

Academic Freedom in a State-Sponsored African University: The Case of the University of Mauritius

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Abstract

This paper discusses the issue of academic freedom in the context of Mauritius, with a focus on its first university, the University of Mauritius. The University of Mauritius was set up in the late 1960s, at a time when poverty was rampant in the country and access to education was reserved for the privileged. A government policy of widening access to education has led to a subsidization of education on a national scale and, consequently, to the university being state-funded. Therefore, students pursuing full-time undergraduate degrees do not have to pay tuition. The University of Mauritius has grown in terms of student population, diversity of courses and faculties, quality of education, and international recognition. Mauritius is one of Africa's premier democracies and is known for respecting human rights, political freedom, and freedom of the press. These values also inform the University of Mauritius, where the belief is that academic staff enjoy academic freedom. The existence of academic freedom at the University of Mauritius is often reiterated as a fact by ruling politicians. Yet, despite this discourse, I argue that state sponsorship has an impact on the level of autonomy of the institution and ultimately on academic freedom. Academics at the University of Mauritius

benefit from a controlled or closely monitored form of academic freedom. Using qualitative interviews of senior academics as well as documentary sources, this paper analyzes the nature of academic freedom at the University of Mauritius. The paper argues that due to a lack of institutional autonomy, academic freedom operates under a subtle veil of threat in state-funded academic institutions in an African democratic context.

Introduction

The *Dar es Salam Declaration on Academic Freedom and Social Responsibility of Academics* defines “academic freedom” as “the freedom of members of the academic community, individually or collectively, in the pursuit, development and transmission of knowledge, through research, study, discussion, documentation, production, creation, teaching, lecturing and writing.”¹ Academic freedom is unquestionably an integral component of the culture of universities around the world. This paper studies the nature and form of academic freedom in existence at the University of Mauritius, an established public university which is the oldest in Mauritius. Mauritius is one of Africa’s most successful and long-standing democracies and a model of democracy and development in the region. Drawing from documentary sources as well as qualitative interviews of senior academics at the Faculty of Social Studies and Humanities, this paper analyzes how academic freedom is experienced at the University of Mauritius, and explores the main threats and constraints to academic freedom in a state-sponsored African academic institution. Following this introductory section, the paper discusses the concept of academic freedom in the developmental context, particularly in African contexts. It then focuses on Mauritius, discussing freedom and democracy in Mauritius and instances of censure which potentially threaten the exercise of academic freedom. The paper moves on to focus on tertiary education in Mauritius and at the University of Mauritius, discussing institutional autonomy, social responsibility, and the practice of academic freedom at this institution of higher learning.

African Experiences of Academic Freedom

On the African continent, prior to the recent wave of privatization, most universities were founded, financed, and controlled by the postcolonial developmental state.² In dictatorial states, university campuses became arenas of regular confrontation between governments, academics, and students.³ The struggle for academic freedom bore close resemblance to the struggle for “citizenship” where members of the academic community, either individually or collectively, were engaged in a struggle for rights and democracy within the academy as well as in the broad politics within which the academy was located.⁴ Such struggles have formed part of the broader struggles for human rights, freedom, and democracy in African contexts, especially where military rule and authoritarian regimes have led to direct state repression. Academic criticisms of the state were framed in an anti-nationalist and anti-developmental terms.⁵ This led to repression, the deployment of security forces on campuses, confrontation with students and staff, and the closure of several campuses on the continent.⁶

The economic crisis led to severe budgetary austerity with structural adjustment policies that curbed state spending on social services, including education, and limited the funding available to most African universities. Academic facilities including libraries and research facilities were on the verge of collapse, teaching materials were scarce, and classrooms were overcrowded and poorly equipped. The crisis led to increasing administrative regulation and political repression of the academic community and ultimately to a mass exodus of African intellectuals to universities overseas.⁷ The lack of adequate public funding is a major obstacle for higher education development and an indirect obstacle to academic freedom.⁸ Moreover, the demands of academic careers have proliferated to the point of becoming incompatible with time for the research and reflection that are essential to high quality intellectual production. Hence, according to Mama, within universities, the professional role of academics has gradually become more diverse to include other functions such as administration, often in the name of efficiency. The lack of funding and development of new technologies have fuelled the assumption that support staff can be reduced in the name of efficiency as administrative duties

are increasingly loaded on academic staff. Such additional demands deplete the time and energy available for teaching, research, and knowledge production.

