THE CONUNDRUM OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN AFRICA: CAN ACADEMICS IN CONTEXTS SUCH AS TANZANIA HAVE ABSOLUTE ACADEMIC FREEDOM?

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the concept and the terrain of academic freedom in Tanzania, highlighting the challenges it faces today. It goes beyond individual rights of academics to address the fundamental role universities play in critically examining power structures, societal injustices and the systems shaping our world. At the core of this issue is a persistent tension: while academics strive for unrestricted intellectual inquiry, those in authority often view critical scholarship as a threat to the established order. This dynamic stifles open dialogue, transforming universities from vibrant spaces for intellectual exchange into environments characterized by cautious conformity. To understand this phenomenon, the study looks back at Tanzania's rich intellectual history, drawing on the experiences of academics who recall a time when critical voices and agency thrived. We conducted semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of scholars from various

disciplines, career stages and genders at a Tanzanian university. This qualitative approach allowed us to delve deeply into their lived experiences and perspectives on academic freedom. Our analysis reveals a complex interplay of factors contributing to the erosion of academic freedom. Many academics expressed feelings of pressure to self-censor their research and publications, especially regarding sensitive political or social issues. In addition, a decline in university autonomy has restricted institutional capacity to protect academic freedom and foster an environment conducive to critical discourse. The diminishing presence of forums for open intellectual debates has further stifled critical scholarship and led to a shift from collective action to individual pursuits, potentially compromising the impact of academic work. In conclusion, this article calls for a renewed commitment to academic freedom in Tanzania, emphasizing the urgent need for policy and practice reforms that encourage uninhibited intellectual exploration. By restoring robust academic freedom, Tanzanian universities can become genuine pillars of knowledge creation and meaningful contributor to society's advancement.

Keywords: Academic freedom, academics, universities, higher education institutions, Tanzania

INTRODUCTION

This article argues that "academic freedom" in a context such as Tanzania is imbued with the conundrum whereby academics operate with limited freedom to generate critical ideas, raise essential voices and hold authorities accountable. Such conditions not only constrain individual academics' freedom to express themselves and voice out critical issues, but also undermine the generation of genuine and critical scholarship. Chachage (2008) calls this as dehumanisation and de-socialisation, which is internalised by some academics whereby administration is now the university and faculties are mere subsidiaries. In essence, Chachage is pointing towards a censored academic freedom, which is at odds with the fundamental role of scholarship. Such fundamental role demands the absence of outside interference, censure or obstacles in pursuing and practising academic work. This is particularly important given that academic freedom is a hallmark of critical, experimental and creative thought to advance intellectual inquiry and knowledge (Council on Higher Education 2005).

The notion of academic freedom is complex and has attracted many conceptualisations. For this article, we draw on the 1997 UNESCO Declaration on the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel, through which academic freedom is understood as: "[...] the right without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express freely their opinions about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies' (UNESCO 1997).

The above conceptualisation illustrates the multifaceted nature of academic freedom and

its importance. A crucial point that needs to be emphasised is that the conceptualisation above embodies the core functions of academics, which are different from those of someone who works for or is affiliated with a church, political party or club (Fuchs 1963). At the core of academics functions is the freedom of inquiry, which enables the pursuit of different values, such as the "truth" in the outcome of the inquiry, or more generally, "excellence" in pursuit of the investigation, or simply the peace of mind of inquirers (Bilgrami and Cole 2015, 1). Central to freedom of inquiry is the expansive notion of freedom, which is inherently underpinned by the absence of any restrictions. Such restrictions on academic freedom cut across several dimensions. Space prevents us from exploring each of these dimensions in detail.

