



Recommendation of the National Conference on Academic Freedom in Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions

Introduction

The Forum for Social Studies (FSS) launched a major research project titled, “The Status of Governance, Academic Freedom and Teaching Personnel in Ethiopian Higher Education” in 2006. The project sought to undertake case studies of major public and private higher education institutions, and to generate other individual papers on cross-cutting issues. The case studies in particular used UNESCO's (1997) Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel as a conceptual framework for assessing the situation in Ethiopia. To disseminate the research results and generate a public debate on the issues raised by the studies, the FSS launched a two-day National Conference on Academic Freedom in Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions, which was held in Semien Hotel, Addis Ababa, from 26th to 27th April 2007. The Conference brought together over 150 participants consisting of leaders of higher education institutions, government officials, researchers, teachers, students, representatives of international organizations, development partners, civil society activists, journalists and other stakeholders.

The two-day deliberations on the status of governance, academic freedom, and higher-education teaching personnel brought to light the opportunities, constraints, and challenges facing higher education in Ethiopia. Cognizant of the need to mobilize all stakeholders to build on the successes registered so far and to address the gaps encountered hitherto, the participants of the Conference resolved to put forward this Recommendation for action by all key stakeholders.

Preamble

We, the participants of the National Conference on Academic Freedom,

Recognising that the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, in line with standard international and regional legal instruments guaranteeing human, civil, political, economic, and cultural rights, makes key provisions recognizing fundamental human and democratic rights;

Recognising also that Ethiopia's “Higher Education Proclamation No. 351/2003” provides for a certain level of institutional autonomy and academic freedom in the higher education institutions;

Recalling that as a Member State, Ethiopia is expected to accept and apply UNESCO's standard-making instruments relating to Education, including the 1997 Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel;

Taking into account that the results of the empirical studies show the degree of institutional autonomy actually exercised by the higher education institutions is perceived to be quite limited, especially in terms of curriculum and programme development; student admission; staff employment, promotion, and dismissal; the appointment and removal of institutional leaders; financial management; and the management of campus security;

Concerned that the studies indicate that most of the teaching personnel in public institutions in particular are highly dissatisfied with their rather heavy workloads, low salaries, low participation in institutional policy/decision-making processes, limited academic freedom, and generally uncondusive working conditions;

Noting that the high cost of living, coupled with the low level of salary, is driving teachers to preoccupy themselves with external consultancies and/or carry extra teaching loads which tend to undermine the quality of their teaching and research;

Concerned that the current rapid process of expansion which is driven by a top-down approach is contributing to the overcrowding of classrooms, libraries, cafeterias and dormitories; shortage of teaching/reading materials; the deterioration of the quality of student facilities and services; and to excessive workload of teachers;

Observing that inter-ethnic and/or sectarian clashes among higher education students are increasing in frequency and leading to the interruption of classes, and to the injury and summary dismissal of students;

Persuaded that the institutionalization and active promotion of academic freedom, social dialogue, democratic governance, collegial relations and transparency will encourage and nurture a more dynamic intellectual life, democratic values, respect for diversity, social harmony, and campus peace;

Convinced that the Government of Ethiopia is highly committed to the rapid growth of higher education as evidenced by the dramatic expansion of access and diversification in the higher education sector, and that this significant effort should be supplemented by an equally radical improvement in quality;

Believing that UNESCO's 1997 Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel embodies internationally accepted principles, values, and norms, the full application of which will create an enabling environment that helps the higher education institutions to successfully achieve their missions;

Recalling the Declaration of the “**World Conference on Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century: Vision and Action**” (9th October 1998), calling on “States, including their governments, parliaments and other decision-makers”, to “**establish clear policies concerning higher education teachers**, as set out in the Recommendation concerning Higher-Education Teaching Personnel approved by the General Conference of UNESCO in November 1997”;

Bearing in mind that the great majority of students, teaching personnel and the leadership of higher education institutions are unaware of the 1997 UNESCO Recommendation and other relevant standard-making instruments of UN agencies;

Considering that the students, teaching personnel, and leaders of higher education institutions, both in the public and private sectors, are among the key stakeholders of the educational policies, strategies, and programmes of the nation in general and of their respective institutions in particular,

have resolved to recommend as follows:

Recommendation

1. We strongly recommend that the Government of Ethiopia and the leaders of the higher education institutions take concrete steps, including providing public forums of discussions, to create a greater awareness of the 1997 UNESCO Recommendation and other relevant international human rights instruments among the members of the higher education community;

2. We urge the Government of Ethiopia and the governing organs of the institutions of higher education to institutionalize the principles, values, and norms enshrined in the 1997 UNESCO Recommendation and other international best practices of institutional autonomy and academic freedom by incorporating them into their institutions' charters and other regulatory frameworks and rigorously applying them in the everyday conduct of their educational affairs;
3. We recommend that institutions of higher education put in place institutionalized governance that is characterized by rule of law, consistency, and accountability;
4. While recognizing the merit of the affirmative action taken to expand women's access to higher education, we also recommend that national and institutional policy makers devise more effective and sustainable mechanisms to improve women's academic performance to enable them to successfully compete with their male peers and to widen their career opportunities in teaching, research and academic leadership in the higher education sector;
5. We call upon the teaching personnel to seize every opportunity available for promoting and protecting academic freedom and institutional autonomy, professionalism and excellence, and to diligently and unwaveringly discharge their social responsibility to improve and assure the welfare of their society, and the good of the nation;
6. We urge the student community to rise above ethnic, sectarian and/or ideological divides and prejudices in their pursuit of knowledge and truth, to espouse universal ideals of equality, justice, freedom, peace and progress for all, and to foster harmonious relations with their peers and instructors based on tolerance, respect, and understanding;
7. To stem the internal and external brain drain, to attract new talent, and to enable the teaching personnel in public institutions in particular to concentrate on their primary duties of teaching, research and community service, we strongly advise the Government of Ethiopia to review the salary scale and benefit packages of the teaching personnel in line with the market rate and the rise in the cost of living;
8. We recommend that social dialogue and stakeholder participation be instituted as the norms and standard practices for policy/decision-making, and that appropriate channels and mechanisms for consultation be put in place to involve the teaching personnel and students in the policy/decision-making processes at the national and institutional levels;
9. In view of the originality and relevance of the studies conducted by senior researchers under the sponsorship of the Forum for Social Studies, and the considerable insights gained from the studies on the opportunities, constraints and challenges concerning institutional governance, academic freedom and teaching personnel, we recommend that both the leaders of higher education institutions and the educational policy-makers at the national level seriously consider the findings and recommendations of these studies to improve the situation in Ethiopian higher education institutions;
10. We also call upon the academic community, civil society, development partners and other concerned international organizations, to encourage and engage in dialogue with the Government of Ethiopia over the application of UNESCO's 1997 Recommendation as well as the findings of the FSS studies, and to provide the Government with the necessary support for translating the provisions and research findings into practice.

April 27, 2007
Addis Ababa