



OSF/IIE-FUNDED RESEARCH PROJECT

Postulating A Relative Universalist African Perspective of Academic Freedom

Background

Reference the Academic Freedom Index (AFi) 2024 and other academic freedom reportage like Scholars at Risks Network's *Freedom to Think 2024*, Africa, like other regions of the world, is experiencing an escalation of attacks on academic freedom in the face of a growing decline in the quality of democracy and governance on the continent.

While some generic factors account for this worldwide phenomenon, others are fundamentally unique to the African context. These factors are related principally to the subject matter of coloniality in higher education on the continent.

Though one may trace the origins of university/academic freedom to Africa, it was subjected to epistemic violence, linguicide and theft of history influenced by the Enlightenment principles of "fundamental exclusions" of other values and the universalism of Western norms inherent in the liberal script. Thus, academic freedom today reflects the liberal script bias clothed with immutability, immortality and universality with hardly any reference to the roots of higher education in Africa. Therefore, the meaning, understanding and application of academic freedom do not reflect the realities of higher education in Africa.

The attempt to apply a universalist notion of academic freedom in the African higher education context has faced some key challenges as the indicators or scorecard, because of its unilinear liberal projection, overlooks certain factors and actors that are unique to the African context.

Objectives

Against this backdrop, the presence research project seeks to

- Deepen knowledge and understanding of the issue of academic freedom from an African perspective by identifying particularities and common trends that exist throughout the continent;
- Review the impact of colonialism on the pursuit, production, dissemination and application of knowledge and ultimately on academic freedom in Africa;
- Conduct research towards the design and development of the African Principles on Academic Freedom;
- Create a critical mass of researchers throughout the region capable of contributing to this field of research and inspiring other researchers to join this work.
- Disseminate research findings in written and oral form, through the websites of ACAF and partner institutions, their social media platforms and through

workshops and seminars, establishing dialogues with policymakers, UN, AU and regional economic community institutions, civil society actors and other stakeholders to advance respect for and protection of academic freedom as a fundamental human right.

Sub-themes

Against this backdrop, the research project is divided into 3 components:

1. Identify rudimentary elements of academic freedom in Africa's pre-modern university system

Researchers will focus on reviewing, exploring and identifying the rudimentary elements of academic freedom as they might have existed in Africa's pre-modern universities; and how they informed or shaped the definition of the purpose for which these universities were set up.

(US\$10,000.00)

2. Develop scorecards to measure academic freedom in Africa's colonial university system

Researchers will investigate the actors and factors associated with the coloniality of higher education in Africa and assess their influence on the evolution of a culture of respect for academic freedom in African universities. It will further identify what indicators emerge out of this exercise and assess whether they represent a scientific basis to measure academic freedom in African universities. Further, the findings will be used to assess the extent to which this development justifies the need for a relative universalist approach to academic freedom discourse and praxis in African universities.

(US\$10,000).

3. Identify gaps in African documents on academic freedom

Researchers will provide the basis to test and respond to the gaps identified in the concepts, laws, practices and traditions associated with academic freedom in Africa as introduced by colonial Europe. The work will also digest, review and identify the gaps identified in African documents on academic freedom, such as the Dar-es-Salaam Declaration on Academic Freedom and Social Responsibility (1990) and the Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility (1990) and the Juba Declaration on Academic Freedom and University Autonomy (CODESRIA, 2007).

(US\$8,000).

Qualifications and competencies

3 research teams will be selected for each research component. Each team will be made up of 3 academic freedom fellows (AFF), including a senior academic (with at least 5 years of research experience) and two students, one pursuing a master's degree and the other a doctoral degree. Preferably the students should be writing their dissertations on academic freedom, higher education in Africa or human rights generally may be an advantage. A student who has completed his/her dissertation within the past year may also qualify to participate, preferably having written their dissertation on the subject.

Additional requirements are as follows:

- Each person should have a background interest, expertise and or experience in academic freedom work, higher education and or human rights-related studies.
- The composition of the team shall respect gender parity, be intergenerational and include people from diverse backgrounds, experiences and nationalities.
- The final deliverable shall be a research paper of 40-50 pages long (20,000-25,000 words, *Times New Roman* font 12), which should include recommendations to guide the formulation of the African Principles on Academic Freedom (APAF).
- Each research component will have a duration of 7 (seven) months to complete their research project.

Rules of the call

- It is recommended, but not obligatory, that at least one of the team members should have accredited links with the Africa Coalition for Academic Freedom (ACAF).
- One of the members of the team must be selected as responsible for the registration of the project.
- Teams may wish to apply for more than one research component. However, a team will qualify to participate in only one research area in this call.
- Proposals will not be accepted from researchers who are currently grantees in the framework of other calls for research, scholarships or trials organised by ACAF or Scholars at Risk Network (SAR).
- In the course of the research, teams will be invited by ACAF to an online workshop to provide updates on their progress of work. ACAF members and partners will be invited to participate as a way towards forming a research community.
- If the project is awarded and travel is necessary, the winners shall cover the costs of medical or similar insurance at their own expense.

Application procedure

Applicants should submit

1. A letter cover of not more than a page, indicating expression of interest and evidence of qualification and contempencies of the team.
2. A proposal of 2-3 pages, identifying the research component their team is applying for and the names of team members, including project timelines.
3. Brief curriculum vitae of all applicants in the research time, indicating experience in academic freedom, higher education and human rights-related research.
4. Application package to info@acafafrica.org

Timelines

Deadline for submission of application: **10 April 2025**
Date for publication of winners: **10 May 2025**
Project implementation period: **20 May 2025 – 30 December 2025**
Submission of the final report: **30 November 2025**

Inquiries: info@acafrica.org

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