A conception of academic freedom adopted in this article is not new as it has its roots in philosophical arguments associated with Socrates' teaching as well as early colleges and universities that existed during the medieval era. In antiquity time, there was an enforced suicide of Socrates by the Athenian authorities who claimed that his teaching corrupted the minds of youth (Stone 2015; Brickman 1968). As Stone (2015) described, the modern history of academic freedom begins with the advent of universities, which we know today, in the twelfth century. During the Middle Ages, universities were regarded as centres of power, prestige, and autonomy, partly manifested in electing their officials and setting their own rules (Stone 2015; Fuchs 1963). However, a sharp shift and limits on the scope of inquiry emerged as the Roman Catholic Church authorities imposed a hard core of authoritatively established doctrine, which was obligatory on all scholars and teachers (Stone 2015). As such, knowledge generation was consistent with a single system of truth anchored in Christian dogma (Stone 2015; Brickman 1968). Thwarting of academic freedom continued as in the seventeenth century, absolute freedom of thought was neither practised nor professed, and freedom of inquiry in America was severely limited by the constraints of religious doctrine (Stone 2015; Wilson 2014). The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed a continuation of academic unfreedoms as the Enlightenment received scepticisms and counterattacks, allowing the churches to reassert their control over intellectual life (Stone 2015). The author identifies three factors that stifled academic freedom in this era (paraphrased from Stone 2015, 14): To begin with, the college teacher was regarded first and foremost as a teacher. Because academic honours hinged entirely on teaching, there was no incentive or time for research. Second, educators of this era generally regarded college students as intellectually naive and morally deficient. "Stamping in," derogatively used to imply that the predominant pedagogical method, and learning was understood to mean little more than memorisation and repetitive, mechanical drill. Third, freedom of inquiry and teaching was smothered by the prevailing theory of "doctrinal moralism," which assumed that the worth of an idea should be judged by its moral advantages.

This attitude is anathema to scholarly inquiry.

Before the end of the 19th century, several issues shaped the notion of practices of academic freedom. Darwinism and the Humboldtian model had a significant impact on and influenced German universities. The former constitutes proponents of evolution whose ideas revolutionised academic inquiry, leading to clashes between conflicting cultures, intellectual styles and educational values (Stone 2015). The clerical control of universities continued to dwindle as clergy were seen as incompetent in science. The influence of the latter (the German model of university) on academic freedom was more focused on a methodical and independent search for truth (Stone 2015). In the context of the German university model, a professor enjoyed the freedom of teaching and inquiry; such freedom was a distinctive prerogative of the academic profession and an essential condition of a university (Stone 2015).

Although American universities borrowed heavily from Germany in this era, two critical differences evolved between the American and German conceptions of academic freedom. First, the German conception encouraged a professor to convince his students of the wisdom of his views. This is similar to negative freedom, which, as described by Ballim (2022) involved elements of exclusion and prejudice woven into institutional culture and hamper academic freedom. For Cooper and Mtawa (2022) such institutional culture is also a product of external power interference or constraints, which dictate choices and actions of academics with respect to academic freedom. Meanwhile, the American conception held that the proper stance for professors in the classroom was neutrality on controversial issues. Indoctrinating students with what the teacher deemed factual was considered intolerable in a university (Stone 2015). Another important distinction is that academic freedom in German conception involved freedom within and outside, with the former allowing a wide latitude of utterance. At the same time, the latter compelled professors to be circumspect and non-political (Stone, 2015). The American conception emphasised the centrality of freedom of speech and active participation in social and political action (Stone 2015).

Tensions, friction and debate about academic freedom continue to be experienced even in the 21st century. Today, academic freedom remains far from secure in many parts of the world and, in some places, is under attack (Altbach 2007).

In Tanzanian context, the history and conception of academic freedom is rooted in the European history largely influenced by colonial legacy, that continues to dominate the fabric and model of universities in Africa in general and Tanzania in particular (Kratou and Laaksо, 2020). However, it cannot be discussed without linking it to different historical moments in the country. This aligns with Zeleza's (2003, 151) argument that “defences and definitions of academic freedom are as conceptual as they are contextual, subject to intellectual, institutional,

and ideological transformations within the wider society and the academy itself'. Given the limited space in this article, one is inclined to briefly discuss academic freedom in Tanzania post-independence in the 1960s. Some early influential scholars advanced the academic freedom agenda and movement through the Dar es Salaam School of Thought. However, during the first three decades after independence, higher learning institutions and academics constantly struggled against state control and political interference (Shivji 1991). For Itandala (1996), the years 1989 and 1990 marked a turning-point in the struggle for democracy and academic freedom in institutions of higher learning.

