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President's Statement on Academic Freedom and the Role of the University

Freedom of inquiry by faculty and students is central to the mission of the academy. Academic freedom implies the freedom to teach, conduct research, disseminate knowledge and help shape public opinion and policy.

However, with academic freedom come certain obligations. Scholars' academic activities must be based on evidence, rigorous thought and extensive research and universities must be dedicated to rigour, reasoned discourse and a willingness to accept dissent and deal with complex issues.

As such, academic freedom cannot be a shield for racism or bigotry.

Recently, two particular issues here at York have raised basic questions about academic freedom.

Conferences

The first arose in relation to an upcoming conference organized by York faculty members, as well as academics from other institutions, entitled "Israel/Palestine: Mapping Models of Statehood and Paths to Peace".

The freedom of independent scholars to organize events such as conferences on matters of legitimate academic inquiry goes to the very heart of academic freedom. It would be entirely inappropriate for the university administration to intervene in or to take responsibility for the academic content of such events, provided that they do not offend Canadian law, are consistent with the obligations cited above and deal with issues that are appropriate for academic debate.

Within those general parameters, the choice of topic, of who is to speak, and of what is said at the event lies squarely with the individual academics who organize and/or participate in it and no one else. The university provides a forum for the robust exchange, but does not align itself with a particular set of views or positions.

Some have complained that the conference should not form part of the University's 50th anniversary calendar of almost 100 events. However, this would have involved excluding a conference *because* of its subject matter, which would in itself have been a fundamental violation of academic freedom.

Boycotts

The second issue is the concept of academic boycotts, an issue that has been debated at a number of universities, including at a recent academic forum here at York.

Universities at their core are free institutions that must be open to the widest range of ideas, arguments and debates. Thus the concept of an academic boycott, which would prescribe a form of blacklist, is antithetical to the very purpose of a university. It would undermine the

freedom of individual scholars to make their own academic choices, and would suggest that the university 'owns' its academics or their opinions. In fact, it would be contrary to the very purpose of the university to dictate those with whom its scholars may or may not associate.

On this basis, York University has consistently opposed the call to boycott Israeli universities; our position is clearly outlined in the President's statement on the autonomy of universities.

Universities exist for the discussion of often difficult and uncomfortable ideas in a civil and respectful academic environment, because this is a critically important way to protect genuine freedom of thought and opinion. As these recent issues illustrate, it is important that, as a community, we clearly and unequivocally reaffirm our commitment to the core values of academic freedom and the right of free inquiry.

Like democracy, academic freedom is untidy, ungainly and often inconvenient, but it remains our best defence against the intellectual paralysis that is the hallmark of totalitarian societies.

Mamdouh Shoukri,
President & Vice-Chancellor

