

# THE PARADOX OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

*The paper examined the concept of Academic Freedom and Responsibility. It exposed the logical relationship between the two concepts. It further revealed the various ways the paradox sickness plaguing the Nigeria society did not spare the academic in respect of his responsibility. The paper finally posited that if the nation will escape going down the drain, the academic needs radical reformation while the government should urgently review the conditions of service of the academic.*

The National Curriculum Conference of 1969 had on its decision area a focus on the purpose of tertiary education.

These among others include:

Teaching and imparting knowledge, researching to discover knowledge, dissemination knowledge by contributing to national and contributing to national and international dialogues and criticism. (Adaralegbe, 1981)

Such institutions designated as store-houses of knowledge (FRN, 2004) are assigned as well the duty of:

- (a) strengthening the other levels of education
- (b) developing in the citizenry national consciousness and loyalty to truth and principles,
- (c) provoking and promoting enlightenment and informed public opinion (FRN 2004).
- (d) disseminating existing and new information (Adaralegbe, 1981).

Given the enormity of such a tall order and by virtue of its attributes as the font and storehouse of knowledge, it follows that tertiary institutions in Nigeria rightly deserve academic freedom.

By the recommendation of UNESCO (1997) that academic freedom and institutional autonomy are a necessary pre-condition to guarantee the proper fulfillment of the function entrusted to higher education teaching personnel and institutions, it becomes incontrovertible that academic freedom is necessary.

Similarly, a code of professional ethics for teachers should therefore underline the responsibility of the teacher which should among other things, ensure that in the discharge of his teaching task, personal, religious, political and other prejudices are not deliberately forced on his students in any way or for any reasons whatever. Part of the crucial functions of the teachers include evaluation of learning outcomes of students which can either enhance or mar social mobility and better living condition.

However, it is sometimes observed that teachers are constrained by internal and external pressures towards acting in manners that are inconsistent with sound professional or moral judgment. It is therefore the focus of this paper to examine the concepts of academic freedom and responsibility, expose the logical relationship between the two concepts as well as reveal the overt and covert abuses of professional responsibility as reflections of the events in the larger Nigerian society.

### **The Concept of Academic Freedom**

In its singularity and detached status as a construct, freedom simply connotes immunity from coercion. In conjunction with the adjective "academic" yielding the phrase "academic freedom" it draws attention to, as deriving from, the nature of man as regards his right as a member of an academic community (An Africa Watch Report, 1991),

Such rights of man as implicated in the concept of academic freedom have been elaborated and endorsed by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) at its 29<sup>th</sup> session. These rights that have been recognized and thus declared enjoyable by all higher education teaching personnel including but are not limited to right to life and liberty, freedom of thoughts, conscience, religion, expression, assembly, association and movement (UNESCO, 1997).

For Einstein (2002), academic freedom is the right to search for the truth, publish and teach what one holds to be true. It can safely be concluded from the above that academic freedom borders on the right of teachers and research workers to investigate their respective fields of knowledge and express their views without fear of restraint or dismissal as well as select textual teachings deemed suitable for the attainment of educational goals and objectives.

Africa Watch Report (1997) has rightly summed up the essential functions of the academic which is to arouse and develop in the students a spirit of critical inquiry. Also, it's overall goal is to assist in the production of persons imbued with independent, critical penetrating minds™ And such people, Enemuo (2004) insisted will in the long run prove their worth when they *assist* fn the *evolution of a* better and more human social order. An indication would then be that by liberating man from the

yoke of the past, his education has become proof to protest against mass conformity (Meyer, 1962).

The provisions of academic freedom constitute in the main, a leap that is unarguably unattainable without reflection, research and dialogue (Africa watch 1991). This position accounts for why academic freedom is associated only with tertiary institutions.

### **The Concept of Responsibility**

From our explanation of freedom, one would have noticed a meeting point between a person's free-will otherwise called self-determination and the outcome of choices made. Going by the existentialist position, a person who consciously engages in a self-determined action should accept responsibility for both the action and its outcome given that the self determined choice and outcomes are the essence of a person's existence.

At once, it stands to reason that as long as man is a social being, his actions to a very large extent, affect others whether positively or negatively and as such the individual must in some way be responsible for them. In that context one shall agree with Okoroh (in NJEP 1991-1995-5) that responsibility is a personal judgement passed by a person on himself for an action he has taken or for being liable for the outcome of an event he caused.

