

## **Interdisciplinary Engagements with the CHE Report on Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy and Public Accountability in South African Higher Education**

**17-19 February 2010, Rhodes University**

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CHE report URL: <http://www.che.ac.za/documents/d000183/>

This event forms part of a series of three roundtable discussions on issues relating to higher education to be held in 2010 and 2011. The second roundtable will be on managerialism and the third on issues relating to diversity. The series is generously sponsored by the Ford Foundation.

Location: CEC (Continuing Education Centre). You can download a campus map from:  
<http://www.ru.ac.za/conferences/venues/overheadviewofrhodescampus>

Search for 'Continuing Education Centre' on the PDF file and you will find the location.

Event format: Each speaker will have up to 45 minutes to deliver and there will be another 45 minutes for Q&As. There are relatively long tea breaks between sessions so that we can go overtime if necessary. Members of the audience are welcome to ask questions but, given the nature of the event, priority will be given to questions from official delegates. There will be tea breaks in between each session. Lunches and dinners will be provided but, if you are not an official delegate, you must RSVP. All people with special dietary needs must inform us. RSVPs and dietary requests must be sent to Nco Dube at [n.dube@ru.ac.za](mailto:n.dube@ru.ac.za) no later than Monday 10 February.

Lunches will be at the CEC and both dinners will be at the VC Dining Hall at Eden Grove (see campus map).

### **Wednesday 17 Feb**

#### **1. 10am-11.30am**

#### **Taking Stock of South African Academic Freedom Discourse in Theory and Practice**

André du Toit (UCT)

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The paper will consider the recent and ongoing discussions on the current state of academic freedom in South Africa in three parts:

- \* with reference to some key outcomes of the CHE's HEIAAF process;
- \* with reference to the different ways in which issues of academic freedom have recently been of critical concern at South African universities; and
- \* by revisiting the conceptual framework for thinking about issues of academic freedom in the context of South African higher education.

1. The CHE's ambitious and comprehensive 3-year process on Higher Education, Institutional Autonomy and Academic Freedom (HEIAAF) finally issued in the Task Team report on "Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy and Public Accountability in South African Higher Education" (CHE, 2008). This important document provided a detailed and systematic summary account based on a wide range of institutional and individual submissions, commissioned research reports, regional workshops and national conferences that had gone before over the preceding years together with a set of conclusions and recommendations. The Task Team report should have been an authoritative landmark text for South African discussions of academic freedom in particular and higher education more generally. In practice, though, the Task Team report has achieved no

significant public profile and attracted hardly any serious attention or responses. Why has this been the case? What are the report's key findings and contributions and how should these be critically assessed? To what extent has the HEIAAF process achieved an understanding of "academic freedom" relevant to the actual situation in South African higher education? The first part of the paper will introduce and explore these and other questions with reference to the Task Team report.

2. Issues of "academic freedom" arise in very different ways at different South African universities. This section will take a brief look at some selected cases, including those of the Mangosuthu University of Technology, the Mafeking Campus of the University of the Northwest and the University of KwaZuluNatal as well as UCT and Stellenbosch. Particular attention will be given to the question of who is able to deal with these varied concerns of academic freedom when they arise: the Department of (Higher) Education, the CHE, HESA, University Councils & Senates, academic unions and staff associations, Academic Freedom Committees etc.? The underlying question will be how these current practices of academic freedom relates to the discussions and conclusions of the HEIAAF process in general and the Task Team report in particular.

3. The current landscape of academic freedom range from "failed" or "failing" institutions where the basic conditions for sustaining a core academic project hardly exist, through major universities where "academic freedom" has become a highly contested battlefield, to efficient academic enterprises no longer primarily committed to the traditional core values of teaching and research. It is not clear that all of these varied problems and issues can coherently be subsumed under conventional notions of "academic freedom" concerned with the relation between university, society and state. This section will consider possible ways of re-framing discussions of "academic freedom" so as to bring theory and practice closer together,

## **2. 12.00pm-1.30pm**

### **Beyond the Devil's Alternative: Academic Freedom, Transformation and Social Accountability**

Jimí O. Adésínà (Rhodes)

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The primary challenge of post-1994 South African higher education sector has been posed, often, as alternatively one of the defence of academic freedom or transformation. Sometimes, the 'debate' has been posed as existentially linked to the differential locations of the beneficiaries of a racialised socio-political order and its victims. This paper takes up some of the arguments contributed by the author to the process that led to the 2007 CHE report. Its starting position is the imperative of transcending the posing of academic freedom and the transformation in the higher education sector as alternatives—hence the imperative of transcending what is in effect a Devil's Alternative. The paper takes the *Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility* (1990) as its normative basis. We explore the multidimensional nature of the transformation of higher education and examine the mutually embedding nature of academic freedom and transformation, and argue that the social responsibility and accountability of intellectuals as the critical enabling mechanism. The persisting problem with curriculum transformation is used to illustrate this wider understanding of academic freedom and institutional transformation.

The paper draws on earlier debates on academic freedom and the transformation of inherited colonial higher education landscape in post-colonial Africa. We draw on the experience of the defamation litigation involving the author and a former university senior official, and the framing of the debate within the particular university in empirically grounding the paper.