In Western traditions, academic freedom tends to be defined negatively, in terms of institutional autonomy from external intervention especially by the state and individual autonomy of academics from administrators. In African traditions, however, the emphasis has been on both negative and positive rights, and on institutional autonomy and social responsibility.⁹ The broad definition of academic freedom focuses on the right of academics to be free from external constraints in teaching and research and to freely criticize their institutions.¹⁰ Academic freedom has been linked with a range of academic policies, including university autonomy, departmental self-administration, and tenure. Moreover, academic and intellectual freedoms have been threatened or curtailed for the same reasons as human rights, and often in the same places and by the same authorities and institutions.¹¹ Academic freedom has been justified by claims that it is necessary for the pursuit of truth for the general benefit of society, including immediate advantages derived from scientific discovery, technological innovation, and creative work.¹² Academic freedom is also considered essential in protecting societies against undemocratic acts and abuses by preserving universities as institutional sanctuaries of free thinking.¹³ Yet another argument in favor of academic freedom is that it is central to universities' missions to foster individual autonomy.¹⁴ In many instances however, academic freedom has been employed as an excuse for abusive behavior and irresponsible acts on the part of some academics, including non-fulfillment of contractual obligations and responsibilities.¹⁵ While academic freedom is specifically intended to foster the free exchange of ideas within a community of scholars, it also requires a sense of responsibility and respect for ethics.

While academic institutions are in principle designed to propagate knowledge and stimulate research, Tamale and Oloka-Onyango note that this often does not reflect the reality, as these institutions are often crippled by serious structural and ideological impediments.¹⁶ Arblaster observes that while academic freedom and academic democracy go hand in hand,

threats to academic freedom derive from the authoritarian structures of educational institutions.¹⁷ A contradiction arises when a society and its institutions advertise themselves as free and democratic and yet tolerate a high degree of authoritarianism within major institutions. In this context, Tamale and Oloka-Onyango contend that academic freedom is positioned both *between* the state and educational institutions, as well as *within* those institutions. Zeleza nevertheless notes that although the context and content of the challenges to academic freedom differ between countries, they all center on the challenges of institutional autonomy, ideological controls, internal governance, and intellectual authority.¹⁸ He further notes that the forces that seek to erode academic freedom emanate from the state, capital, civil society, and the academy itself, where transformations are often driven by globalization. In Western democracies, the public prosecution of academics who express unpopular or unorthodox views has been rare, yet it is not unusual for pressures and threats to be directed at those who challenge received wisdom, institutional authority, reflect the wrong ideological orientation.¹⁹

The above discussion has highlighted the main definitions of academic freedom and the constraints experienced on the African continent. The paper draws from the themes raised in this review, focusing on academic freedom in terms of institutional autonomy, freedom from external constraints on teaching and research, and freedom to criticize university institutional or governmental policy. The main constraints on academic freedom include financial resources, bureaucratic bottlenecks, and overloading academics with administrative duties. These issues will be discussed in the Mauritian context in the subsequent sections of the paper.

Democracy and Freedom in Mauritius: A Brief Introduction

Mauritius is a small island of 720 square miles, located in the southwestern Indian Ocean with a population of approximately 1.2 million inhabitants. It is one of the three small islands collectively called the Mascarene Islands. Mauritius lies on longitude 57 east of the Greenwich Meridian and its latitude ranges from 19°58 ' to 20°32 ' in the Southern Hemisphere, just north of the Tropic of Capricorn. The island of Mauritius has experienced successive waves of

colonizers from the Dutch to the French and finally the British. The French played a highly significant role in the history and development of Mauritius, initially as settlers and then as a local dominating group. Mauritian society is plural and multi-ethnic with the population presently made up of different groups.²⁰ Class and ethnic divisions in the population of Mauritius are very pertinent.

