State monitored freedom: An analysis of academic freedom at the University of Mauritius

Ramola Ramtohul,
Department of Social Studies, University of Mauritius.
Email: rr9591@yahoo.com
February 2010

Abstract
This paper discusses the issue of academic freedom in the Mauritian context, with focus on the University of Mauritius which is the first established university of the country. 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. Government policy of widening access to education, has led a subsidisation of education and consequently, to this academic institution being state funded. As such, students following full time undergraduate degrees do not have to pay tuition fees. 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 the respect of human rights, political freedom and freedom of the press. These values also transpose at the modus operandi of the University of Mauritius, where the belief is that academic staff enjoy academic freedom. The issue of academic freedom at the University of Mauritius is often reiterated as a fact by ruling politicians. Yet, despite this discourse, I argue that academics at the University of Mauritius only benefit from a ‘controlled’ or closely ‘monitored’ form of academic freedom. Indeed, academic staff often receive directives from the Ministry of Education or from the Tertiary Education Commission, reminding them to seek approval of the Ministry of Education or the Vice Chancellor, before speaking to the media, especially the press. In 2009, a circular from the Ministry of Education addressed to all officers on this issue was also sent to the University of Mauritius. This became a very contested issue as it threatened the existence of academic freedom at the institution. The Academic Staff Union of the University protested and the issue became public such that it reached parliament. Ultimately, it was the existing Vice Chancellor of the time, who was asked to step down. Using qualitative interviews of senior academics, as well as documentary sources, this paper analyses the fragile and threatened existence of academic freedom at the University of Mauritius. The paper argues that academic freedom is constantly under threat in state funded academic institutions, even in a democratic country.

Introduction
Academic Freedom is an integral component of the culture of universities around the world. The Dar es Salam Declaration on Academic Freedom and Social Responsibility of Academics (1990) 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’. Indeed, the broad definition of
academic freedom in practice focuses on the right of academics to be free from external constraints in teaching and research and to freely criticize their institutions (Andreescu, 2009). Academic freedom has been linked with a range of academic policies, including university autonomy, departmental self-administration and tenure. Academic and intellectual freedoms have in fact been threatened or curtailed for the same reasons as human rights, and often in the same places and by the same authorities and institutions (Heisler, 2007). 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 (De George, 1997). Academic freedom is also considered as essential in protecting societies against undemocratic acts and abuses by preserving universities as institutional sanctuaries of free thinking (Gutmann, 1999). Yet another argument in favour of academic freedom regards the latter as central to the mission of universities to foster individual autonomy (Andreescu, 2009). In many instances however, academic freedom has been employed as an excuse for abusive behaviour and irresponsible acts on the part of some academics, including non fulfilment of contractual obligations and responsibilities (Olson, 2009). 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.

In the western world, especially the USA, 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 or institutional authority or reflect the wrong ideological orientation (Heisler, 2007). Moreover, while academic institutions are in principle, designed to propagate knowledge and stimulate research, Tamale and Oloka-Onyango (2000) note that this often does not reflect the reality as these institutions are often crippled by serious structural and ideological impediments. In the British context for instance, Arblaster (1974: 1) states that academic freedom and academic democracy go hand in hand and, threats to academic freedom derive from the authoritarian structures of educational institutions. A contradiction arises when a society and its institutions advertise themselves as free and democratic and yet tolerate a major degree of authoritarianism within major institutions. In this context, Tamale and Oloka-Onyango (2000) contend that academic freedom is positioned both between the state and educational institutions, as well as within the latter.

Following on from the above 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 of freedom of expression. The paper then moves on to focus on tertiary education in Mauritius, and at the University of Mauritius, discussing the practice of academic freedom at this institution of higher learning. To this end, I have employed qualitative
methods, carrying out semi-structured interviews of four senior members of academic staff to supplement the issues raised during desk research.