In April 1990, six academic staff associations congregated during the "Dar es Salaam Declaration on Academic Freedom and Social Responsibility of Academics". This was followed by the "Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility", which was modelled upon the Dar es Salaam Declaration and included academics across the continent. The Dar es Salaam Declaration in particular emphasised the centrality of education for human emancipation, which was built around several basic principles. As captured by Chachage (2008), the included:

- the full development of the human personality,
- preparing a person to strive for and participate fully in the emancipation of the human being and society from oppression,
- inculcating in every person respect for all human culture developed by humankind,
- developing critical faculties, inculcating the spirit of scientific enquiry and encouraging the pursuit of knowledge and the search for the whole truth in the interest of social transformation and human liberation,
- make every person conscious of ecology and the need to protect the environment.

However, despite the two declarations, academic freedom has continued to be undermined in multiple ways. This has prompted us to ask: Can academics in contexts such as Tanzania have absolute academic freedom? Our idea of absolute freedom does not entirely foreclose the boundaries and responsibilities; instead, it is about the ability of academics to exercise their intellectual prowess and mirror universities as centres characterised by free generation and exchange of ideas, where the received wisdom is questioned and tested, unpopular opinions are put forward without fear and prejudice or unreasonable restrictions (McCrae 2011). Without absolute academic freedom, universities' purposes and core functions are undermined. In essence, undermining academic freedom is a recipe for constricting the ability of universities and academics to use the freedom to undertake relevant research and training students to serve

the common good. Such framing reflects the underlying principles of The Dar es Salaam Declaration on Academic Freedom and Social Responsibility of Academics 1990. The principles enshrined in the declaration align with academic freedom, which encourages advancing the common good in its broadest sense. This is in line with Calhoun's (2009, 578) defence for academic freedom through which it is argued that:

To develop these arguments, and indeed not just to argue for academic freedom but to grasp the value of the university as a reason for its existence and a goal for its improvement, we need to see that enterprise in a richer and more complete way—as involving the problem choice and intellectual agendas of researchers, as involving scholarship and the re-examination and renewal of long-considered truths as well as the production of new knowledge, as involving communication among different participants in the common enterprise and with external constituencies, and as centred on learning, including that of students as well as of teachers and researchers at all stages of their careers.

The statement above demonstrates the link between academic freedom and the pursuit of the public good. At its core lies teaching, research, and public engagement, which are geared toward delivering the public good and thus responding to the questions of what universities are for.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMING

This article draws on the Capability Approach (CA) developed by Amartya Sen and taken up by multiple scholars. The use of the CA is based on its emphasis on the centrality of creating enabling conditions for people (academics) to have the freedom to achieve beings and doings they see as valuable (Sen 1999) in and through academic freedom. Thus, the CA is built around elements of agency, which is about the ability to individually and collectively act and bring about change. The agency dimension is often linked to the capability for voice, which is the ability to voice and call out critical issues or unjust societal practices. Some deem this as the extent to which people can have their say and make it count when designing and implementing collective decisions and regulations (Bonvin 2012). There is also an element of capabilities, which in this context is about what academics value doing and being as a result of academic freedom. Our argument is that a greater academic freedom, which fosters capabilities is central to supporting the common good although we do not assume that all academics would value things that are in the "common good". The final but equally important construct is the functionings, which denotes achievements academics derive from being or doing what they value in and through academic freedom. A combination of these constructs allows us to ascertain whether academic staff have the freedom, to tell the truth through research, act

individually and collectively in questioning structural injustices and unjust practices, and engage freely in ideas generating and cultivating critical minds among students. Macfarlane (2011) described this freedom as the "rights" to full and free expression and as a means by which academics and students can experience a genuinely "higher" education that enables them to become critical thinkers.

The core constructs of the CA are helpful in this article because they enable us to investigate the positionality and experiences of academic staff, enablers, and impediments to academic freedom.

The table below summarises the key constructs of the CA and their ideal application in the context of academic freedom:

Construct	Description	Application for Academic Freedom
Agency	Capacity to act and effect change.	Individual and collective ability to pursue transformative research, teaching, and public engagement.
Voice	Influence in collective decision-making processes.	Freedom to express views within and beyond the university, with meaningful impact on decision-making.
Capabilities	Real opportunities to achieve valued "doings and beings," considering constraints.	Substantive freedoms to pursue valued academic activities and identities and free from undue restrictions.
Conversion factors	Contextual factors enabling or hindering capability realization.	Socio-political conditions, institutional structures, and power dynamics shaping academic freedom.