Mauritius gained political independence in 1968 and became a republic within the commonwealth in 1992. Compared with most South African Development Community (SADC) countries, Mauritius has a long tradition of democratic governance since independence. From the perspective of a small developing country endowed with limited resources, Mauritius has made commendable progress. Mauritius ranked seventy-second in the 2010 *Human Development Report* with a Human Development Index (HDI) value of 0.701²¹ putting the country at “medium human development” level.²² The post-independence government introduced a comprehensive welfare package that included free education and health services, universal pension, and a subsidized food scheme. Mauritius also resisted pressures from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to scale down welfare benefits, in order to maintain social cohesion in its plural society. The state currently offers free public transportation to full-time students and the elderly. The maintenance of the welfare state led to a rise in literacy rates for girls and the country has almost eradicated illiteracy.²³

Mauritius is known for its sustained political stability and its ability to preserve basic democratic rights for every citizen in a society consisting of different religions, ethnic backgrounds, and languages. There has also been reference to the “Mauritian Miracle” with Mauritius being considered as a model of development.²⁴ Mauritius has maintained a democratic system of government and is now a republic within the commonwealth. Freedom House²⁵ designated Mauritius as being “free” and assigned the island a rating of one out of seven for political rights and two out of seven for civil rights.²⁶ The constitution guarantees freedom of expression and the press freely expresses criticism of the government and opposition parties without fear of retribution. The Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation, which

provides the local television and some of the radio stations, is state-owned and has a pro-government bias. There are nevertheless three private radio stations²⁷ which adopt a more critical view of government policy. There have, however, been recent threats from the prime minister to the press, warning about instilling more severe media laws. Government officials have also been using libel laws to suppress media criticism of political leaders and a few newspaper editors have been arrested as a result of the articles they wrote. These articles mainly questioned governmental policy and official statistics.²⁸ The rule of law and justice are nonetheless respected and the editors were released on bail on the same day.

In its 2008 report, Freedom House noted that freedom of religion was respected in Mauritius, as was academic freedom and freedom of assembly and association. It is in fact rare for the Mauritian government to censor news, publications, or the Internet. However, there have been a few cases of censorship in the country, pertaining mainly to political and religious sensitivities. Politics and religion remain highly sensitive areas in Mauritius and governments hesitate to take unpopular decisions. Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* was banned in Mauritius in 1989 by the then-prime minister. The owner of Bookcourt, a major bookstore in Mauritius, was arrested and fined in June 2008 because copies of Rushdie's book were available in his bookstore. In 1994, Mauritian author Linsey Collen's book *The Rape of Sita* was banned with the support of the then-prime minister following pressure from Hindu fundamentalist groups who were unhappy with the title of the book since "Sita" is the name of a Hindu deity. Although the contents of the book did not concern any religion or the Hindu goddess Sita, it was still banned. Such forms of censorship send a strong message to academics and other writers who might wish to write or speak out on religion or any injustices caused by religious groups. This state of affairs also indicates that religious groups in Mauritius have a strong political lobby. Another case of censorship took place in November 2007 when access to the social networking website Facebook was closed for several hours by government authorities because of the usurpation of the current prime minister's identity and criticisms of him that had been uploaded on the site. While usurpation of a person's identity is indeed an illegal act,

denying the whole country access to the social networking site reflects a relatively strong sense of censorship for political purposes, when such critiques could have been dealt with through alternative and more democratic means.

Mauritius therefore presents itself as an African state which respects human rights, freedom, and the rule of law, as there are no records of any form of abuse of these rights on the part of the state. Yet, as illustrated above, subtle threats to freedom of expression do exist, especially with regard to criticisms of ruling political parties and their leaders as well as religious groups in the country. This state of affairs carries the potential to inhibit or discourage overt criticism or critical analysis of state institutions and government policy, as well of religious groups and their activities, and represents a threat to freedom of expression, including academic freedom.

