

Academic Freedom and the Promise of International Higher Education

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The expansion of international higher education is good news for everyone. Better-trained and educated populations, greater familiarity with other cultures, the sharing of expertise and experiences across boundaries all offer promise of a brighter, more prosperous and peaceful future. But without a firm rooting in principles of academic freedom, international higher education forfeits this promise and risks being coopted to the service of discrimination, corruption, and repression.

Respect for Academic Freedom

Academic freedom—including constituent freedoms of thought, opinion, expression, association, travel, and instruction—is essential to any free, open, and stable society. Academic freedom helps to create space for free inquiry and expression and space in which members of the academy (and by extension all members of society) are able to evaluate conflicting ideas, policies, and points of view. Every scholar depends on this space, using it to test and shape one's thoughts and theories or drawing upon earlier generations of ideas, data, materials, and methods. Academic communities are in their essence physical (and, increasingly, virtual) manifestations of this space. The promise of international higher education *presumes* the existence of this space and the vigorous combat of ideas within it, and it presumes the sharing of the *best* ideas across borders.

Around the world, however, repressive authorities intent on maintaining power seek to strip higher education of its essential core of freedom. They use higher education as a necessary vehicle for the economic and technologic development that sustains their position but repress inquiry and expression beyond officially sanctioned limits. They closely monitor academic communities. They discriminate against dissenters and “new” voices—including women and ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities. With shocking frequency they target individual scholars for intimidation and violence—including arrest on false charges, trial, and imprisonment and, in the worst cases, torture, disappearance, and death.

Take, for example, the sociologist from the Middle East whose examination of infant mortality rates showed significantly higher rates than those published in official public figures. Rather than review their own figures, the government expelled the professor from the university and imprisoned him.

There are the three scholars whose work exposed corruption in their respective countries in Central Asia, Latin America, and Africa. The first exposed corruption in the government, the second in the commercial sector, and the third in the university system itself. All were forced into hiding and exile.

There are the three political scientists—one from Europe, one from South America, and one from Southeast Asia—whose calls for peaceful, nonviolent reexamination of decades-long armed conflicts within their respective countries triggered assassination attempts. Two survived. One did not.

These are real examples of real attacks. There have been perhaps hundreds more like them in recent years. Each attack is an attempt to silence a particular voice. Each is also a message to those not directly targeted that they could be next.

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Where academic communities are silent about these attacks they risk being coopted by repressive authorities engaging in discrimination, corruption, and repression. Silence reinforces the effectiveness of attacks: wrongdoers believe they can enjoy the fruits of educational exchanges without respecting academic freedom and basic rights. Targeted communities are left isolated and vulnerable.

Academic Communities' Responsibility

Academic communities benefit from exchanges intellectually and financially, as well as in other ways. Thus they have a responsibility to ensure that these benefits are not obtained at the expense of partner communities or their members and that the exchanges do not contribute to attacks on scholars.

What, then, is the responsibility of an academic community when a partner community in another country is dominated by a ruling authority that practices ethnic, religious, or gender discrimination? Can the partnership be maintained without supporting the practices? What if a repressive

authority employs imprisonment, torture, or murder against scholars who stray beyond restrictions on inquiry or expression?

There may be circumstances in which international higher education partnerships cannot be maintained in good faith: for example where formal apartheid-type systems are in place or where genocidal violence is occurring. But situations warranting a full withdrawal are infrequent. Circumstances are almost always complex and changing, and there is a strong perspective in international higher education that favors more exchange, not less. Academic communities must not allow this perspective to support their silence in the face of wrongdoing by their partners. To do so is at least tacitly to acquiesce.

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Fortunately, silence is not the only option. Academic communities can work together to promote a cross-cultural dialogue that addresses the importance of academic freedom, its scope and boundaries, and steps that might be taken to ensure academic freedom is understood and respected.

One way to start this dialogue would be for every international higher education partnership (faculty or student exchanges, for example) to acknowledge the role of academic freedom in the relationship. A joint statement of understanding might address the responsibilities of faculty, administration, and students of the partner institutions in exercising, promoting, and respecting academic freedom and might include provisions for raising concerns about academic freedom issues. Through such simple measures significant improvements in understanding and local conditions might be achieved. Another way to start this dialogue would be to hold events focused on academic freedom and threats to scholarly communities. Introducing these issues to colleagues, students, media, and members of the public can expand the dialogue and magnify its effect.

Of course when scholars are presently suffering intimidation and attack, promoting understanding and organizing events are not enough. Action must be taken. Letters from higher education leaders put wrongdoers on notice that the world is watching. Joint-letters from groups of higher education communities are even more powerful in showing that concern about violations is widespread.

For the most severely threatened scholars, however, even letters are not enough—refuge is essential if their voices are to be saved. Academic communities can make

room on their campuses and in their classrooms for these individuals. By lending shelter and safety for a short time, academic communities give these scholars a chance to recover, regroup, and resume their work.

Of course, no one community can be expected to do it all. A collective response is necessary. Since 2000, the Scholars at Risk Network has provided that response. Scholars at Risk is an international network of more than 80 colleges and universities dedicated to promoting academic freedom and defending the human rights of scholars worldwide. Institutions of higher education in any country can join the Network. Some members send letters of concern about particular violations of academic freedom; others host events on their campuses featuring formerly threatened or exiled scholars. In the last four years, dozens have invited threatened scholars to be visitors at their campuses for up to a year or more, during which time the scholars lecture, do research, and write. These visits have saved many important voices and dozens of lives, including most of those mentioned at the beginning of this essay.

What is most important is that academic communities share responsibility and join in the growing dialogue about the importance of academic freedom. Such actions will not only help to achieve added protections for threatened individuals but will ensure that international higher education maintains its essential core of freedom, allowing it to deliver on its promise of a brighter, more prosperous, and more peaceful future for all.

GATS Update

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The inclusion of higher education in the General Agreement of Trade in Services (GATS) continues to concern higher education leaders, students, and faculty around the world. They fear that liberalization of trade in education may weaken governments' commitment to and investment in public higher education, promote privatization, and put countries with weak quality assurance mechanisms at a disadvantage in their efforts to oversee education programs delivered in their countries by foreign providers.