Source: Robyens (2017), Crocker and Robeyns (2009).

However, while the CA offers valuable and generative elements, structural constraints or in capability language "conversion factors" as described by Robeyns (2017), may play an essential role in shaping academic staff's ability or inability to exercise full or absolute academic freedom. Depending on the context, these structural constraints can be at institutional and systemic (system) levels. They may include some of the conversion factors highlighted in the above Table.

METHODOLOGY

The issue of academic freedom is context-specific, and academic staff may have varying experiences in terms of the ways in which it is practised. In this context, academic staff construct multiple meanings and experiences of academic freedom in their settings. To unpack these meanings and experiences, this article employed a qualitative research approach to allow

the gathering of in-depth perspectives of academic staff. Tanzania has a population of 49 Universities, out of which the X was sampled because it serves as a generative case study for several reasons. Firstly, since its establishment, the X has been experiencing rather tense and often unpredictable relationship with the authorities (Itandala, 1996). Secondly, it has made historical contribution to the national and continental debate on academic freedom spearheaded by its iconic School of Thought in the 1980s and early 1990s. Thus, the university provided a compelling case for understanding and unpacking the conundrum of academic freedom.

The qualitative data for this article was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 15 academic staff from the X. The emphasis was on academics with strong institutional memories and recollections of moments, which reflect the complexities and changing patterns of academic freedom at the institutions and with the broader higher education system. Data collection also entailed critically reviewing documents such as internal university memoranda and government circulars/directives. Data was then subjected to inductive Thematic Analysis, allowing the themes to emerge from the data. We also analysed the data using conceptual lenses of the capability approach.

Below is a detailed overview of the participants, disaggregated by rank, gender, and academic disciplines:

Category	Demographic Characteristics
Age	• 40–49 years: 6 • 50 years and above: 9
Academic Ranks	• Lecturers: 4 • Senior Lecturers: 7 • Associate Professors: 2 • Professors: 2
Gender	• Male: 9 • Female: 6
Academic Disciplines	• Law: 1 • Education: 7 • Humanities: 7

Considering the considerable number of academic staff and the diverse range of disciplines at the case study university, the selected sample was deemed suitable and sufficient to capture a wide array of viewpoints and experiences related to academic freedom. The inclusion of two

professors and academics over the age of 50 was crucial, as their extensive institutional memories and deep understanding of the complexities and challenges associated with academic freedom in the Tanzanian higher education context provide valuable insights. Their perspectives contribute to a richer analysis of the historical and contemporary issues surrounding academic freedom.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study results show that a range of issues manifest how complex academic freedom is and the impasses academic staff encounter as they attempt to exercise academic freedom within the context of the core functions of universities.

Constrained agency and undermined capability for voice

Genuine academic freedom depends on, among other things, the presence of agentic academics, collective agency and a capability for voice. Combining these three dimensions can be described as the hallmark of academic freedom. A higher education system and institutions with agentic academics working collectively and having the voice to engage in critical discussions, intellectual inquiry and finding solutions to societal challenges. However, there seems to be a constant tendency and practice of suppressing or silencing agentic academics and constraining their valued voices. Emphasising the idea of speaking the truth and without fear, which is a fulcrum of academic freedom, one interviewee stated that:

> "Our job as academics is to search for the truth and present or speak out such truth. We have seen over time that those who search for the truth are told you can touch this but not that. So, it is risky when you start scratching the truth. Sometimes, academics scratch the truth and find it, but they are told to keep quiet. However, now, that is not how our job as academics is supposed to be. While those [sic] like to keep secrets, our job as academicians and researchers is to reveal the truth. But if you try, you may be asked: what do you want? Sometimes people are transferred to other posts outside academia just to silence them" (Interview, September, 2024).