**Academic freedom in the developmental context**

On the African continent, prior to the recent wave of privatization, most African universities were founded, financed and controlled by the postcolonial developmental state (Zeleza, 2003). The struggle for academic freedom resembles a struggle for ‘citizenship’ where members of the academic community, either individually or collectively, are engaged in a struggle for rights and democracy within the academy as well as in the broad politics within which the academy is located (Sall, 2000). In fact, the struggle is often of the academic community for freedom and for the autonomy of academic institutions\(^1\). Such struggles are often part of the broader struggles for human rights, freedom and democracy in African contexts especially where military rule and authoritarian regimes led to direct state repression. Moreover, academics were defined as being entitled to their freedom only to the extent that the struggle for academic freedom was coupled with popular struggles and imbued with social responsibility towards those struggles (Mama, n.d.). Criticisms of the state by academics were framed in an anti-nationalist and anti-developmentalist terms (Zeleza, 2003).

Academic freedom is a necessary condition for knowledge production. In the African context, Mama (n.d.) notes that the lack of adequate public funding constitutes the major obstacle for higher education development, which becomes an indirect obstacle to academic freedom. Structural adjustment policies curbed state spending on social services, including education, thereby limiting funding available to universities. Moreover, the demands of academic careers have proliferated to the extent of becoming incompatible with time for research and reflection which is essential to high quality intellectual production. Hence, according to Mama (n.d.), 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 (Mama, n.d.).

**Democracy and Freedom in Mauritius: A brief introduction**

Mauritius is a small island of 720 square miles, located in the south western 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 colonisers 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 colonisers and then as a local dominating group. Mauritian society
is plural and multi-ethnic with the population presently made up of different groups. 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 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 65th in the 2008 Human Development Report with a Human
Development Index (HDI) value of 0.802, at ‘high human development’ level (UNDP,
2008). The post-independence government introduced a comprehensive welfare package
that included free education and health services, and a subsidised food scheme. The
country also resisted pressures from the IMF and World Bank to scale down welfare
benefits, in order to maintain social cohesion in its plural society. The maintenance of the
welfare state led to a rise in literacy rates for girls and the country has almost eradicated
illiteracy.

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. Mauritius has maintained a
democratic system of government and is now a Republic within the Commonwealth. In
fact, Freedom House (2008) has designated Mauritius as being “free” and has assigned
the island a rating of 1 out of 7 for Political Rights and 2 out of 7 for Civil Rights. The
constitution guarantees freedom of expression and the press freely expresses criticism of
government and opposition parties without fear of retribution. The Mauritius
Broadcasting Corporation, which provides the local television and the some of the radio
stations, is state owned and has a pro-government bias. There are nevertheless three
private radio stations which have a more critical view on government policy.

---

2 Mauritian society is composed of four ethnic groups and four major religious groups, namely, the Franco-
Mauritians and Creoles who are Catholic; the Indian community, Muslim and Hindu; and the small Chinese
community, either Buddhist or Catholic.

3 http://hdrstats.undp.org/2008/countries/country_fact_sheets/cfy_fs_MUS.html (accessed 13.03.09). 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.

4 According to the 2000 census, the literacy rate of the population aged 12 and above was 88.7% for men

5 Brautigam (1999a), (1999b); Alladin (1993).

6 http://www.freedomhouse.org/modules/mod_call_dsp_country-fiw.cfm?year=2008&country=7446

7 These include Radio One, Top FM and Radio Plus.
In its 2008 report, Freedom House notes that freedom of religion is respected in Mauritius, as is 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 pertaining to political and religious sensitivities. Indeed, in Mauritius, politics and religion remain highly sensitive areas and governments hesitate to take unpopular decisions. Salman Rushdie’s book (1988) ‘The Satanic Verses’ was banned in Mauritius by the then Prime Minister since its publication. The owner of the a major bookstore in Mauritius ‘Bookcourt’, was arrested and fined in June 2008 for having copies of this book 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. Hence, such censorship sends a strong message to academics who might wish to write or speak out on religion or any injustices caused by religious groups. This state of affairs indicates that religious groups in Mauritius have a strong political lobby. In November 2007, access to the social networking site Facebook was closed for some hours due to criticisms of the current Prime Minister that had been uploaded on the site.

**Tertiary education in Mauritius**

Mauritius follows the British educational system and Mauritian students still write British exams, namely at ‘O’ Level and ‘A’ Level. Since independence, the government embarked upon a strategy of widening access to education with the establishment of primary schools in remote areas. Moreover, following independence, more girls’ schools were built all over the island, with the effect of widening access of education to girls. In 1976, secondary education became free, with the immediate effect of increasing the enrolment of students, mainly girls who 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 with the effect of widening access to tertiary education.

