of their own employment, that they determine who shall teach and what shall be taught, and that they make these decisions according to the criteria that they themselves have established, without any interference from the outside.<sup>5</sup>

6. What has helped in the broadening of the concepts of university autonomy and academic freedom is a related broadening of the human rights concept. The extensive set of international standards in the field of human rights, which the United Nations and other universal and regional organizations have established, has given us a new understanding of education. The right to education comes as an affirmation of the following principles pertaining to education:

(i) Every human being has the right to education.

(ii) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity, and shall strengthen the respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and peace. Education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in the construction of a free and egalitarian society, and promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups. Education shall promote mutual understanding, respect and equality between men and women. Education shall be a means to understand and contribute to the achievement of the major goals of contemporary society such as social equality, peace,

equal development of all nations, and the protection of the environment."<sup>6</sup>

6.1 These principles, which are very clearly outlined in the Lima Declaration on Academic Freedom and Autonomy of Institutions of Higher Education, have brought about a revolution in our understanding of the purpose of universities. It is these principles which now provide a strong linkage between the university and a free society. Those academics who have qualms about the participation of a university in the liberation struggle have to examine the principle that "Education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in the construction of a free society."<sup>7</sup>

6.2 Universities and academics are indeed challenged to facilitate effective participation in the construction of a free society in South Africa and throughout the world. Is it not strange that there are academics who question the fact that leaders of the liberation movement have become Chancellors of some historically black universities such as Fort Hare and the University of the North? It may have taken us long to fully accept that to educate is to liberate. There must be something questionable about the education that failed to liberate us.

6.3 The commitments of universities to addressing societal needs does not wipe away their autonomy and academic freedom. On the contrary, the solidarity between universities and the communities they serve strengthens their freedom. The Lima Declaration stresses that:

"All institutions of higher education shall address themselves to the contemporary problems facing society. To this end, the curricula of these institutions, as well as their activities, shall respond to the needs of society at large. Institutions of higher education should be critical of conditions of political repression and violations of human rights within their own society."<sup>8</sup>

6.4 It must be noted that the Lima Declaration on Academic Freedom and Autonomy of Institutions of Higher Education was developed against the background of the two decades during which there was an alarming tendency to undermine, restrict, or suppress academic freedom. There were glaring violations of human rights of teachers, students, researchers, and educational writers, irrespective of socio-political systems throughout the

world. The recommendations of the Lima Declaration reaffirm academic freedom and university autonomy by highlighting the close link between universities and society. The isolationist and withdrawal from society approach is replaced by solidarity and direct involvement by universities in society approach.

"The proper enjoyment of academic freedom and the compliance with the responsibilities in the foregoing articles demand a higher degree of autonomy of institutions of higher education. States are under an obligation not to interfere with the autonomy of institutions of higher education, as well as to prevent interference by other forces of society."<sup>9</sup>

6.5 The world-wide solidarity of all universities is also recognized as a factor that strengthens and guarantees academic freedom. In that respect:

"All institutions of higher education shall provide solidarity to other such institutions and individual members of their academic communities when they are subject to persecution. Such solidarity may be moral or material, and should include refuge and employment or education for victims of persecution."<sup>10</sup>

6.6 Our analysis recognizes the contributions which have been made to the debate on the linkage between a university and a free society by the Lima Declaration. The linkage is accompanied by mutual responsibilities of universities and Governments. In the developing countries the violations of university autonomy have in many cases been justified through economic austerity and/or political expediency. In South Africa 15 years ago, when I left the country, the State violations of university autonomy were mostly political. From where I am at Fort Hare these days university autonomy and academic freedom are threatened, and in fact violated, by the drastic State subsidy cuts to universities. The institutional financial inequalities between historically white and historically black universities threaten the university solidarity in this country, even around clearly understood concepts of academic freedom and university autonomy. Historically black institutions can hardly survive the shock of the subsidy cuts owing to the fact that the majority of their students come from economically-deprived families. No one has taken responsibility for high student growth rates at

these institutions. The Government's callous neglect of its social responsibility to finance tertiary education institutions adequately, together with the lack of an affirmative action type of intervention in education by the non-governmental sector, pose a serious threat to university autonomy and academic freedom today.

7. Thirty years ago the South African Government enacted racist provisions in order to ensure control by Government over those who govern or manage black universities. These notorious Extension of University Acts and their amendments are now being rejected and reversed. For instance, the new University of Fort Hare Act, which will give this institution full autonomy, is now being democratically debated. We hope that Rhodes University and other historically white universities will support this struggle for the restoration of autonomy to black campuses.

7.1 The University of Fort Hare is in the process of drafting an Act that will ensure that the Courts will be able to protect our people's rights to education. Further, it must be the Act that is sensitive to the demands of the disadvantaged groups such as women, blacks, and the disabled. That Act will, hopefully, set the University free from external control of examinations. Fort Hare will do away with Government control, and therefore make its own arrangements for the maintenance of academic standards.