In the above excerpt, one of the recurring keywords is "truth", which is at the centre of academic freedom. This is because academic freedom guarantees the discovery of truth and the advancement of knowledge for the benefit of society at large (Lyer, Saliba and Spannagel, 2023). Such an explanation divulges the power that authorities have and hold. They can take away the freedom of academics through rebukes and transferring any individual who may hold their ground insofar as truth is concerned. Such authoritative practices are not only external to universities but are also exercised even within campuses. The interviewee further reveals this:

> "Across history, there has been a tussle between university's management and champions of academic freedom. As academics, we look at things with a critical eye, but often, university management looks at those academics as enemies or rebels. So even within the institutions, academic freedom is restricted" (Interview, September 2024).

Supporting the above argument about watchdog tendency, another interviewee added:

> "There are complex control mechanisms, which include university administration – that is internal factor as well as externalities bearing in mind government and other stakeholders – political parties, civil society, which bring so much infiltrations on campus –impacting academic freedom" (Interview, September, 2024).

The claims above reveal that university management teams and officer bearers are not necessarily meant to stand for truth but to make sure that academics do not contradict the status quo or do not raise issues which regimes may not want to hear. Thus, at some point, the management and the academics may stand on different sides of academic freedom. This contradicts Butler's (2017, 858) view that "higher education grounded in academic freedom opens up the possibility of free and critical thought, including intellectual positions that call into question the status quo". While one may blame the university management for exercising some control and restrictions, there is also a need to be cognizant of the structural constraints beyond the university level. This raises the question of whether university management is under some siege to ensure that academics are restricted. The restrictions might come in different forms, and oftentimes, they are explicit or implicit. This leads us to question the university's autonomy.

Nonetheless, there are some who contend that academics possess the agency to address critical issues relevant to their work and the broader society. Their central argument is that both students and academics enjoy the freedom to pursue independent research and publish their findings without censorship. This perspective frames academic freedom primarily as the capacity to engage in research activities, which is significant considering that knowledge production through research is a fundamental purpose of universities. The sentiments of this group of academics are summarized as follows:

> "At our university, academic freedom is there as you can see students have freedom to go to the field and collect data, we academics are free to ask for ethical clearance for research, we do write proposals. This is part of academic freedom because all these are part and parcel of generating knowledge. Thus, so far as a university we are free and I have never seen or encountered a case where one academic was refused to conduct research because it was against the institutional or national norms and values or put the national security into disrepute. I have never heard such" (Interview, September, 2024).

The quotation paints a picture of a university environment where academic freedom seems vibrant, allowing students and faculty to dive into research activities like data collection and proposal writing without undue restriction. It speaks to a supportive atmosphere, particularly with ethical approvals, and reassures that research isn't stifled by external or institutional censorship, suggesting a sensible balance between independence and responsibility. Yet, this experience might not capture the whole story, as different internal and external socio-political pressures and specific discipline challenges could affect others differently. Understanding and addressing any obstacles others might face is crucial to ensuring that academic freedom is genuinely inclusive and equitable for everyone in the university community.

The group mentioned above likely reflects a minority of academics who are integral to the institutional structures that make pivotal decisions. This situation highlights that academic freedom is multidimensional and often implicit, encompassing various aspects such as freedom of expression, freedom of thought, the ability to act, access to critical information, and active participation in decision-making processes both within the university and in the wider community. This broader understanding of academic freedom was articulated as follows:

> "We are narrowing too much this idea of academic freedom. We need to challenge it from a wider spectrum. We need to look at internal and external processes. We need to look at the extent to which students have access to information, the welfare of academics and students in terms of infrastructure, facilities, students with disabilities, gender dimensions and participation in decision making processes. So internally we need to look at how do people feel about the institutional administration for instance but externally we need to look at infiltration and propagation from outside e.g. political parties, civil society. These have implication on freedom of thoughts, freedom of expression etc." (Interview, September, 2024).

At the core of this perspective is the notion that certain limitations on academic freedom tend to be implicit and subtle. These constraints can only be identified and dismantled through a broadened inquiry and exploration of academic freedom that transcends the prevailing narrow discourse with the aim of moving towards a more expansive version of academic freedom.