**Lunch: 1.30-2.30**

## **3. 2.30pm-4.00**

### **The University Vice-Chancellor and Academic Freedom**

Barney Pityana (UNISA)

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Academic freedom and institutional autonomy provide the space and rationale for intellectual voices to be heard. Those voices have always been at the vanguard of change, progress and development; sometimes supportive and exhortative and sometime scathing and highly critical. When the voices kow-tow to the prevailing political order and to received ideas, they are lionized and féted, further entrenching an insidious culture of political correctness and dominant views – irrespective of their merit. When they speak out and contest those ideas however, they are often ridiculed and sometimes, silenced. Methods of attack are seldom of an intellectual nature. Most commonly we find resort to character assassination and personal degradation and humiliation. That is still bearable as long as the freedoms remain, because the underhandedness can always be revealed for what it is. It is where the freedoms themselves come under attack, or are circumscribed, that vigorous defence must surely be mounted. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are currently under threat in South Africa, particularly through the increasing politicization of the higher education environment. It is in this environment that the Vice-Chancellors of South African universities must hold their ground and assert their voices – as individuals and intellectuals whose rights and freedoms are enshrined in the Constitution, and as leaders of institutions whose responsibility it is to develop a critical citizenry.

**4. 4.30pm-6.00pm**

**Maintaining the Tension: Public Accountability and Academic Freedom**

Steven Friedman (Rhodes/UJ)

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Academic activity, like some other social functions, faces a twin imperative: it cannot be performed appropriately unless its practitioners enjoy independence and it is also embedded in and accountable to society. This raises obvious debates about the appropriate boundaries between accountability and independence. The paper argues that the boundary cannot be defined because democratic principle requires that it always emerge from a continuing and always unresolved engagement between academy and society and within the academy. It is, therefore, more appropriate to attempt to theorise the ways in this engagement ought to be conducted than to seek to define the boundary.

**Dinner: 7pm**

**Thursday 18 February**

**5. 9.00am-10.30am**

**The Politics of Academic Freedom**

John Higgins (UCT)

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A distinguishing feature of both the local and the global discourse on academic freedom in the past decade or so has been an emphasis on the inevitability of changes to the university system in the face of economic pressures. What is often lost or displaced in such accounts in the discourse of higher education is the larger historical and political dimensions informing these debates. This paper seeks to bring these dimensions back into focus as a way of exploring the particular difficulty and complexity of questions of academic freedom in SA higher education discourse.

**6. 11.00am-12.30pm**

**A Dilemma Regarding the Idea of a University: African and Western Views of Academic Freedom and Public Accountability**

Thaddeus Metz (UJ)

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The ultimate aim of this article is to support the claim that current thought about the point of a publicly funded university faces a dilemma. On the one hand, 'micro'-level self-conceptions of researchers and lecturers include the idea that it can be proper to use academic freedom in order to discover and impart knowledge that is unlikely to foster social justice, however broadly construed. The idea that 'knowledge for its own sake' merits pursuit by academics is a classically 'Western' idea. On the other hand, influential and attractive 'macro'-level principles about how public resources ought to be accountably used entail that academic freedom ought to be utilised solely for the sake of social justice. The idea that an academic's responsibility is entirely to the community is a typically 'African' idea. In this article, I use the most space to defend the first horn of the dilemma, the more Western approach to academic freedom, by indicating just how counterintuitive the more African one is. As a foil I critically discuss a recent report by the South African Council on Higher Education, which advocates the idea that the right to academic freedom is essentially tied to a duty to benefit society. However, I conclude by noting *prima facie* defences of the second horn, pointing out that dominant theories of political morality seem to rule out the more Western approach, and hence indicating the need to search for a way to reconcile micro- and macro-level perspectives about the proper final ends of a state university.

**Lunch: 12.30pm-1.30pm**

**7. 1.30pm-3.00pm**

**The Political Economy of Higher Education in South Africa: Social Responsibility, Academic Freedom and Transformation**

Salim Vally (UJ)

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When former Minister Asmal described the landscape of higher education in 1999 as one which was "largely dictated by the geo-political imagination of apartheid planners" many eagerly anticipated a new imagination upon which the academy would be reconfigured. Today, on the back of technocratic restructuring, a conservative institutional culture, corporatisation and two ministers later, changes are best described as desultory. Despite the promise and rhetoric of transformation it is 'business as usual'.

This presentation calls for a defence of higher education as a public good and an autonomous sphere of critical and productive democratic citizenry as well as resistance to the imposition of commercial values to subvert the purpose and mission of our institutions. It concedes that the academy has to be accountable not only to the collegiums but also to the constituencies 'outside'. It attempts to identify these constituencies and suggests that they together with progressive academics and students can influence the university.