Tertiary education in Mauritius

Mauritius follows the British educational system and Mauritian students still write British exams, namely at the O and A levels. Since independence in 1968, the government has embarked on a strategy of widening access to education with the establishment of primary schools in remote areas and the construction of more girls' schools all over the island. In 1976, the state decided to sponsor secondary education, thereby increasing the enrollment of students at the secondary level. This policy had a gendered impact as well since most girls had been previously denied access to secondary education by conservative and low income families. In 1988, university fees were abolished for full-time undergraduate courses at the University of Mauritius, which was the only state university in existence at that time. This policy measure rendered tertiary education more accessible to the lower income groups and to girls as well.

The Mauritian government aims to transform Mauritius into a regional knowledge hub to serve the region and as a center for higher learning and excellence. Two major state institutions currently oversee the tertiary education sector in Mauritius: (1) the Ministry of Tertiary Education, Science, Research and Technology and (2) the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC). The Ministry of Tertiary Education, Science, Research and Technology is a relatively new

ministry which was set up following the last general elections in 2010. The national priority of the government is to increase enrollment in higher education. The Gross Tertiary Enrolment Ratio (GTER) has risen from 20 percent in 2003 to 46.9 percent in August 2010 (Ministry of Tertiary Education, 2010). The government aims to improve access to tertiary education to attain 72 percent GTER by 2015 and to make tertiary education more widely available to the population by including late night and weekend classes. It also plans to attract renowned tertiary education institutions to the island and has as its goal one graduate per family. Furthermore, the Ministry of Tertiary Education plans to attract 100,000 foreign students by the year 2020. These plans have been critiqued as being too ambitious since the tertiary education institutions in Mauritius do not have accommodation facilities for foreign students and public transportation becomes scarce after six in the evening, rendering it difficult for students to attend evening lectures. Also, there needs to be greater planning to upgrade existing infrastructure of the existing tertiary education institutions before substantially increasing the intake of students.

The Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) has been mandated to promote, plan, develop, and coordinate post-secondary education in Mauritius. It oversees the functioning of tertiary education institutions and is responsible for allocating public funds to the tertiary institutions under its purview. The TEC also monitors the use of these funds to ensure accountability and optimum use of resources. Since 2005, the TEC has been given the task of implementing a regulatory framework which would ensure the quality of post-secondary education, as well as to determine the recognition and equivalence of post-secondary qualifications (Ministry of Education, Culture and Human Resources, 2008). Thus, the TEC registers private tertiary educational institutions and universities and accredits their programs. The TEC also advises the Ministry of Tertiary Education, Science, Research and Technology on policy issues pertaining to tertiary education.

Mauritius now has a total of sixty-one tertiary educational institutions, both public and private.²⁹ In addition to the publicly funded institutions, there are fifty private educational

institutions and seventy-six awarding bodies that deliver courses at tertiary level in the country. These courses are mainly concentrated in high-demanded areas such as information technology, law, management, accountancy, and finance. Whereas some provide all levels of tertiary education in a range of disciplines, others center their activities on a few selected disciplines mainly at undergraduate levels. Within the public sector, the country has seven tertiary education institutions. These include two universities—the University of Mauritius (UOM) and the University of Technology Mauritius (UTM).³⁰ The other tertiary education institutions in the public sector are the Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE),³¹ the Mahatma Gandhi Institute (MGI),³² the Mauritius College of the Air (MCA),³³ the Rabindranath Tagore Institute (RTI), and the Fashion and Design Institute (FDI). Apart from UTM which charges tuition fees to students, the other publicly funded tertiary education institutions do not charge fees on the full-time programs offered. The budget of these institutions is largely financed through the Government Recurrent Grants and the tuition fees that they charge for part-time courses carry a high subsidy element.³⁴ The government is also setting up a third university, the Open University of Mauritius (OUM). The OUM will promote access to tertiary education through a mixed mode of open and distance learning and face-to-face interaction, with the aim of providing opportunities for non-traditional learners as well as enabling lifelong learning for adults wishing to pursue further studies.