The question of universities' autonomy

Academic freedom is inherently intertwined with university autonomy. The latter allowed each university to manage its affairs without undue outside interference (Lyer et al. 2023). However, in the Tanzanian context, university autonomy has been characterised by shifts and debates. Although it is difficult to pinpoint a particular moment when it can be said that universities enjoyed full independence, the recent experience indicates dwindling university autonomy. It appears that there are multiple interested groups which seem to use different means and

mechanisms to undermine university autonomy. The main concern seems to be that universities are becoming spaces where critical minds are no longer cultivated and tolerated. Cultivating a critical mind is essential because "if students are not taught to think critically, they will be at the mercy of anyone with a persuasive story" (Cooke 2007, 399). For academic staff, university autonomy provides a fertile space for freedom of thought and expression (Butler 2017). However, there is a sense from the academics that independence has been taken away with universities under constant surveillance, and some of the key decisions are no longer under their purview. This is captured below:

> "The government and politicians have always feared universities because these institutions breed critical minds. So, what the government started to do, especially after 1990, was to crack down on institutions, and of course, universities could not make any decisions or raise any voice". So, processes such as recruitment, promotion, and others. We are under the central government, even now. The government would use a simple funding mechanism and appoint top management" (Interview, September, 2024).

The practices of interfering and watchdogging and their implications were astutely pointed out by Zeleza (2003). Writing in the context of the aftermath of the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, in New York and Washington, Zeleza (2003, 153) posits "The security services have also stepped up their work on campuses for recruitment and surveillance, inciting fear and anger among academics". Such concern was also raised by several academics interviewed in the case study. Holding a critical view of the interference and hands-on culture, the following example captures such concern:

> "If you look at the governance Charter, the Council governs the university. Your appointment letter and my letter are from the University Council, not the government. But if you look at the trends now, you see interference. The autonomy is gone, and without the autonomy, there is no freedom. This goes further in terms of academics' works as far as policy analysis is concerned and strategic engagement with the government to get inputs from researchers. The issue is that you have to sing the song" (Interview, September, 2024).

At the heart of the above extract is the issue of compromised autonomy, leading academic staff to adopt a less critical stance and align themselves with the norms and values of those pursuing specific agendas. The quote also implies that censorship manifests not as a direct intervention but as an indirect influence, often driven by external factors. This trend, if not critically examined, is likely to drift academic staff from being genuine intellectuals to becoming "sycophants" whereby academic staff are compelled to do and act in accordance and not based on intellectual norms and principles. To use Sen's (1999) view, academic staff may become "passive recipients" of instructions and directives with limited freedom to interrogate them.

However, many academics find themselves in a challenging position, carefully navigating their environment. While they may engage in some level of self-censorship, they certainly do not see themselves as sycophants. Instead, they strive to maintain their integrity and authenticity while balancing the pressures around them.

Decline of critical engagement forums and spaces

Forums and spaces such as unions of students, unions of academic staff, staff-students' seminars, and debates, which used to be vibrant in the 1970/80s and early 1990s, have been weakened, and some are no longer in existence. Perhaps an extract from the work of Mazrui (2003, 136) is a helpful starting point to capture the situation during the early decades after independence:

> "Those were the days when I could be engaged in a public disagreement with a Head of State, Milton Obote, and survive. It was also possible for a public debate in the Town Hall of Kampala between a professor of political science (myself) and the Head of Intelligence in Uganda's Security system."

The statement from Mazrui illustrates how critical engagement forums and spaces were possible post-independence in some African countries. These forums and spaces are the bedrock of academic freedoms, allowing academic staff and students to engage in critical intellectual discussions. These discussions strengthen the academic core and serve as a training ground for essential minds and ideas generation platforms where solutions to social challenges are provided. These spaces also allow academic staff to play a role of academic citizenship whereby academics draw on "freedoms, autonomy, values and individual motivations in their participation in a range of academic work viewed integratively" (Albia and Cheng 2023, 710).

However, for some reasons, potentially related to issues of university autonomy and constrained agency, today, critical discussions such as those spearheaded by School of Thought are declining. As one of the academics stated:

> "During our time, the campus was vibrant. Every Friday, we used to discuss uncomfortable matters, and we would invite a politician or someone with power or authority to come and debate with us. But there were also unions, which were at the forefront in pushing for freedom, voices and expression of academics. But today, those forums are dead, and if they still have any breath left, they are toothless. So, academics do not have meaningful platforms anymore" (Interview, September 2024).