What passes for social responsibility in the academy today is akin to the 'corporate responsibility' model of business. The presentation will show that the rhetoric of transformation, narrowly defined, is often a cover for repressing dissent and perpetuating class inequalities. Nonetheless it has saliency precisely because of the potent mix of 'race' and class mirroring the society at large. The presentation therefore calls for a self-critical look at the practices of management and academics. It will also highlight crucial initiatives by colleagues in some universities that point the way toward transforming the academy for the common good and who strive through their praxis to contribute to genuine social transformation

**8. 3.30-5.00pm**

**Facing Up to the Realities of the Post-Apartheid State**

Richard Pithouse (Rhodes)

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There is a worrying degree of naivety about the nature of the post-apartheid state in the 2006 CHE report on academic freedom. This is, in part, produced by its methodological failings and, in particular, its persistent elitism, its Eurocentric assumptions and the tendency to assume that policy documents and statements by politicians are a transparent representation of the reality of state practice. The disjuncture between the report's uncritical assumptions about the nature of the South African state and the realities of the state has widened considerably since its publication in 2006 rendering it a largely unhelpful document in the present conjuncture. We need to take full measure of the anti-democratic tendencies in the state, and in broader society, if we are to ground a discussion of academic freedom in the reality of social relations as they actually exist in South Africa.

**Dinner: 7pm**

**Friday 19 February**

**9. 9.00am-10.30am**

**The Making of the Knowledge Commons: From Lobsters to Ideas**

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In this paper I address the practical task of the making the knowledge commons. I examine this project in two parts. The first one is a discussion of the typical difficulties in the making of commons in general. In order to concretize this theme I analyze the making of the "lobster commons" on the coast of Maine over the last hundred and fifty years. Many, perhaps, do not know that the methods of lobster fishing developed by Maine lobstermen and women have become a textbook example of how a group of people, who are not altruistic angels, can come together to self-manage the exploitation of a common resource without exhausting it and destroying each other.

Once we become sensitized to the difficulties in the making of commons in general, I turn to the question of the knowledge commons in particular. This is not a simple logical transition from general to particular, however. For knowledge is a peculiar common good, since neither is it located in any geographical site nor is it a "natural resource" as are most examples of common-pool resources in history (lands, forests, aquifers, fishing grounds, etc.).

I then go on to consider a number of typical problems the constituent community of the knowledge commons must face in preventing a "tragedy" that is often described in the "commons" literature.

The new horizon of academic freedom determined by the knowledge commons points towards a return to the original status of universities in the Medieval European city: independent of church, market, and state and self-managed by students and faculty. If they do not move in this direction, our universities may revert to the situation they were in between the Reformation and the French Revolution, i.e., as places evoking fear and repulsion in thinkers.

**10. 11.00am-12.30**

**The Source of Academic Freedom**

Ward E. Jones (Rhodes)

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The CHE Report (as well as other recent writings on the topic by South African writers) refers both to academic freedom and to academic responsibilities, but there is little discussion of the relationship between them. In this paper, I argue that academics have freedom only if they also have responsibilities.

The usual claim to academic freedom is, at bottom, a claim to entitlements, to a protection from interference; those who demand academic freedom demand that they be able to following their own judgments, interests, and choices with respect to their research and teaching. All entitlements, however, are generated by value; all claims to freedom must be rooted in the value of the thing claiming protection from interference. What this value is determines what these responsibilities are.

Accordingly, the claim to academic freedom must be sustained by the existence of value in the academic realm. I argue that academic freedom is not a “basic” freedom (like the freedom of expression); academics’ claims to protection from interference must be rooted in the value and importance of their work. It follows from this that if academics do have freedoms, then they also shoulder certain responsibilities. Academics, in sum, have a responsibility to sustaining the value of their work, whatever that might be.

**Lunch: 12.30pm-1.30pm**

**11. 1.30pm-3.00pm**

**Against Academic Freedom Discourse**

Pedro Alexis Tabensky (Rhodes)

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Contrary to the central presuppositions of the CHE report and all work defending or presupposing the importance of academic freedom discourse, I propose that the issue that actually ought to be of concern is not best described in the terms that have defined the debate thus far. Freedom-talk or entitlement-talk is only truly effective when it can clearly be differentiated from duty or responsibility-talk, but this clear differentiation cannot be established when describing the activities of academics and the threats to the proper performance of such activities. So, attempts by the state or other actors, such as industry, to control academic institutions are problematic not so much because they threaten freedom, but because they threaten the space that allows academic work properly to be carried out. I propose a proper-function account of academic activities and defend the idea that relevant complaints should really be about allowing academics to do their jobs properly.

The proper-function of academic work cannot be understood independently of how academic activities are woven into the wider sphere of the social and, once this is understood as I argue it should, it becomes apparent that academic work is fundamentally ethical and that its aims are ultimately emancipatory. So, academics not working for the sake of these aims are actually not doing their jobs properly. This means that the work we do within our own disciplines, however abstract, should be understood—an understanding that should ultimately lead to changes in patterns of attitudes and behavior—as forming part of the overall project of bettering human life.

Once the goals of academic work are properly understood, we will be in a better position to engage in a more productive dialogue with—or more productive protest action against—those who threaten to undermine our ability to do our job properly. One thing that academics will be able better to do is avoid appealing to justifications for their concerns which blur the distinction between whim and genuine complaint, or between genuine concern and a disregard for justice.

**End**