8. In emphasizing the binding ties between a university and a free society, the principle of academic freedom as a civil liberty has to be accompanied by an interface of university autonomy with social accountability. Universities belong to the people. The concept of a people's university originates from universities which have a strong sense of belonging to a free society. It is imperative that the people of South Africa be given a chance to indicate what their expectations are from their universities. For universities that have for too long been regarded as Government institutions it is significant that they be influenced to become more accountable to the people than to the Government. I pride myself for belonging to a people's University, as I have been to many well-run people's universities, both in

Eastern and Western Europe, and in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

9. For instance, the transformation of the University of Fort Hare into a people's University means that the University must throw the idea of being an ivory tower overboard. It must be a University in community. This means that its activities and mission must be relevant to the community. The community must be understood to be three-dimensional, including the local community, the national community, and the international community. In the local situation the University must use its autonomy and its diverse intellectual and entrepreneurial skills to empower the community. The community must not just become guinea pigs for ambitious academics, but must be enabled to enter into a creative and mutually beneficial co-operation with the University. On the other hand, the local community must defend the University from those elements that want to destabilize the University. In practical terms, the proposed relationship between the University and the local community should lead to a decrease in crimes against the University community, such as theft of property, vandalism, and burglary.

10. In serving the national community the University must keep abreast of the changes and developments that are taking place in all spheres of South African life, and introduce courses that will enable students to function in a democratic society. In fact, the University must gear itself to producing graduates who will help shape the new society. National institutions must, on the other hand, acknowledge the injustice they have committed by starving historically black institutions such as Fort Hare of resources, and make amends through a clearly-defined programme of affirmative action. National institutions must accept the truth that there is no incompatibility between the democratization of a university into a people's university and excellent academic and practical training. The appeal for resources is made urgent by the fact that resources are needed to conduct scientific institutional evaluations that will help in the transformation of the University.

11. The inter-university solidarity we spoke of earlier should be seen in positive terms. There is a triangular linkage programme that is being developed between the Universities of Rhodes and Fort Hare in South Africa, and the University of Dalhousie in Canada, in the area of International Relations and Public Administration. It just does not make sense for Rhodes and Fort Hare not to forge more academic linkages which will be mutually beneficial. We certainly do not have to wait for foreign universities to help us team up and share our limited resources. Co-operation between our universities will enhance our academic outreach programmes, and provide a broad framework for a non-racial academic community in this region. It is even as we break those apartheid institutional barriers that we shall strengthen our autonomy and catch glimpses of a new South Africa.

12. In conclusion, I hope you will excuse me for having made references to the transformation project at Fort Hare. I meant to share concrete examples of the transformation of universities in South Africa. I am convinced that all universities in South Africa need to be transformed. The dawn of a free society in South Africa to which universities will be socially accountable demands that all universities should be transformed before freedom day. I have evidence that the international university community stands ready to support socially-accountable university autonomy and academic freedom programmes in a new and free South Africa. I invite Rhodes University to be a partner to the University of Fort Hare during this interesting and challenging era, in which universities seek a mutually rewarding relationship with the emerging free society in our country. Much of that

relationship will invariably depend on universities' participation in the creation of such a free society.

## Endnotes

1. Tasker, M E and Packham, D E: "Freedom, Funding and the Future of the Universities", *Studies in Higher Education*, Volume 15, No 2, 1990, p 182
2. *Ibid*, p 182
3. *Ibid*, p 182
4. Piven, Frances Fox: "Academic Freedom and Political Dissent", in Kaplan Craig and Schrecker Ellen, *Regulating the Intellectual: Perspectives on Academic Freedom in the 1980s*, Praeger, 1983, pp 17-18
5. Schrecker, Ellen: "Academic Freedom: The Historical View", in Kaplan Craig and Schrecker Ellen, *Regulating the Intellectual: Perspectives on Academic Freedom in the 1980s*, Praeger, 1983, pp 25 - 26
6. Lima Declaration on Academic Freedom and Autonomy of Institutions of Higher Education, p1
7. *Ibid*, p 5
8. *Ibid*, p 5
9. *Ibid*, p 5
10. *Ibid*, p 5

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15 November 1986

Dear Mr and Mrs Denton

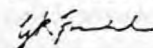
After much thought I have decided to write to you regarding the guest list to the wedding of Nick and Laura.

I have known Nick and his many friends for no short time now. Four days ago a close friend of mine received an invitation to Nick and Laura's wedding. To my surprise there was no similar envelope in my post box.

My friend advised me that it would be tactless to directly approach either Nick or Laura on the subject. For this reason I have decided to find out whether I have (as I suspect) been omitted by accident (and not design).

I look forward to meeting you at the wedding.

Yours sincerely



Gerald Keith Frankel

P.S. Myself and a couple of friends have nowhere to stay during our planned visit to Rhodesia. Would it be possible for us (4) to 'shack up' as it were at your farm for a short while?

P.P.S. ONLY ABOUT THE COFFEE STAIN

*The Editors are delighted – if that is not too neutral – to have gained entry, as it were, to the Frankel Files. We publish them as a tribute to the epistolary art and a nostalgic reminder of those heady late 80s at Rhodes.*

– The Editors