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PROCEEDINGS

Academic Freedom Conference

“Problems and Challenges in Arab and African Countries”

10 – 11 September, 2005
Alexandria, Egypt

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Editor

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**ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM CONFERENCE
“PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES IN ARAB AND AFRICAN COUNTRIES”**

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Table of contents

FORWARD	4
INTRODUCTION	6
PART I: THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY IN ARAB AND AFRICAN COUNTRIES	11
• Social and Human Sciences and Academic Freedom: Histographic Practices in Algeria and the Arab world Hassan Remaoun	12
• From Dictatorship to Democracy: Nature and Evolution of Academic Freedom in Mali Isaie Dougnon	19
PART II: THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM	31
• The Struggle for Academic Freedom in the Palestinian Occupied Territories R. Barghouti and H. Murray	32
• Ever changing contest: The struggle for Academic Freedom and its repercussion in Nigeria, 1985-2005 Y.Z. Ya'u	43
PART III: THE COMMUNICATION REVOLUTION AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM	51
• Communication Revolution and Academic Freedom B. Hammada	52
• Academic Freedom and the Right to Publish M. Al-Shamsi and B. Hammada	66
PART IV: GLOBALIZATION AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM	79
• Globalization and Academic Freedom E. Sall	80
• New Global Economy and Academic Freedom in Kenya J.O. Jwan	89

• Globalization and Academic Freedom in Cameroon with a Focus on the Anglo-Saxon University of Buea N. Fru Awasom	99
PART V: FINAL REPORT OF THE CONFERENCE	116
ANNEXES	
• Annex A: Agenda of the conference	134
• Annex B: List of contributing authors	139
• Annex C: List of participants	140

Foreword

The Academic Freedom Conference: Problems and Challenges in Arab and African Countries, convened in Alexandria 10 – 11 September, 2005, was indeed a challenging and timely event. The conference was organized by UNESCO in cooperation with important partners such as Codesria, the Arab and African Research Centre in Cairo, the Swedish Institute in Alexandria and hosted by the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. The meeting brought together distinguished academicians and researchers from both regions.

The theme of the conference in these two regions is not new as it has been the centre of debates of many previous conferences and fora. However the issues and challenges relevant to this theme persist and are subjected to negotiation and renegotiations between the various stakeholders. In spite of the positive changes that have taken place in many countries in terms of establishing democratic systems of governments, academic freedom seems to remain subjected to restrictions and infringements in most of these. This situation prompts academicians to continue their struggle to achieve academic freedom and institutional autonomy, which they consider instrumental for development and for the construction of knowledge societies. This aspect was made clear by the participants who considered that restricting academic freedom limits the capacities of countries in knowledge generation, dissemination and application. This aspect is crucial for achieving development and welfare and contributing to the global knowledge pool. Another vital challenge is bridging the existing knowledge gap which separates developing and developed countries.

The conference clearly indicated that barriers to academic freedom, in spite of some relaxed policies in some countries, persist in both so-called democratic, non-democratic states, and in occupied and war torn areas. Many expressed opinions linking the level of academic freedom to the general freedoms available in such socio-political contexts.

One important contribution made by the conference was its attempt to draw attention to the global forces, which, in addition to national circumstances, will lead to redefining the concept and practice of academic freedom. It was affirmed that the communication revolution and the trends of globalization will have profound impact not only on academic freedom but also on the higher education system as a whole. This will affect its mission, structure, content and the way teaching and research are being conducted and delivered. On this basis, the conference called for a redefined concept of academic freedom taking into consideration both local and global factors. This particular aspect is of a great interest to UNESCO in its attempt to help systems of higher education face current issues and challenges in all regions of the world.

The interest of UNESCO in academic freedom and this particular conference is based on the Organization's mandate to promote freedom of expression, freedom of speech, education as human right and other freedoms clearly stated in international conventions and in the Declaration of Human Rights itself.

This publication contains the proceedings of The Academic Freedom Conference: Problems and Challenges in Arab and African Countries. For UNESCO, the valuable contributions made, the clarity of the debate and the concrete recommendations adopted, constitute an important milestone in the ongoing review of this subject at the international level. It is in this context that the Organization is producing this publication with the hope that it will enrich the literature on the issues and challenges facing academic freedom in developing countries.

Finally UNESCO wishes to express its appreciation and gratitude to all the partners who contributed to the convening of the conference and the production of this publication. Special thanks must go to the Swedish Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), The Swedish Institute in Alexandria and the Council for the Development of Social Sciences Research (CODESRIA) for the generous financial support they provided for the conference. Appreciation must be also extended to the Bibliotheca Alexandria, the Arab African Research Centre in Cairo (AARC) and the UNESCO-Cairo office for the technical and logistical support they provided for the convening of the conference.

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