Introduction: Academic Freedom and the Social Responsibilities of Academics in Tanzania

Chachage Seithy L. Chachage

When the Dar es Salaam Declaration on Academic Freedom and Social Responsibility of Academics saw the light of day in the early 1990s, African higher education systems were in a serious, multidimensional and longstanding crisis. Hand-in-hand with the imbalances and troubles that shackled African economies, the crisis in academia was characterised by the collapse of infrastructures such as libraries, bookstores and laboratories, inadequate teaching personnel and poor staff development and motivation. Members of the academy, university management, state stakeholders and the community as a whole reacted in different ways to this situation, each of them trying to cope with the status quo but also seeking alternatives. Migration to “greener pastures” was seen as a way out of the crisis by many academics, but at the same time the worsening of material conditions among academics and students resulted in growing activism on campuses, with academics protesting against the falling salaries and deteriorating working conditions and students protesting against the “cost-sharing” measures introduced by university management on the advice of the Breton Woods institutions.

It was in this context of crisis that the questions of academic freedom and the responsibilities and autonomy of higher-learning institutions were raised in the Dar es Salaam Declaration. Questions around better living and working conditions, as well as questions related to the social responsibility of intellectuals and academicians, were daily concerns of the more advanced sectors of the academy, and the hardships of their economic and social conditions did not
hinder intellectuals from recognising their responsibility to look much beyond the problems of their immediate environment and situation. It was a time ‘ridden with crises but full of hope’ (Dar es Salaam Declaration 1990).

The present situation is very similar to that of the early 1990s. Despite some differences, there is no doubt that in the face of the present challenges we are at a very similar juncture, especially as far as our responsibilities are concerned. The Dar es Salaam Declaration recognised not only that all members of the academic community have a responsibility to fulfil their academic functions and roles but also stated that ‘all members of the academic community have a duty to contribute towards redressing historical and contemporary inequalities in our society based on differences of class, beliefs, gender, race, nationality, region and economic conditions’ (Dar es Salaam Declaration 1990).

It is true that since the adoption of this document a lot of water has passed under the bridge, yet the state of academic freedom in Africa, and the future of African universities as sites of knowledge and social commitment, are still far from satisfactory. With this in mind UDASA, in cooperation with CODESRIA, organised a workshop in February 2005 to bring together the staff associations of some public and private universities in Tanzania in order to renew their commitment to the basic principles of the Dar es Salaam declaration and its sister document the Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility, also from 1990, and to reinvigorate the social commitment of African intellectuals.

In the context of the privatisation and marketisation of higher learning being promoted by the World Bank and other forces of globalisation, intellectuals have a responsibility to produce “emancipatory” forms of knowledge and to make sure that this knowledge penetrates their societies and reaches especially the mass of the young generation. This means a fight within the campuses, because the World Bank models are now being incorporated by university administrations and management as if such “free market” models are the be-all-and-end-all for everybody everywhere. Universities were and remain a contested terrain, where social contestation is expected to take place. As noted by Mkandawire (1996), the academy is one among many sites of the struggle for democracy. Like other sites of social contestation the academy is traversed by contradictions of class, gender, ideology and other factors. Virtually every kind of contradiction that exists in our societies finds its expression within the academy as well (Sall 2000).

For all these reasons one of the outcomes of the 2005 workshop was an awareness among the new generation of academics of the complexity of the problems facing the education sector and knowledge production in general in
Africa. The papers included in the present volume reflect the healthiness and depth of the debates that took place in the workshop. Being aware of the present challenges facing academic freedom in Africa, participants thought it would be useful to first revisit the Dar es Salaam and Kampala declarations, bearing in mind that any discussion of the issues raised in these documents should contribute to take the debates a little bit further. The papers that underpinned the debates raised crucial questions ranging from the very concept of academic freedom and its relevance or significance today to the implications of privatisation and marketisation of higher education on the generation of knowledge and social transformation to the obligations of the state and communities in the provision of higher education to the role of basic research in knowledge production.

The first two contributions presented here stress the question of academic freedom. In ‘Academic Freedom, Social Responsibility and the State of Academia in Tanzania: Glimpses of Nationalist Academics’, Prof G. Mmari stresses the fact that it is always easy to articulate basic elements associated with academic freedom, namely the freedom of teachers to inquire into any subject that evokes their intellectual concern, but that it has not been easy to implement or sustain these elements. In this context the contribution of Prof J. K. Kanywanyi, ‘Academic Freedom, the Autonomy of Institutions of Higher Education and the Social Responsibility of Academics’, calls our attention to the necessity of bringing more practicality into the debate. Arguing that the two declarations did not present any practical programme for implementing the principles they enunciated, he maintains that revisiting these instruments only makes sense if one of the results of this debate is to make provisions that will address the practical dimensions of the issues.