The above statement demonstrates that critical engagement forums and spaces catalysed flourishing academic freedom It is vital and worth noting that the "academics do not have

meaningful platforms anymore", indicating that spaces where academics can express their views and engage in critical discussions as those pointed out by Itandala (1996) have been curtailed. Limited or lacking such spaces is a recipe for constraining capability for voice and agency, whether individual or collective. While constrained academic freedom might be one of the main reasons, there are other possible explanations (e.g. workload of individual academics increased to a point where they do not have time to engage in critical dialogues).

The periodisation in the above excerpt shows the shifting dynamics at the case study university concerning the decline of critical engagement forums and spaces. The comment on the vibrancy during the early years potentially speaks to the influence of the School of Thought. Appearing to support the foregoing, another interviewee with relatively affluent institutional memory and recollections expressed that:

> "I remember we used to have good and strong representations in the Senate by students and academics. We would debate and ask for more information to inform our colleagues. The academic staff assembly, was powerful, and it used to stand firm on matters of academics' rights" (Interview, September 2024).

The statement above points towards an expansive form of academic freedom, which, when undermined, makes the works of academics devoid of any substantial impact. Representation in key decision-making bodies and processes, the opportunity to debate freely and access to information are key ingredients of academic freedom. Nevertheless, the current general feeling between and among academics is the weakened representation and limited privy to certain information, even if it impacts their academic well-being and freedom to execute the core functions.

The shift from collective agency to individual self-interest

One of the trends that has been observed to be on the rise in the recent past is the shift from collective agency to more individualistic and self-interested tendencies among academics. It seems that the collective agency and voices of the early years are now being replaced by individual academic staff's approach to fighting for specific demands.

> "At one moment, we were quite strong, and we had solidarity, and the management knew that even if they attend forums such as academics union, they are there as members, not as management. But it is no longer the same. One of the reasons I would say is maybe the interests have changed across most staff members. There is a feeling that nothing can be done, and control is now beyond the university. It is quite strong in all aspects, and indicators are very obvious" (Interview, September, 2024).

The shift from a collective agency approach to striving for academic freedom to an individualistic and self-interested survival mode is due to a number of factors. One of the reasons is that academic freedom demands of the early years post-independence were associated with elements of fights against colonialism and its aftermaths in the spirit of nation-building. Thus, authorities place hope on universities and academics, who deem themselves part of the collective efforts in the processes and struggles to build the nation. Similarly, the higher education landscape and demands within the broader society differed slightly from today's context and conditions under which universities operate. As summed in the following statement:

> "That period was different in terms of conditions, and collective efforts were needed because it seemed that the biggest quest in the African continent was the liberation from colonisation, neo-colonialism, and existing national struggles, which are not similar to this point. The conditions of that moment governed how the shift within academic freedom is moving. In Tanzania, we were in the process of nation-building, which needed collected power and contribution from all facets of society, from the elite, like those working at the university, to citizens and other sectors. That needed people to sit down and bring their contribution and X was like a think tank of collecting contributions and analyse them and advice the government for further steps. So, the School of Thought at that particular moment was a necessity to have so that the country can stand, and without solidarity, we could not have a country. So, nation-building and patriotism and engagement with society are at the forefront. But the world has changed and the academic freedom we are seeing today is different from the one we came up with those days" (Interview, September, 2024).

There are pockets of evidence to suggest that during the early years after independence, academic freedom, whether genuine or not, was largely embraced by the state. Such a seemingly positive attitude, however, was connected to the positionality of the state about context and moment within the continent. Being one of the countries that spearheaded the struggle for independence, particularly in the Sub-Saharan region, academics were seen to be central in pushing for critical engagements and questioning the unjust colonial practices of that moment. As one interviewee explained:

> "Perhaps I can say that academic freedom was state driven during that moment, so the urgency was driven because the state was saying that we have our colleagues in Cuba, Zimbabwe, Namibia etcetera. Who are not independent yet. So, there was a push driven by the state. So, that freedom of open discussions put pressure on other countries' governments, and the awakening changed as time moved on. As we moved into the 1980s with the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAPs) and industrialisation, which was meant to calm down economic recession, the national narrative started to get lost with the state-driven desire for the think tank starting to diminish because the goal was independence, now we are independent, what next and that is when we started to ask what next" (Interview, September 2024).