Mauritius now has a wide range of educational institutions offering courses at tertiary level. Whereas some provide all levels of tertiary education in a range of disciplines, others centre their activities on a few selected disciplines mainly at undergraduate levels. Within the public sector, the country has two state-run universities: the University of Mauritius (UOM) and the University of Technology (UTM). The public sector also includes other tertiary education institutions, namely the Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE), the Mahatma Gandhi Institute (MGI) and the Mauritius College of the Air

---

8 The UTM became operational in September 2000 and works closely with government, business and industry.
9 The MIE was founded in 1973 and initially focussed on teacher training, education and curriculum development.
10 The MGI was established in 1970 as a joint Government of Mauritius-Government of India venture to promote education and culture, with emphasis on Indian culture and traditions.
The Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) oversees the functioning of tertiary education institutions and is responsible for allocating public funds as well as fostering, planning and coordinating the development of post-secondary education and training. In addition to the publicly funded institutions, there are a number of private educational institutions as well as foreign educational institutions currently offering courses at tertiary level in the country. These courses are mainly concentrated in the disciplines of Information Technology, Law, Management, Accountancy and Finance.

**The University of Mauritius**

The origins of the University of Mauritius began in 1924 with 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 setting up 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 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 University currently has a student population of approximately 12000 and offers undergraduate as well as postgraduate courses. 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 (Manrakhan, 1991). In fact, Manrakhan (1991: 109) comments 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 parastatal bodies.

In 1988, 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. These courses have been designed to cater for the needs of individuals who are already employed. The main source of current funding for UOM, accounting for 85% of total funding, is from the government. On this issue, Baichoo et al. (2003) 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% of its total funds, mainly through consultancy, student fees and renting of premises (Baichoo et al., 2003). Moreover almost 75% of the student population are enrolled in full time courses for which fees are not charged. The revenue generated from these students is restricted to

---

11 The MCA, established in 1971, promotes education, arts and science and culture through the mass media and distance education at tertiary level.
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 at the apex, an independent governing Council. This is a high level committee which deals with all matters relating to administration, finance and general policies. Most members of Council are appointed by or through Government and are drawn from the legislature and from other walks of public life, except for those who are appointed from within the University and are University staff. Next in hierarchy is Senate which is responsible for the academic management of the University. Academics predominate on Senate, irrespective of academic status. The structure of UOM is nonetheless very authoritarian with major decisions made by top management, with hardly any consultation of academic staff 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. However, attendance of UMASU meetings and interest in UMASU affairs is still relatively low among the bulk of academics at the university, to the advantage of management. Students are grouped into a student’s union, geared to safeguard the rights of the students of the university.

Academic staff are required to undertake a minimum of 270 hours of teaching per academic year as well as 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 requirement. 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 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 organised by UOM (mid Feb 2010) which saw a very low participation and interest on the part of the bulk of academic staff of the University. 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 (Baichoo et al., 2003). 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 university, arguing that the university has been generating funds on its own. This led to a policy of increasing the student intake in 2007, combining classes with common modules into large cohorts and requiring students to write group dissertations instead of individual projects, to alleviate the burden of marking on academic staff. This proposal was rejected by both the students and academics. For 2010 financial year, the university made a request for Rs 450 million funding, but was only
given Rs 320 million. The problem of funding and overdependence on the state for funds puts UOM in a tight situation which curtails its autonomy and affects the quality of research and teaching. 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 UOM. In fact, UOM has been losing highly qualified academic staff who are attracted by better job prospects in universities overseas.

The University of Mauritius officially endorses the practice of academic freedom. The registrar states that the “University of Mauritius has always recognised and upheld academic freedom as a fundamental right of all academics”\(^\text{12}\). The principle of academic freedom became a public and mediatized issue in May 2009 when UMASU spoke out against the previous Vice Chancellor, Prof. 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 who were civil servants and especially by the following comments of the Vice Chancellor in the 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 (Le Mauricien, 12.05.09). 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. Although the Vice Chancellor had indeed circulated the form to academics, yet this circular had been sent by the Ministry of Education to the University of Mauritius. This shows that there is an attitude of control as irrelevant circulars are still being sent to the university by state officials.