Accordingly, responsibility attracts either praise, blame, reward or punishment and a person should be held responsible for his belief, intention, desire, reason, and action and so on. Such should be the case on the ground that the agent is presumed to be rationally responsible except proved otherwise. Hence personal responsibility is often considered, a necessary condition for the attainment of justice.

Essentially, the logically necessary conditions of responsibility have been shown by Enoh (2003) to include

- a. an agent's acts resulted to a consequence whether negative or positive.
- b. an agent's failure to act resulted to a consequence whether negative or positive.
- c. in both "a" and "b" the agent must have acted or failed to act freely.
- d. the agent must be mentally balanced.

Clearly, it is deduceable that a person may not be held responsible for an action or an outcome for which he is personally not responsible.

### **The Logical Relationship Between Academic Freedom and Responsibility**

One would agree with Enoh (2004) that it might seem odd on the surface at least to attempt establishing a relationship between the concept of freedom and responsibility for the two concepts appear not to meet in any way. One relates to an individual's liberty to do what he desires and the other has to do with approving or disproving acts by others. It may seem odd for instance to hold a man responsible for freely eating his bread. But this ignores the fact that not all actions are as private as having one's bread and this is precisely the point at which freedom, a social principle connects our actions with others.

Mills for instance tried to distinguish areas of action in which man can act without interference by others and those in which they cannot in his essay on liberty. These are those which concern him only however dangerous and those which concern others respectively. Mills calls this the simple principle. At a glance, the truth is exposed that as long as man is a social being, his action to a very large extent affects others whether positively or negatively and as such the individual must in some way be responsible for them. This in general establishes the connection between the concepts.

Furthermore, considered from the perspective of legal jurisprudence, freedom as denoting immunity from coercion and therefore, conferral of right has implicit to it some duties and responsibilities. Freedom far from being another word for anarchy and selfishness, implies on the part of higher education due regard for the right of all stakeholders in the education edifice.

Accordingly therefore, moral lapses, arbitrary and capricious disregard of standard of professional conduct, incompetence, indolence, dishonesty in all ramifications, want in leadership qualities inter alia also could be a ground for any form of disciplinary action against an erring member of higher education personnel (UNESCO 1997).

One major deduction that readily comes to mind is that academic freedom and responsibility are interdependent and mutually parasitic on each other. The position of Enemu (2004) in this regard should be appreciated when he stated that: the academic freedom doctrine apart from being an essential ingredient in a burgeoning democratic society like Nigeria is also a critical factor to reckon with as a catalyst for actualizing educational aims.

And with specific focus on an academic community, it unarguably guarantees that teachers and students will be able to carry on the functions of learning, research and teaching with a minimum of restriction. It applies to subject within the professor's professional expertise within which there is special need for freedom to pursue truth in an atmosphere of open inquiry necessary in an academic community if learning is to be honest and thorough, remarked General Conference of Seventh Day Adventist October 11, 1987.

It is note worthy that in daily human relations, be it personal or group, choices are made and actions are taken. The meaning which man derives in the world is the product of his free choice and authentic living according to the existentialist.

Consequently any attempt at explaining man's action would demand the determination of what his goals are by the fact that his future is dependent on his future goals. Freedom even in a common parlance is inseparably accompanied by a heavy responsibility. In order that man must account for the way he uses his freedom hence man's radical freedom implies total responsibility without the possibility of any excuse (Omoregbe1991) and life lived in freedom is personal responsibility or it is a pathetic farce (Buber 1965).

### **The Academic and Professional Responsibility**

The academic, it has been established, needs to enjoy academic freedom if his job has to be properly done. Similarly, he needs to be guided by some code of conduct in order not to de-rail from the path of rectitude as well as remain focused.

On this premise Akpan in Iheoma and Nduka (1983) had listed some of the professional ethics of the teacher to include:

1. To evaluate the work or conduct of his students fairly and objectively at all times on the basis of valid and reliable criteria.
2. To base all decisions about promotion, advancement or certification of students on objective criteria known to the students themselves.
3. Not to in any consideration of personal relationship, religion, ethnic or other affinities or political view influence the process of students evaluation, advancement or certification.
4. To maintain the secrecy, security and confidentiality of all examination material papers, scripts or scores until otherwise authorized or directed by the relevant authority.
5. To remain at all times a worthy moral and intellectual model for the students.
6. To lead a life of honour and respectability in the school and in the community around the schools etc.