Kanywanyi also shows how in discussing academic freedom in Tanzania one cannot avoid its relationship with the development of the East African higher-education system. He concludes that several serious threats to academic freedom still exist. One of them, he argues, is related to the new conditions created by the loans that have made it possible for providers other than the government to establish universities and other tertiary institutions. This expansion of possibilities brings with it the risk that ‘ruthless purveyors of programmes of doubtful credibility’ will find a sympathetic market.

Very often privatisation is seen as a panacea to the crises of higher education in Africa. The World Bank has managed to create the illusion that privatisation is something non-problematic that simply addresses deficits in the management of administrative and financial factors. As a result many stakeholders, including more than a few well-positioned officials, have failed
to recognise how privatisation contributes to boosting social inequalities as well as presenting serious implications for the quality of teaching.

In the case of Tanzania one important principal of equity over the years has been equal access to higher education, regardless of family background or ethnic origin, for Tanzanians who have done well in their studies. In his insightful contribution Amos Mhina elucidates the advantages of this system and discusses the destructive implications of the privatisation and marketisation of higher education on social equity and the generation of knowledge in Tanzania. He stresses the importance of knowledge generation for the social transformation of the country, examines what sort of knowledge is now becoming dominant and asks the vital question ‘whether [such knowledge] enhances the emancipation or dependency of Tanzania’. Mhina recognises the need for reform in higher education but argues that the reforms should have arisen from an analysis of the particularity of the Tanzanian situation and not from standardised reform packages.

Against this expectation, the university administration went ahead with the launching of the Institutional Transformation Programme 1993-2008 which, among other aims, was geared at creating awareness of institutional strengths and weaknesses, finding ways to reduce the costs of training students, agitating for a “flexible” University Act to improve the autonomy of institutions and improving the working conditions and environments for staff and students. With the implementation of this programme the university privatised and outsourced several functions and reduced the number of support staff. It increased to some extent the space for teaching and student accommodation and introduced new training programmes and new management units and also introduced programmes of excellence aiming at responding to job markets. However the process in general was aimed at the privatisation and marketisation of the university.

As I underscore in my contribution, ‘The University as a Site of Knowledge: The Role of Basic Research’, the University of Dar es Salaam has reached a stage where production of “marketable goods” is given priority over academic excellence, and academic excellence itself is defined in the narrow terms of policy makers as marketability of courses and of “outputs” (graduates). In the final analysis academic freedom under the present conditions belongs to those who control and own the means of production and dissemination of knowledge, not those who generate knowledge. “Commercialisation” of knowledge, with international financial institutions and donors playing a central role, has been the main feature of the development of higher education in Africa since the Dar es Salaam and Kampala declarations. The trend has been geared towards privatisation of educational proc-
esses, programmes and responsibilities while at the same time strengthening state control.

Popular, academic and political thinking in Tanzania and Africa generally has ceased to debate on emancipationist politics, that is, politics which would lead to the transformation of societies in order to reach a stage where no one’s humanity is contested. It is only with the recognition that universities can neither function like government departments or like businesses that the central issues of knowledge production and basic research can be brought again to the fore. The debate reflected in this book will certainly not breach the gap by itself, but it is surely one step forward. In order to extend the debate to the whole society, one has to go beyond the conception of higher education as a commercial product which can be left to “free markets” to determine demand and supply. In this regard M. K. Possi in his contribution, ‘The Obligation of the State and Communities in the Provision of Higher Education’, is absolutely right to state that higher education should instead be considered a “social good” where both the state and members of the community have to share the responsibilities and accountability in providing education to our sons and daughters.

Possi’s argument raises the more general question of the relationship between the state and the community on one hand and the universities on the other hand. This relationship has to be seen in a double sense. Whilst the state and members of the community have to be socially responsible and take control in providing higher education to citizens, the education provided has to be equally distributed and socially valid. For instance, it is important that research results are consumed by the community and used to solve problems rather than ending up on shelves as decorations, signs of achievement or evidence for promotions. These and other similar issues show that the higher education system in Africa has a long way to go but that our workshop has at least managed to throw light on some of these critical issues, in the expectation that the debate will continue and grow.

References