**Academic freedom: The voices of academics at the University of Mauritius**

\(^{12}\) Email correspondence with the registrar, UOM (05.02.10).
This section gives a voice to a sample of senior academics from the Faculty of Social Studies and Humanities at UOM. Through semi-structured interviews, I basically look at 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, Chandan Jankee – Associate Professor in Economics, and Uma Bhowon – Associate Professor in Psychology.

The basic understanding of academic freedom is having the liberty to do what one wants to do, including speaking to the press. According to Dr Kasenally, academic freedom should allow progressive societies on a culture of debate and exchange, which is fundamental to democracy. However, Ibrahim Koodoruth highlights the fact that this comes with a sense of responsibility as academics need to be aware of professional ethics and bound by a code of ethics of the organisation, as any professional. A sense of responsibility is necessary to make constructive participation which will add to debate. 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 up people and bring out a number of issues which have been previously hidden. Academics have a fundamental role to play as public intellectuals, to engage other groups 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 them to take a strong position. This would introduce a formative approach to students’ minds. In fact, campuses across Africa experience politics of protest, consent and dissent. Given that her father had been a professor at the University of Mauritius, she notes that in the 1970s and early 1980s, the University was at the forefront of debates, e.g. on ethanol and sugar technology. However, from the 1990s, the University has shied out of controversial debates. Academics are no longer allowed to do 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.

Academics interviewed also note that in Mauritius, the common understanding of academic freedom is mainly in terms of freedom at the level of time of work, namely flexible working hours. Associate Prof. C. 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.

Assoc. Prof C. Jankee states that academic freedom is more a buzz word and not something academics at UOM really enjoy. The freedom to speak carries a high level of risk. Consequently, the tendency has been for most academics not to criticise government policy or the government. There is a feeling that this will carry repercussions are those in power do not like to be criticised. This issue is indeed confirmed by Assoc. Prof Bhowon and Dr Kasenally. Academics at 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 penalised for expressing their ideas freely, and this has happened in the past, as in the case of Prof Sheila Bunwaree. The latter had stated on television that there was no real research culture at UOM and was reprimanded by the dean of her faculty for making such a statement on national television. Hence, although academics are supposed to be able to express their views freely, in practice they are not totally free to express their views and opinions publicly. The broader political system creates restrictions on the freedom of academics such that many of them are ultimately afraid of repercussions of expressing their views in public. There is a culture of ‘fear’ and tacit implications for academics who get involved in controversial debates. The university needs to be strong enough to support academic staff who engage in controversial debates.

She 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 notices that academics 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 which crowds out the life and voice of academics. The university is in fact imbued with red tapeism 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 VC 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 manoeuvres of academics. In this context, Dr Kasenally mentions the recent ‘undertaking’ form circulated to academics requiring them to sign a clause of confidentiality. This, according to her, is a tacit message to academics.

Assoc. Prof Jankee and Dr Kasenally mention the right of academics to do politics which was removed in 1986 as a curtailment of academic freedom. Academics should not only do research, but should be given the opportunity to implement the policies they have in mind. Moreover, another shortcoming at UOM according to Ibrahim Koodoruth is a benchmark on targets that academics need to achieve, e.g. number of papers to be
published in scholarly journals annually or to strive for promotion to senior grades. Academics are not aware of what is needed for them to grow as an academic and what targets need to be set.

Conclusion

This paper has described and discussed the practice of academic freedom at the University of Mauritius. Despite being one of Africa’s highly established democracies, the paper has highlighted the fact that academic freedom at UOM is implicitly controlled and restricted by the state and bureaucratic mechanisms. This suffocates the critical voice of academics and has turned UOM into a teaching university. There is a need for the university to achieve greater autonomy, and more leeway into its functioning. Nevertheless, Mauritius has not experienced any gross violations of the rights of academics and severe curtailment of academic freedom. It is rather the institutional bureaucracy and overdependence on the state which have to a certain extent restricted the freedom of academics to criticise government policy when required. UOM thus does not differ from most African universities which have been held ‘on a tight leash’ by the state (Zeleza, 2003).
Bibliography


Websites


Press articles

Le Mauricien (12.05.09) ‘Pr Fagoonee: Nous avons déjà exprimé nos réserves l’an dernier’. Available on http://www.lemauricien.com

Le Mauricien (13.05.09) ‘Le vice-chancellier Fagoonee en difficulté’. Available on http://www.lemauricien.com