

The World Conference on Higher Education: “The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research for Societal Change and Development” (UNESCO, Paris, 5-8 July 2009)

Harnessing the Public and Private, Affirming Higher Education as a Public Responsibility on the point of “Insuring Academic Freedom in Public and Private partnership”

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Chair, distinguished participants to the World Conference.

First of all, I would like to thank the organisers of the WCHE for the opportunity to speak today. The importance of broadening and deepening the discussion about the future of higher education cannot be overstated. It is a real privilege to be part of such an important workshop with such esteemed academics and contributors.

Universities around the world continue to be the epicentre of ground-breaking ideas and knowledge, which in turn generates cultural, scientific and technological development. They are the vanguard of innovation and vital for the sustained advancement of our societies. Universities have an indispensable role to play in the advancement of knowledge and are committed to a vigorous, open and unconstrained discourse, in which yesterday’s truth can be constantly questioned and re-formulated. The freedom to teach, research, speak and publish, without penalty or outside interference, is fundamental in allowing the university to fulfil this core function to society.

The core mission of the university in the modern world is being challenged by the constraints placed on them by conflicting forces. Universities in many parts of the world are being torn between their commitments to the public sector and their commitments to the private sector. Are universities a public service, or simply private corporations hamstrung by the demands of profit and loss? To take one system, the UK, the origins of the university are clearly private sector. Established by private subscription, they operated successfully without regular government grant or intervention until 1919, when the University Grants Committee was established by the

UK Treasury. Technically speaking, the state still regards universities as private sector-after all they must comply with all the rules that control private bodies.

Nowadays, especially as far as politicians are concerned, universities throughout Europe are regarded as being firmly in the public sector. Freedom of information and duties to promote equality are all public-sector obligations, and the universities get the full force of the new laws that the private sector largely escapes. Yet herein lies a blatant contradiction – universities are constantly being told by the authorities that they should be more entrepreneurial, that they need to adopt the best practices of the business sector. In reality, universities can sometimes sit uncomfortably in the void between the public and the private sectors, receiving the disadvantages of both and the advantages of neither.

The traditional teaching and research model is fast becoming a thing of the past. Focus on short term needs means that research is given less focus than teaching. The universities' core mission, the pursuit of knowledge and the truth, is being eroded to make way for the short term demand of serving the public interest through the production of skilled workers. There exists a clear misbalance between public responsibility and institutional autonomy. If higher education is to drive forward society in a positive way then a strategy and vision is needed by both the political authorities and university leadership. It requires cooperation between public authorities and autonomous institutions, and the role of both must be reconsidered to meet our current needs while also respecting the traditional values on which higher education is built. UNESCO and other individual groups need to be more involved in preserving this balance, thus allowing universities to fulfil their core functions effectively.

Academic freedom benefits society in two fundamental ways: (1) Directly, through the impacts and benefits of applied knowledge and the training of skilled professionals, which also transmits university values onto society and; (2) Indirectly, over long periods of time, through the creation, prevention and transmission of knowledge and understanding for its own intrinsic value. It thereby enables universities to produce citizens equipped to thrive in and sustain free and open societies. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are the crucial factors in ensuring productive relationships

that achieve these core outcomes. Only by insisting on academic freedom and institutional autonomy can the university begin to fulfil its dual function of skill provider and forwarding society through the production of knowledge. Without academic freedom and autonomy, sadly universities will remain lost in the void between the public sector and private sector demands.

In universities across Africa and the Middle East there has appeared a clear preference for market-driven programmes of study. Private universities are increasingly regarded as instruments for promoting private corporate advancement, in order to help the national economy. A huge surge in the demand for higher education in Africa has placed institutions under enormous pressure to put greater emphasis on teaching, at the expense of research. Faculty have little time to devote to enquiry and free thinking. Unfortunately, governments are exercising greater control on higher education, making the 'partnership' with universities considerably one-sided.

Over the past 2 years, NEAR and SAR have made some notable achievements. The first collaborative project aimed to train a cohort of scholar advocates around the world to serve as academic freedom defenders. To date we have held workshops in Jordan, Lithuania, Russia, Ethiopia and Ghana. Each workshop has examined the state of higher education in different regions around the world and has attempted to provide solutions to problems on a local, regional and international level. The workshops have revealed a pattern – (i) that universities across the world share similar experiences and face similar challenges; (ii) the institutions that lack basic academic freedoms and autonomy are least well equipped to deal with these challenges head-on and as a result suffer the most hardship; (iii) those institutions operating in different systems need to reinforce the value of academic freedom.

Constructive, long-term solutions to the challenges facing higher education require deep commitment to core international higher education values, including academic freedom, institutional autonomy, access, accountability and transparency, quality, social responsibility and respect for human rights. A lack of respect for these core values risks fragmenting the sector and undermining its ability to contribute to society. Approaches that respect core values will strengthen the higher education sector and reinforce its capacity to advance knowledge and contribute to the

betterment of society for the benefit of all persons, everywhere. These values must be respected by both the public and private sectors – a balance needs to be struck.

To this end, 5 international organisations – The Network for Education and Academic Rights (NEAR), the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA), the Scholars at Risk Network (SAR), the Institute of International Educators' Scholars Rescue Fund (SRF), the Foundation for Refugee Students (UAF) and the West African Research Centre (WARC), have put forward a platform, urging the organisers and participants of the WCHE to give core higher education values prominence in their discussions as it did in 1998. Specifically, it calls for:-

- (i) Wider dissemination of internationally recognized standards of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, social responsibility and related higher education values, including the 1997 recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel;
- (ii) Greater sharing of information with regard to UNESCO's efforts to promote and defend the human rights of members of higher education communities, including information concerning existing complaint procedures and pathways for organisations representing higher education communities to contribute to these efforts;
- (iii) A Directive on the Responsibility of the Higher Education Sector (or comparable statement) to assist higher education professionals experiencing threats in their own country or displaced by such threats and who have now become refugee scholars;
- (iv) The establishment of an annual International Academic Freedom Day to highlight the importance of higher education values—including academic freedom, institutional autonomy and social responsibility—not only for the education sector but for all members of society.

Key elements in the interface of public and private partnerships that relate to academic freedom are:

1. Public competition for appointments
2. Freedom to publish research
3. Independence to undertake research
4. Procedures to stop arbitrary removal from posts

There should also be restrictions on temporary appointments, especially when some longer term appointments are possible.

As well as recognising and acting on our platform, we would also like UNESCO, in light of this paper, to follow the suggested plan of action:-

- Ensure that universities are fulfilling their commitment of pursuing knowledge and the truth, rather than just training skilled-professionals. The university has a responsibility to society as a knowledge producer and a balance must be struck between the two objectives.
- Recognise the importance of research and its ability to impact positively on society and promote long term development.
- Insist that academic freedom and university autonomy becomes a central feature of university life and recognise that these freedoms are the only way to ensure that the university fulfils ALL of its responsibilities to society.
- Make sure that universities are treated fairly and are not made impotent by excessive demands made on it by the public and private sectors.

I urge you all to consider our proposals.

Many thanks.

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