

‘Academic Freedom in the 21st Century – Challenges and Opportunities’

Academics and students around the world are at this very second being subjected to infringements of their professional and human rights and most of these violations are going unnoticed.

Submitted to the *Norwegian Students’ and Academics’ International Assistance Fund (SAIH)* by *Jonathan Travis, Network for Education and Academic Rights (NEAR)*, 1st October, 2008.



From surveillance to corruption, from torture to murder, educators and the educated stand little chance against the full force of corrupt regimes and repressive agents, intent on stifling democracy. Violations of this kind are not limited to countries with poor human rights records – on the contrary, in the post 9/11 world even the most transparent democracies are showing signs of concern. Many institutions and academics in the ‘west’ are being subjected to an increasingly sophisticated infrastructure of surveillance, intervention and control. As a result, universities are operating within a climate of increased pressure and paranoia, to the detriment of academic freedom.

Why does Academic Freedom matter?

Academic freedom is situated at the very core of the mission of the university and is essential to teaching and research. Often during times of political or social difficulty, academics and students are attacked because they hold the key to shaping the quality and availability of information in society. In their pursuit of new knowledge, academics and students develop and express new ideas, exchange information and offer insightful opinions - all of which can trigger a violent reaction from a government or agency intent on controlling society and moulding the way people think. When academics attempt to teach or communicate ideas or facts that are inconvenient to external political groups or to authorities, they may find themselves dealing with job loss, imprisonment, or even death. Ultimately, the quality and flow of information on a local, national and international level is vital to the development of any society.

Challenges of the 21st Century

Unfortunately, attacks on academics and students are far from a thing of the past. Respect for human rights in Iran, especially freedom of expression, has deteriorated rapidly in recent

times. The government routinely tortures and mistreats detained dissidents, including many academics and students. In April this year, four students suffered physical and psychological abuse while in detention. The four students are active members of 'Students Seeking Freedom and Equality,' a group which clearly states its peaceful intentions to resist various forms of inequality and exploitation. Recently ten students in China were sentenced to two years in prison with hard labour for taking part in the Buddhist monk-led peaceful demonstrations last September in Burma. Attacks such as these happen on a daily basis and only a few ever benefit from media attention.

Concerns are appearing in well-established democratic nations as well. In the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, government agencies around the globe have been subjecting institutions of higher education to more intervention and more control. For example, in the UK there was the recent case at the University of Nottingham, when a graduate student and an administrative member of staff were arrested by armed police under the Terrorism Act of 2000. The student downloaded an edited version of the al-Qaeda handbook from a US government website and sent it to an administrative member of staff to print. Both were released from custody as soon as it became clear that the 'controversial' research material in question was publicly available and directly linked to the student's thesis. What has been questioned is the alarming speed at which the pair were reported to the police – it remains unclear as to whether there was clear policy guidance available to staff members, a process which they could follow in such a situation.

Cases such as these highlight a very real dilemma - universities are operating within a climate of increased pressure and paranoia, to the detriment of academic freedom. These challenges affect the psyche of university decision-makers. Fear of extremism is stifling debate and forms of self-censorship in research and teaching are appearing. Universities and governments alike should be reminded that academic freedom is essential to cultural development and a useful tool in the fight against extremism. Western nations must lead by example and we should all be aware that free, open, academic debate within the university is the key to unlocking the possibilities of the future.

The Network for Education and Academic Rights (NEAR) was set up to monitor academic rights violations and to facilitate international collaboration between organisations active in issues of academic freedom and educational rights. Please see www.nearinternational.org