The University of Mauritius

The origins of the University of Mauritius (UOM) date back to British colonial times in 1924 with setting up of the College of Agriculture. It became established as a university in 1965 and currently dominates the tertiary education sector locally. The state played a major role in the creation of the University of Mauritius. The University of Mauritius initially had three schools: Agriculture, Administration, and Industrial Technology. It has since expanded to comprise five faculties: Agriculture, Engineering, Law and Management, Science, and Social Science & Humanities. The University of Mauritius also has a Centre for Medical Research Studies, a

Centre for Distance Education, a Centre for Information Technology and Systems and a Consultancy Centre. The UOM currently has a student population of approximately 12,000 and offers undergraduate and postgraduate courses up to a doctoral degree. Like many state universities on the African continent, the University of Mauritius was deliberately designed to help Mauritius overcome the developmental crisis of the time by providing training facilities—largely on an in-service, non-graduate basis—in technology, administration and agriculture, while conducting research of an applied nature in consultation with government departments.³⁵ In fact, Manrakhan states that since the University of Mauritius had been designed and set up to help the development of the country through strict investment criteria, it was required to collaborate closely with government, the private sector, and other entities.

In 1988, the government passed a law introducing free education at the University of Mauritius for full-time undergraduate students. Tuition fees are nevertheless charged to students who follow courses on a part-time basis as the part-time courses have been designed for individuals who are already employed. The main source of current funding for the university, accounting for 85 percent of total funding, is the government. On this issue, Baichoo *et al.* highlight the fact that most of this funding is, however, absorbed by running costs of the institution, leaving relatively little for academic improvement and development. The university only generates 15 percent of its total funds, mainly through consultancy, student fees and renting of premises.³⁶ Moreover, almost 75 percent of the student population is enrolled in full time courses for which fees are not charged. The revenue generated from these students is restricted to registration, examination, and library fees. The part-time, fee-paying courses generate the bulk of revenue for the university.

The university is hierarchically structured with an independent governing council at its apex. This is a high-level committee deals with all matters relating to administration, finance, and general policies. Most members of council are appointed by or through the government and are drawn from the legislature and other walks of public life, except for those who are appointed from within the university and are university staff. Next in hierarchy is the senate,

which is responsible for the academic management of the university. Academics predominate on the senate, irrespective of academic status. The structure of the UOM is nonetheless very authoritarian with major decisions made by top management, with hardly any consultation of academic staff and students prior to decision-making. Most academics are members of the University of Mauritius Academic Staff Union (UMASU). The mandate of UMASU is to safeguard the rights of academic staff. Students are grouped into a student union, geared to safeguard their rights.

Academic staff are required to undertake a minimum of 270 hours of teaching per academic year as well as to perform a growing volume of administrative duties. There is growing frustration among academic staff as they complain of burnout and lack of time for research due to the heavy teaching and administrative work requirements. This state of affairs has slowed down knowledge production and the UOM has become known as a “teaching university.” In fact, although research features as a crucial component of the core mission of the UOM and forms part of academic staff duties, the research output of the university is still relatively low. A pertinent example is the recent research week organized by the UOM (mid-February 2010) which saw a very low participation and interest on the part of the bulk of academic staff of the university. The UOM has recently introduced a number of incentives to encourage research, namely the recruitment of research assistants, provision of research funds for recurrent and capital expenditure, partial funding for participation in conferences, and financial support for overseas research partnerships.³⁷ However, funds available to the university for expansion, research, and development are not sufficient.

