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ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND STUDENTS' ACTIVISM
IN NIGERIA

By
Ayotunde Francis. OYELADE (Ph.D)
Dept. Of Arts And Social Sciences Education,
Faculty Of Education, University Of Ilorin

Abstract

This paper attempts to analyse the concept of academic freedom and to consider the role of students' activism in academic freedom. It further attempts to analyse academic freedom and students' activism in Nigeria. It was found that academic freedom involves the right granted scholars in universities and other institutions of advanced study to freely teach, conduct research, publish their findings as they see fit, and to initiate others into the work of professional scholarship – without fear of interference from members of the public. It was also found that students enjoy academic freedom by virtue of their being initiated into the work of professional scholarship by their teachers. Further, it was found that students' activism involves pursuit of acquisition of knowledge and truth; and pursuit of demonstrations, riots, agitations and cultism. In Nigeria students' activism in terms of pursuit of demonstrations, agitations, riots and cultism is very rampant. It is therefore, recommended that the university teachers as well as other teachers in other institutions of advanced study in Nigeria and our societal leaders engage our students more frequently in activities that are positively rewarding, so that they can more frequently channel their youthful exuberance in positively rewarding ventures. Moreover, our university teachers and teachers in other institutions of advanced study in Nigeria, as well as our societal leaders should be more conscious of exemplary leadership.

Introduction

The concept of academic freedom involves the right granted to scholars in 'Institutes of Advanced Study' to freely teach, conduct research, publish their findings as they see fit, and initiate others into the work of professional scholarship without fear of interference from the public (Crittenden, 1973). This right granted to scholars to teach, conduct research, publish their findings as they see fit, and to initiate others into the work of professional scholarship is based on the notion that societal progress depends on its readiness to freely promote the discovery of truth and the extension of frontiers of human knowledge (Oakeshott 1967; Magsino 1978). Moreover, the discovery of truth and extension of human knowledge through research is granted to

belong squarely to the enterprise of professional scholarship. Therefore scholars should be given the special freedom to pursue their professional enterprise of conducting research for the discovery of truth and extension of human knowledge. In the same regard they should be given the freedom to teach about their findings and publish their findings as they see fit, and to initiate others into the work of professional scholarship. The public is expected to sponsor this pursuit of professional scholarship without interfering in its conduct. Scholars are experts in the conduct of their professional enterprise, and they should be given the freedom to conduct the enterprise without interference from the public (Brubacher 1969).

The concept of *freedom* can be seen to be a human right of everybody, just like the right of thought, speech, publication, religion, association and education in democratic societies. But the concept of *academic freedom* is not a human right, it is rather a special right depending on the understanding of the society to sponsor institutions of higher learning without interference in their conduct, for the purpose of the discovery of truth and human knowledge (Crittenden, 1973). It is only if members of the society realize that granting such financial and moral support without interference would promote the discovery of truth, the extension of human knowledge, and consequently the development of the society itself, that the society can consider granting the special right. If on the other hand the society feels that the University does not have to be granted the special right before it can perform its function of promoting professional scholarship then it would not grant such right (Crittenden, 1973).

It follows therefore that most civilized societies would want to encourage this special right with the view to promote the discovery of truth and consequently the development of the societies themselves. Thus the USA, Canada, Britain, Nigeria etc would be interested in sponsoring the Universities and other Institutes of Advanced Study without interfering in their conduct of professional scholarship. See for instance: the American Association of University Professors Declaration of Principles in *Academic Freedom and Tenure* in Joughin (1967 p 165); and Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004 p. 36). However, the degree to which each nation would subscribe to sponsorship-without-interference would vary from one nation to another and from one time to another.

Manifestation of Academic Freedom in Universities and other Institutes of Advanced Study:

In Institute of Higher Learning, it is presumed that the lecturer is given free hand to inquire about the truth and thereby to extend the frontier of knowledge. He is free to make his findings known in his area of academic competence without interference. Thus, if the lecturer decides to air his view on a topic that is outside his field of specialization, he would be doing so only like any lay citizen exercising his right of freedom of speech, publication, and so on, and not as a lecturer exercising his right of academic freedom. Therefore, a lecturer of Economics for instance, may freely investigate, teach, and publish the knowledge of truth as he sees it in Economics only, without any fear of interference from the public or even from his colleagues or students; in so far as he follows the criteria of academic competence and standard of objective inquiry.

No matter how apparently unorthodox or how offensive to the community the lecturer's observations are in his area of specialization, he is still guaranteed the cloak of freedom to continue with his utterances if what he says is short of libel, sedition, inciting people to violence, slander, obscenity, palpable moral turpitude, and the like. He may not be subjected to arrest, imprisonment, fine, incarceration, or loss of his position on the basis of his professional utterances (Brubacher, 1969; Peters, 1974). It is granted that all truths are not yet discovered and therefore what the University lecturer says is likely to contribute to the knowledge of more truth about human understanding and consequently to further the development of the society.

The lecturer is a specialist in his field, so whatever he says in that area is likely to be certain knowledge because he has made a life study in the area. Thus the lecturer is even free to challenge the most obvious and basic propositions in his field. It is assumed that if orthodox opinions are true, their truth will be strengthened when they are challenged by conflicting opinions, otherwise such orthodox opinions would give way in the face of the true ones. Therefore to forbid freedom to the challenge of orthodox opinions is to presuppose infallibility of such opinions (Peters, 1974).