To what extent are teachers being guided by these ethics? Most university lecturers today are known to stifle freedom of opinion and discussion. They feel intoxicated by their superior possession of knowledge and authority not creating room whereby students should see themselves as actors and not mere spectators in the drama of learning. Teacher despotism, which is morally objectionable and rationally unacceptable still prevails in Nigerian universities. What is more, the educational system has become marketized; schools and other education agencies view learners as customers (Smith 2005). The "you must buy my handout/textbooks" syndrome is now a

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notorious phenomenon, which many universities are trying to curb without much success. This situation has led to the exploitation of the student, with brazen effrontery.

It is saddening to note that examination grades are sold by some unscrupulous lecturers for a bout of pottage. Also some lecturers leave their jobs to chase contracts, consultancy and political appointment while others engage in full-time commercial activities.

Several questions can be raised in this regard. How objective are lecturers in the assessment of the student and what criteria are enforced and what knowledge do students have about the criteria of assessment? How much can a teacher vouch of being free from not allowing personal relationship, religious, ethnic and or other affinities to influence his decision about what marks to award to students in our present circumstance? Does the tranquility of teachers not rest on how little the students question their system through systematic inducement of powerlessness by the banking system of teaching?

Intellectualism indisputably endows a recipient with the ability to operate at a higher plane of rationality just as it invests him with a very special responsibility. Though there is no universally accepted intellectual morality above any scales of value which can necessarily be inserted into a given social matrix (Wokocha 1992) it is not open to debate that the intellectual, consequent upon his special training is expected to place himself over and above the more immediate social conditions of individual behaviours. But have the Nigerian intellectual liberated themselves from the shackles of persistent cut-throat struggles for personal advantage and selfism?

It stands to reason that the indulgence of lecturers in these dishonourable acts would not only scare away students of poor parentage but will also compromise academic excellence and moral uprightness. Happening in their formative age, this trend can only mortgage the possibility of a progressive future driven by quality and value. Under the national ethos, quest for excellence through hard work is gradually losing its hold on national life propping up mediocrities in intellectual garb.

### **What Shall We Do?**

When Babarinsa in Tell Magazine of October 6, 2003:60 noted that: Today, the new generation of university administrators are confronting the paradox of teachers who don't teach, students who don't study, and professors who don't profess. He would be chiding the Ivory tower for not struggling to make a difference in a society increasingly threatened by dislodged values.

1. If education must retain its worth, it must be done under a free atmosphere. The rational moral being can exercise his freedom in the investigation and dissemination of truth but this must be subject to the common good of the society. He should exercise his freedom with due and proper sense of

responsibility which presupposes that the exercise of freedom to investigate the truth and communicate human values must do no harm or injury to truth, justice, fraternity and the common good.

2. To respond adequately to the challenges of the society, academic reform must radically transform the moral and intellectual mindset of the present generation of lecturers if our civilization will escape the scourge of arrest. Teachers were not known to worship wealth. They were people who took delight in molding the future masterminds, seeing the young grow by complementing the creational roles of God. They were people who championed the concepts of virtue, merit and rightness and lived it as examples for the young. These attributes can still be given expression for society to heal itself.
3. Government should put the necessary machinery in motion geared towards dealing with the pauperization of the academics and academia. Enhanced packages that compare favourably with what the law makers in the Upper Chambers enjoy should be extended to the academic as well as get the Ivory tower adequately equipped to encourage free flow of ideas.

### **Conclusion**

For the Ivory tower to be able to be seen acquitting itself creditably in the onerous task of shaping the future destiny of the society, academic freedom should be granted and guaranteed. Lecturers have both social and ethical responsibilities to their students which derive from the logical relationship between freedom and responsibility. It is regrettable that in most cases these professional responsibilities are obeyed more in breach than in compliance as a result of the events in the larger society.

Amidst catalogues of woes, the Nigerian academic should through resilience and hard work offer the nation an opportunity for redemption. In the face of adversity the academics remain a sincere and patriotic people eternally hopeful that it will eventually find the true path to its destiny.

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