The government, through the Tertiary Education Commission, has been restricting the availability of state funds to the UOM, arguing that the university has been generating funds on its own. Furthermore, government policy of increasing access to tertiary education has led to an increase in student intake at the university. In 2007, the severe budgetary constraints faced by the UOM led to a policy of austerity which required new arrangements for large cohorts of up to 300 students in certain lectures and a new policy for final year undergraduate students to

undertake their dissertations as group work instead of individual work as had been the practice. This implied fewer dissertations for academics to grade and would have been less costly to the university, as academics would have to be paid for each additional dissertation supervised over and above the minimum of five. This proposal was rejected by both the students and academics, and the students of the UOM went on strike to protest against the new dissertation policy. They also protested against attending lectures in secondary schools because of the lack of space on the main campus and the large number of students per course. Following the strike, the decision to introduce group dissertations was reversed and lectures were no longer held in secondary schools. Students also went on strike in 2008 to protest against the university board's decision to increase the admission fees by 20 percent. The student union protested the fact that it had been excluded from decisions on the fees increase. The student union also criticized the policy of increasing the enrollment, because it was causing an overcrowding of classes and affecting the quality of education at the university.³⁸ The vice chancellor at that time, Indur Fagoonee, explained that these changes were caused by the difficult financial situation of the university and the fact that the Ministry of Education had not permitted the university to introduce proper tuition fees. Following the student protest, admission fees for new students were increased and the fees of current students were left unchanged.

The problem of funding and overdependence on the state puts the UOM in a tight situation which curtails its autonomy and affects the quality of research, teaching, and ultimately academic freedom through knowledge production and expression of ideas. The very bureaucratic structure of the institution and burdening of academics with increasing volumes of administrative duties also curtails knowledge production. The university is also not allowed to introduce fees for its full-time courses as such policy needs to be approved by government and for most politicians in power, this would be an unpopular political decision. The lack of funding, opportunities for research, and autonomy has also contributed to a "brain drain" at the level of academic staff of the UOM. The UOM has been losing highly qualified academic staff

who are attracted by better job prospects at overseas universities. Yet, the events at this institution show that decisions and policies can be reversed following staff and student protest, and that rights and the rule of law are largely respected in the country. Also, there is no evidence of any student or staff member being reprimanded for having spoken against the austere budgetary measures adopted by the UOM. Hence, although academic freedom is threatened by lack of funds, overdependence on state funding, bureaucracy, and heavy administrative duties for academics, yet, academics and students at the UOM can still exercise their freedom to protest given the context of democracy and rule of law in Mauritius. The threat level experienced by academics and students in Mauritius is much lower than on the African continent.

The University of Mauritius officially endorses the practice of academic freedom. The registrar states that the “University of Mauritius has always recognized and upheld academic freedom as a fundamental right of all academics.”³⁹ The principle of academic freedom became a public issue in May 2009 when UMASU spoke out against the previous vice chancellor, Professor I. Fagoonee, who had forwarded a circular sent by the Ministry of Education to academics. This circular targeted public officers and required them to consult their superiors before speaking to the press. Academics were annoyed by the fact that the vice chancellor had endorsed the circular by sending it to them when it was addressed to public officers, and especially by the following comments of the vice chancellor in his email:

It is always safe to seek advice prior to making statements to the press on matters that can be perceived as potential embarrassment to the government and our institution. Moreover, the contents of the circular also violated the principle of academic freedom, as it prevented members from speaking to the press. The circular stated the following:

It has been observed that of late some public officers have been making unauthorised statements to the written and spoken press, causing embarrassment to government. Public officers are strongly advised to refrain from making any statement to the written or spoken press except as provided by the personnel management manual.

In an interview given to the press on this issue, the former vice chancellor stated that while members of academic staff were free to speak to the press, they should not compromise government policy or the policy of the university.⁴⁰ Some members of UMASU spoke to the prime minister on this issue and the matter was taken up in parliament. The vice chancellor was forced to step down and take early retirement following this episode. A vice chancellor of a university stepping down in the name of academic freedom is no small feat, yet what is interesting in the Mauritian case is that the circular which threatened academic freedom at the UOM had been sent by the state and it was the state which ultimately put pressure on the vice chancellor to step down. The latter appears to have been a scapegoat in this whole debate as the government officially and publicly endorses the practice of academic freedom in all tertiary education institutions in the country but still implicitly tries to exercise some form control on the activities of the university. The state therefore still exercises subtle and hidden control on the UOM, which ultimately affects academic freedom at this institution.

