

EDITORIAL

Collective Mission of National University Academics to Protect Fundamental Freedoms in Universities

As those who produce the highest level academic and professional expertise in a land where the large mass of people struggle to make sense of their very existence, are we as academics sensitive enough to our social and political missions with the high scholarly training we claim to possess? This is a fundamental question we should answer with a clear conscience.

The current sense of national insecurity and unrest in the developing world, worsened by the globally destructive Covid 19 Pandemic, has also contributed towards irresponsible governance lacking in transparency. There is a growing perception that there is hardly anyone within these regimes mandated by the people even respond to respond to urgent public grievances, while problems multiply. These are problems that Universities have a fundamental right as well as an obligation to urgently address independently, and if possible, help people to mediate with regard to what burdens them, and also challenge flawed decision making by authorities since expert knowledge comes from university led specialists. Such knowledge should be used to provide checks and balances for the betterment of mankind and most specially in one's own motherland.

Freedom for Critical Scrutiny: Challenging the Status Quo

At a time like this, we in Social Sciences find the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen's work, 'Development as Freedom', to be of timeless significance, with space for freedom increasingly shrinking. Contextually, Sen mentions five distinct freedoms: political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security. Sen articulates that a key determinant of individual capacity to prove one's worth is freedom and social effectiveness.

The people should not only be able to enjoy freedom in a functional sense, but also should be able to maximize its potential if they are to be partners in a dynamic process of social, economic, political and cultural transformation. Once again, the soul-searching question is whether we are receptive to the

national level obligation to correct the courses of action that some individually, and some others collectively pursue with, in the name of national development.

Doing Justice to Oneself as a Catalyst

Revisiting Sen's work, Denis O'Hearn¹, Professor of Sociology at Binghamton University in New York, argues that the ability of individuals to help themselves is fundamental, if they are to maximize their potential. He sees institutions as having a limited role to play unless individuals take themselves seriously in working proactively through them. He states, that 'there is no substitute for individual responsibility' (Sen, 1999). We consider this vital for the development of the academia. It is when this responsibility is taken with sufficient seriousness of purpose that you become a Catalyst: a Change Agent, to ensure that you engage yourself in processes of attitudinal transformation, taking people from their known situation of poverty to an unknown but higher level of social, economic, political and cultural prosperity, respecting the dignity of all.

Countering the Instruments of Suppression

The national universities like ours which are maintained by the taxpayers, of whom the majority are poor, should essentially be centers of dynamic propagation of progressive ideas for the betterment of democracy that sets the people free, as without it we render the very institution of university, invalid, irrelevant and useless. Our national level obligations to protect fundamental freedoms both within and outside the university, locally and globally, should never be underestimated, if we are not to be underestimated in return by the people.

This is especially 'significant at a time when our own university youth face multiple crises together with their teachers with regard to their academic life and professional survival. University student leaders are today imprisoned without proper trial as happened to the leader of the Inter- University Students Federation (IUSF), Wasantha Mudalige. He was remanded for three months for democratically challenging the proposed legislation to militarize civilian

¹ O'Hearn, D (2009) 'Amartya Sen's Development as Freedom: Ten Years Later', Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review, Vol. 8, Spring, pp. 9-15.

university education in August 2021. With him several other university student leaders were also remanded for three months.

Challenging Forms of Injustice within the Education Sector

Additionally, for most of us, a matter of grave concern is increasing inequity and inequality within the entire education system from primary to tertiary levels. Are we mindful and alert that the legitimate provisions for national universities with regard to salaries of permanent staff are withheld arbitrarily for months as happened at the Open University of Sri Lanka. It is proved that the governments are more interested in demonizing student activists as well as teachers who fight back, as unwanted elements within the status quo, as they feel insecure by their arguments in the public domain.

It is in this context we see the current trends of militarization of civilian education through the KDU Bill, and the recently evolved Media Policy Document (2021) of the government as reactionary institutional schemes that are hostile to university independence and autonomy. In line with the provisions laid down in these policy documents relating to use of media, the academics and students need to be sanctioned by university authorities in expressing views through the mass media, thus undermining their independence in creating enlightened public opinion.

As stated in the article, “Academic freedom and institutional autonomy: Developments in Europe and beyond²”:

“Recent months have seen important events regarding academic freedom, both in Europe and globally. There have been [violations of democratic and human rights in Belarus](#), including threats against students and staff of universities – which were widely condemned. Last month, the Court of Justice of the European Union (ECJ) ruled that the [Hungarian government violated EU law](#) when it amended its education law in 2017. The EJC ruling drew welcome attention to growing violations of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, which are essential for successful universities and vibrant democratic societies in Europe and beyond”.

² European University Association (UUA): November 17th 2017

As we faithfully move into the New Year - 2022, it is our fervent expectation that the national universities will not be Ivory Towers that become irrelevant to the people, but dynamic institutions that will be in the frontline of action in creating a more progressive and productive society that respects fundamental freedoms and obligations of all mankind.

Dr. Mahim Mendis
Editor in Chief- Vistas Journal