The question of "what next" as pointed out in the above voice, is a quintessential indication of the shift that is taking place, particularly from collective to individual forms of academic freedom. A common and potential denominator is that perhaps academic staff are preoccupied with safeguarding their interests within the broader realm of neo-liberal as opposed to conditions under which universities operated in the early decades after independence. Universities today operate in a context engulfed with neo-liberal tendencies. Such a trend was identified by Zeleza (2003, 165), and it is imbued with implications in terms of "student access and solidarity, disciplinary differentiation and devaluation, the integrity of research and publishing, management and security of tenure, and permeability and dilution of institutional traditions". In the context of our case study, the solidarity element of academic freedom seems to have waned, and universities are much more porous and easily infiltrated by multiple actors and influences. The following statement implicitly points out some of the reasons behind the shift:

> "The shift I am seeing now is the artefact of imperialism or the capitalist school of thought, which is more individualistic, competitive whereby people compete against each other, and that is why now we have the issue of ranking of individuals and universities, competition for funding, diminished role of the state in investing in research, where now you see other communities (foundations) emerging as part of funding research and knowledge. There are also institutional challenges, which are critical factors in determining the direction of academic freedom" (Interview, September 2024).

A shift from traditional institutional focus on academic freedom to a more personal one is a reflection of the shrinking collective action, which is driven by market-oriented policies and privatisation (Woldegiorgis, 2024), in line with prevailing neoliberal tenets. Nowadays, academics see this freedom as central not just to their professional roles, but also to their personal and social lives, shaped largely by their unique needs and concerns. This trend suggests that institutions might need to adapt, creating policies that acknowledge and support individual differences while maintaining the core values of open and rigorous academic exploration.

> "Academic freedom nowadays is defined and dictated by psychosocial needs of the academics rather than institutional freedom. It is inclining towards individualised forms of academic freedom because individuals believe that it is one of the key aspects of their academic work and social life" (Interview, September, 2024).

There are several impediments, which can be sieved from the forgoing excerpt. One, the competition between and among academic staff is eroding the collective agency and capability for voice. This is because when academic staff compete against each other, the focus moves away from advancing the more significant purpose to move more minor and personal-driven

interests. This shift is detrimental to academic freedom as it impedes the possibility of academic staff collectively engaging in teaching, research, and public engagement, which contributes to dismantling structures of inequalities within the institution and beyond. In addition, the influence of external funders or donors, particularly on academic freedom from a research point of view, shows that academic staff may be inclined towards research that advances the interest of the donors or funders. This raises the question of how much academic staff can be free to engage in research, which speaks to local realities if externally funded?

CONCLUSIONS

The data analysis in this article indicates that academic staff cherish academic freedom in universities, given the purpose it serves. There are elements that academic staff deem academic freedom as not an end in itself, but a means for freely and responsibly engaging in the academic core. Academics are entrusted with the institutional goals of generating new knowledge and responsibly serving society (taking social responsibility). To do so successfully, they certainly need the tool of academic freedom. Interviewed academics appear to have a recollection of memories of the trajectories and the changing shifts of academic freedom and triggers.

However, a closer look at the perspectives of academics involved in this study indicates a potential impasse toward absolute academic freedom in terms of fully realizing the ideals of academic independence and critical inquiry. There are several complex personal, institutional and systemic structural constraints, which are at play as far as the notion and practices of academic freedom is concerned. While this article does not offer any value-laden conceptions and practices of absolute academic freedom, evidence from the case study university shows that unless academic freedom is reconceptualised and revitalised, there is a danger of killing what Mazuri (2003) refers to as engagement in the realm of ideas and rational enquiry. Perhaps an argument by Miller (2019, 14) is befitting to conclude this article as he argues that “unless staff, students, unions, and community stakeholders wrest back universities from the clutches of corporate interests, universities as we know them will vanish forever”.

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