Academic freedom: The Voices of Academics at the University of Mauritius

This section gives a voice to a sample of senior academics from the faculty of social studies and humanities at the UOM. Through semi-structured interviews, I document and analyze their understanding and experience of academic freedom. Academics interviewed include: Ibrahim Koodoruth (senior lecturer in sociology), Dr. Roukaya Kasenally (senior lecturer in media and communication), Dr. Chandan Jankee (associate professor in economics), and Dr. Uma Bhowon (associate professor in psychology).

The basic understanding of academic freedom, according to the interviewed academics, pertains to having the liberty to do what one wants to do, including speaking to the press. According to Dr. Kasenally, academic freedom should enable a culture of debate and exchange, which is fundamental to democracy. Dr. Kasenally believes that academics are agents of change and have a moral responsibility to drive change. There is a need to build a scholarly community which will link people and bring out a number of issues which have previously been hidden.

Academics have a fundamental role to play as public intellectuals, to engage other groups, and to understand and to act as a watchdog for democracy by instituting checks and balances through debate. Moreover, Dr. Kasenally talks about academics having a moral obligation to bring to the limelight issues and the need for academics to take strong positions on these issues. This would introduce a formative approach to students' minds. Given that her father had been a professor at the University of Mauritius, she notes that in the 1970s and early 1980s, the UOM was at the forefront of debates, including on ethanol and sugar technology. However, from the 1990s, the University has shied away from controversial debates. Associate Professor Jankee and Dr. Kasenally both mention the right of academics to engage in politics which was removed in 1986, as a curtailment of academic freedom. Academics are no longer allowed to engage in politics, whereas they form the pool of potential policy makers. Academics are not consulted and their voices are not factored into public policy as they are not part of the public sphere.

Associate Professor Jankee states that academic freedom is a buzz word and not something academics at the UOM really enjoy. The freedom to speak carries a high level of risk. Consequently, the tendency has been for most academics not to criticize government policy or the government. There is a feeling that this will carry repercussions as those in power do not like to be criticized. This culture of fear and silence is confirmed by Associate Professor Bhowon and Dr. Kasenally. Academics at the UOM are not encouraged to express their ideas and views, especially if these are very different from those of management or government. Academics can be penalized for expressing their ideas freely, and this has happened in the past, as in the case of a senior academic of social studies and humanities who had stated on television that there was no real research culture at the UOM and was reprimanded by the dean of her faculty for making such a statement on national television. Hence, although academics have the right to express themselves freely, in practice they are not totally free to express their opinions and views publicly. The broader political system creates restrictions on the freedom of academics such that many of them are ultimately afraid of repercussions if they express their views in public. There is an implicit culture of fear and tacit implications for academics who get involved

in controversial debates. The academics argue that the university needs to be strong enough to support academic staff who engage in controversial debates. However, Ibrahim Koodoruth highlights the fact that a sense of responsibility is necessary to make constructive participation which will add to debate. He argues that academics need to be aware of professional ethics and bound by a code of ethics of the organization, as any professional.

Dr. Kasenally also argues that the campus is very fragmented with the result that very few common platforms for discussion and debate exist. This state of affairs inhibits the ability of academics to forge a common identity as a scholarly community. There is a need to think as one voice and push for change. She states that academics at the UOM have become bureaucrats on campus and there is no real collective involvement in the academic community. Bureaucracy has taken much of the time and energy of academics—they are overloaded with administrative work. The university is in fact imbued with red tape-ism which inhibits progress at all levels and the environment is not user-friendly. Management has adopted a hierarchical attitude, one of control, to regulate and impose criteria and directives. The email circulated by the former vice chancellor was the only explicit attempt to curb academic freedom on campus. However, a strong control mechanism from management still operates, and which constantly tries to cull the maneuvers of academics. In this context, Dr. Kasenally mentions a recent “undertaking” form circulated to academics requiring them to sign a clause of confidentiality. This, according to her, is a tacit message to academics.

