

These reflections were written by Adam Habib after the event “Universities and the Common Good: A Global Conversation about How to Respond to Contemporary Challenges”, hosted by the Bonavero Institute of Human Rights in September 2025.

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Title: Free Speech and Academic Freedom in the University

Author: Adam Habib

Free speech and academic freedom are increasingly under threat, as are universities. These threats come not only from external forces - governments, donors, and the private sector - but also from within universities themselves: vice-chancellors, administrators, academics, and students. This internal dimension demands both structural analysis and self-reflection.

Historically, free speech and academic freedom were championed by liberals and progressives. Today, however, they have become rallying cries for the political right. Critics argue this is hypocritical, as the right often denies these freedoms to dissenters. But this inconsistency is unsurprising. The far right seeks to restore a mythical, homogenous past, excluding those who don't fit their imagined identity. Their manipulation of free speech is less the issue than the societal alienation that allowed them to do so.

As Janan Ganesh provocatively asked in the Financial Times (2024), “Can Liberals be Trusted with Liberalism?” He argues that defending core freedoms requires not just liberal ideals but a spirit of openness and courage. I’ve voiced similar concerns. In Rebels & Rage (2019), I criticised how some South African academics indulged student intolerance during the #FeesMustFall movement. More recently, I highlighted how British universities have tolerated intellectual populism, where academics are publicly targeted and silenced, often excused by appeals to youth or past discrimination. Social media amplifies this, and institutions, in the name of impartiality, often fail to protect individuals, creating a culture of fear and paralysis.

To reclaim our role as defenders of academic freedom, we must first acknowledge our own failures. From this foundation, we can pursue two goals: defining academic freedom and transforming institutional culture.

Academic freedom is the university-specific practice of free speech, bounded by the institution’s mission. It grants academics and students the right to teach, learn, and speak freely, but within professional norms. It demands respectful engagement, tolerance, and the rejection of violence or silencing. Intellectual plurality - the lifeblood of academia - depends on this.

Yet, in the UK and elsewhere, this standard is not always upheld. Some academics and students refuse to engage opposing views and even participate in de-citation campaigns. They claim this as academic freedom, ignoring how it undermines professional integrity and the university’s

mission. This stems from a populist belief that civility and respect are bourgeois values serving elite interests - a view that has gone largely unchallenged.

The University and College Union (UCU), for example, focuses heavily on the marketisation of universities as a threat to academic freedom. While this is valid, UCU neglects the role of individual agency and professional responsibility. This one-sided view weakens its credibility and effectiveness.

Transforming institutional culture requires more than education and empathy. While these are essential, they are insufficient. Without accountability, individuals can exploit institutional values for personal or political gain. Universities must implement mechanisms - both punitive and educative - to hold members accountable for violating shared norms. This is often resisted by liberal academics who equate democracy with non-intervention. But failing to act enables the silencing of others and undermines the university's mission.

Rules must be applied consistently. Selective enforcement - especially when progressive actors are excused for violating norms - creates a vacuum that conservative politicians exploit. Their interventions, however, often worsen polarisation. The solution is not more government regulation but a return to principled, consistent practice rooted in foundational values. This includes courageous leadership willing to hold all actors accountable, regardless of political alignment.

Perhaps one final comment is necessary. Universities, if they are to retain their institutional autonomy and enshrine academic freedom, do require a business model that enables financial sustainability without becoming overly dependent on a narrow base of income sources. This is no more evident than in the recent case of private universities in the US whose significant dependency on donor funds and federal research grants compelled them to fold in their dispute with selected donors and the Trump administration. In this case, institutions that prided themselves about speaking 'truth to power' simply capitulated on their enshrined principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. It is a lesson that universities around the world would do well to heed.

Ultimately, the academic literature often focuses on structural and systemic constraints. While important, these analyses must be complemented by introspection and consistent practice of intellectual plurality, civil engagement, and income diversification. Only then can we effectively resist external threats to academic freedom. The future of the university lies in the hands of its own community.