In the same regard it would be desirable for the lecturer to provide a certain amount of freedom for his student in the latter's educational programme, such that the process of initiating the student into the criteria of academic inquiry, would really lead the student to the discovery of more truth and the extension of the frontier of knowledge. The teacher in such a process should strive to liberate the genius that is latent in the student's personality. This is particularly necessary in the education of students in the post-graduate school for it is such students that are involved in independent research on the very boundaries between present knowledge and ignorance. They are unlike their undergraduate counterparts who are not so close to the intellectual frontier, and they are very much unlike secondary and elementary school children who are still struggling to acquire the rudimentary procedures.

It follows according to Brubacher that the amount of academic freedom that the teacher would grant his student would depend on the level of the student's development of the criteria of academic inquiry. This would be graduated from maximum academic freedom for post-graduate students to minimum academic freedom for elementary school pupils.

Now suppose the lecturer himself decides to air an opinion in an area that is outside his field of specialization (for instance if the professor of Economics makes assertions about Communism) should he expect to be protected by his right to academic freedom or by his right to civil liberties? In this regard he speaks as a lay citizen in terms of his knowledge of Communism and not as a lecturer. Therefore his utterances in this wise are protected only by his civil liberties that affix more stringent limits to the exercise of rights, and not by his special freedom that guarantees protection in his special area. Therefore the lecturer can suffer arrests, loss of position, imprisonment and so on if he talks irresponsibly and out steps his limits of civil liberties.

In the light of the nature of the academic freedom granted to University teachers it can be seen that the academic freedom granted to their students is strictly linked to the academic freedom granted to their teachers. Specifically, the academic freedom granted to the students is to enable them to grow in the enterprise of professional scholarship - when they are initiated into the conduct of professional scholarship by

their teachers. Therefore the initiation and the guidance in the professional scholarship are by their teachers. Their initiation and conduct in professional scholarship is linked to their teachers professional conduct.

It follows that students academic freedom involves freedom to learn to conduct research, and publish their findings as they see fit, and freedom to learn to teach about their findings – all with the view to pursue the acquisition of truth and extension of human knowledge for the purpose of societal development.

It does not involve demonstrations, riots petitions, agitations, hooliganism, cultism, and the like – all of which are also (i.e. in addition to learning to pursue knowledge and truth) manifestations of students' activities in Nigerian educational institutions for some time now. For instance, in Obafemi Awolowo University in 1991, sixty students were involved in violent demonstration and had to be punished for their involvement in the activity (*Nigerian Tribune, August 14, 1991 p. 1*). Also in 1991, some students in the University of Port Harcourt were involved in violent demonstrations and had to be punished for their involvement in the activity (*Daily Sketch, January 15, 1993 p. 1*). In the University of Ilorin, in 2004, some students were involved in demonstrations that led to the closure of the University for some time and the rioters had to be punished for their involvement (*Unilorin BULLETIN May 28, 2004*). These are only a few examples of students' demonstrations, and riots which are part of students activities in addition to their learning to pursue the acquisition of knowledge and truth in Nigerian Universities and other Nigerian Institutions of higher learning.

Students' Activism

These activities involving demonstrations, riots, petitions, rampage, cultism and the like; added to the expected activities of learning to conduct research, and pursue the discovery of truth and extension of human knowledge, are what is regarded as students activism. That is what they are actively involved in regularly in their profession of studentship.

It is therefore important to find ways of discouraging their negative activism and of promoting their positive and expected activism. That is, it is important to find ways of discouraging their demonstrations, riots, rampage, cultism and the like; and of promoting decent academic activities.

In this regard, our Universities and other Institutions of Advanced study in Nigeria should be more active in engaging students in positively rewarding academic activities. That is they should be given more learning work to do to engage their youthful exuberance in productive ventures for the development of the society. If they are not regularly engaged positively, they might channel their youthful exuberance into negative ventures like cultism, demonstrations and riots. The active engagement of the students on a regular basis should also be seen to be intellectually stimulating to them to arrest their attention and sustain their interest. Moreover our leaders in the Universities and other Institutes of Advanced study in Nigeria, as well as our leaders in the Nigerian society at large should be seen to be demonstrating good leadership examples in their moral dispositions and professional ethics. For instance our politicians should be seen to be discouraging cultism in the open society as well as political violence, vandalism, and the get-rich-quick syndrome regardless of how the wealth is acquired.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

It has been seen that academic freedom involves the right given to teachers in Universities and other institutions of advanced learning to freely teach, conduct research, publish their findings as they see fit and to initiate others into the work of professional scholarship, without interference from the public. It has also been seen that students enjoy academic freedom by virtue of their being initiated into the work of professional scholarship by their teachers. Further, it has been seen that students tend to combine the pursuit of learning to get involved in professional scholarship with the pursuit of demonstrations, riots, rampage, agitation and cultism. In effect they combine good activism with bad activism.

It is therefore recommended that they be regularly engaged in positively rewarding activities in line with students' pursuit of acquisition of knowledge and truth, towards the development of the society. In this regard, the University teachers and other teachers in other institutions of advanced study in Nigeria should get students involved in more activities that would engage and arrest their attention and interest. These activities should be intellectually stimulating and towards the development of the society. They should be so to the extent that they would adequately engage the youthful exuberance of our students.

Finally, the university teachers and other teachers in other institutions of advanced study in Nigeria; as well as our politicians in Nigeria, should be more conscious of leadership by example: in terms of issues of morality, political violence, professional ethics, and the get-rich-quick syndrome regardless of how the wealth is acquired.

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