The four academics interviewed also note that in Mauritius, the common understanding of academic freedom has centered on freedom of time of work, namely flexible working hours. Associate Professor Jankee mentions the fact that at one time the Ministry of Education had attempted to control academic freedom by instituting a clock-in-clock-out system. However, given that such a policy would constitute a gross violation of academic freedom and was not the practice in other universities, this was not accepted. Yet, despite the flexible working hours, academics need to spend at least a minimum amount of time at the office. According to Ibrahim Koodoruth, there has been abuse of freedom by some academics. The latter believe that they

have the leeway to do as they please and use the concept of academic freedom to justify their acts. The freedom given to use one's time is basically to encourage quality research and learning and not for attending to tasks that are not related to university work.

The experiences and views of the four academics interviewed highlight the fact that there are no gross violations of the rights of academics and students in at the UOM and academic freedom does exist at the institution. Yet, academic freedom is constantly under threat by the bureaucracy of the institution, the government, and lack of institutional autonomy. As such, academics are not able to publicly and freely express views which go against government policy and the university. Although there have not been cases of arrests or detention of academics, there is a fear that such actions would hinder career progress especially at the level of promotion. As such, many academics tend to avoid participating in controversial debates.

Conclusion

This paper has described and discussed the practice of academic freedom at the University of Mauritius. As one of Africa's highly established democracies, the government of Mauritius officially endorses the practice of academic freedom in the tertiary institutions of the country. However, despite the official discourse, some form of control is still exerted by the state and this paper has argued that academic freedom at the UOM is implicitly controlled and restricted by the state and bureaucratic mechanisms. This suffocates the critical voice of academics and has turned the UOM into a teaching university. Moreover, overdependence on the state for funding and the lack of institutional autonomy have also contributed to crippling the critical voice of academics at the UOM. There is a need for the university to achieve greater autonomy, and more leeway in its functioning. Nevertheless, Mauritius has not experienced any serious violations of the rights of academics or severe curtailment of academic freedom. It is rather the institutional bureaucracy and dependence on the state for funds which have, to a certain extent, restricted the freedom of academics to criticize government policy when required.

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Notes

- ¹ "The Dar es Salam Declaration on Academic Freedom and Social Responsibility of Academics," 1990, <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/africa/DARDOK.htm>.
- ² P. T. Zeleza, "Academic Freedom in the Neo-Liberal Order: Governments, Globalization, Governance and Gender," *JHEA/RESA* 1, no. 1 (2003): 149–194.
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- ²¹ See <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/MUS.html>. The UNDP classifies countries having a HDI score of 0.800 and above as being at 'high human development' level whereas those having scores ranging from 0.500 to 0.799 are at 'medium human development' level.
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- ²³ According to the 2000 census, the literacy rate of the population aged twelve and above was 88.7 percent for men and 81.5 percent for women ("Mauritius: Fact File," Electoral Institute for the Sustainability of Democracy in Africa, accessed July 2006, <http://www.eisa.org.za/WEP/mau2.htm>).
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- ²⁵ Freedom House is an American civil rights organization formed in 1941 that advocates for democracy and freedom in the world. It documents and ranks freedom and democratic governance as practiced in the different countries, and it now has a global presence. Further information is available at <http://www.freedomhouse.org>.
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- ³² The MGI was established in 1970 as a joint Government of Mauritius–Government of India venture to promote education and culture, with an emphasis on Indian culture and traditions.
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³⁸ "Mauritius University Students Protest Against Hike in Fees," *African Press Agency/Net News Publisher*, February 28, 2008, <http://www.netnewspublisher.com/mauritius-university-students-protest-against-hike-in-fees/>.

³⁹ E-mail correspondence with the registrar, UOM (February 5, 2010).

⁴⁰ "Pr Fagoonee: Nous avons déjà exprimé nos réserves l'an dernier," *Le Mauricien*, May 12, 2009.