CONTEXTUALISING THE INVOLVEMENT OF GOVERNMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

A Position Paper and Submission by the Select Committee on Education and Recreation (Arts and Culture, Science and Technology, Sport and Recreation)

27 April 2006
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Contextualising the Involvement of Government in Higher Education in South Africa

1. Introduction

Education confers a wide set of benefits on individuals, families, communities and nations. It is a driving force for economic, social, and political development and prosperity. With the changing nature of the global economy, particularly in the wake of the 21st Century, education and appropriate skills have become significant factors in opening the doors to economic and social prosperity and a crucial element of any sustainable development initiative.

Governments across the globe, particularly in developing countries increasingly view skills development as an important factor in the drive to enhance productivity, stimulate economic competitiveness, and raise people out of poverty.

The purpose of this paper is to provide synopses of the broad issues that are influencing government involvement in higher education in South Africa and across the globe. It provides an overview of the challenges and emerging issues that are confronting governments in using education as one of the key mechanisms of dealing with various socio-economic challenges. The main question that is guiding the arguments put forward in this paper is “what would have happened if higher education in South Africa was left as a free enterprise”. As a result, the paper gives a thorough background on the involvement of the government in higher education after the demise of the apartheid regime and the outcomes of such involvement.

2. Global Development in Government Involvement in Higher Education

Before a discussion on the nature, degree, and relevance of government involvement in higher education, it is necessary to review the recent global developments facing higher education. Whilst many higher education institutions, particularly in the Western countries appear to have increasing autonomy, there are indications governments, through regulation, increasingly seek means to ensure that this autonomy is used to achieve specific social goals such as transformation and equality.

Throughout the globe, there is an unprecedented demand for and a great diversification in higher education. There is also an increased awareness of its vital importance for socio-cultural and economic development, and for building the future, for which the future generations will need to be equipped with new skills, knowledge and ideals.

Everywhere higher education is faced with great challenges and difficulties relating to the following:

- Financing.
• Equity of conditions at access into and during the course of studies.
• Improved staff development.
• Skills-based training.
• Enhancement and preservation of quality in teaching.
• Research and services.
• Relevance of programmes.
• Employability of graduates.
• Establishment of efficient co-operation agreements and equitable access to the benefits of international co-operation.

Some of the factors that influenced the degree and nature of government involvement in higher education was the global economic crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s that led to a growing interest in the economic role of higher education. The global interventions that followed in national higher education policies led to a partial ‘de-instrumentalisation’ or control of higher education and a renewed interest in the social and economic roles of higher education.

The socio-political challenges facing higher education in the 1980’s demonstrated a need to rethink the role of universities in the transformation of society, particularly in advancing principles and values such as equality, diversity, and representativity. These challenges also necessitated a self-affirmed recognition in many higher education institutions that the achievement of equity in access to education is a crucial element in the embodiment of global social transformation.

In response to these challenges, in 1995 the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) took a major initiative to initiate an international debate on the transformation of higher education, particularly around issues of equity and representativity. It published a policy paper entitled Change and Development in Higher Education, the importance of which was recognised in the worldwide development of a discourse to foster change in access to higher education opportunities in higher education institutions.

Regional conferences were also organised leading up to the World Conference on Higher Education, Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action, which was held at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, from 5-9 October 1998. There was a consensus at the conference that all higher education institutions across the globe were facing a challenge of aligning their institutional practices with the evolving values in dealing with social crisis, particularly in using education as a significant mechanism for empowerment.

The Conference also reaffirmed that women, and, most particularly the poor and poverty stricken communities across the globe have been at the most vulnerable end of the discriminatory practices of higher education institutions across the globe. As a result, in all of its resolutions, the conference sent a strong message that higher education institutions should address existing internal institutional inequalities, which are the product of bias and
discriminatory policies, structures and practices and expand access to education. It also indicated that governments should pay particular importance on the role of higher education institutions in redressing and dealing with some of the global crisis, such as poverty, underdevelopment, and vulnerability.

Higher education institutions in South Africa were also experiencing the very same challenges facing their counterparts throughout the globe. In line with the nature of the discriminatory nature of the apartheid system, they were profoundly inequitable and inaccessible to the poor, women and disadvantaged communities and individuals. As a result, after the demise of the apartheid regime in 1994, the new government inherited institutions of very different sizes, with different strengths and weaknesses, different patterns of participation intakes, different offerings by level and subject of study, different local, regional and national orientations, different legal status and governance arrangements and different histories. These institutions were also instrumental in further entrenching the legacy of inequality, lack of opportunities and disempowerment.

The footprints of the legacy of the long years of apartheid were so obvious that the government took a decisive step to completely revamp and overall the system in terms of the newly established norms. Racial differentiation and discrimination within higher education had created a divided and fragmented system in which:

- Resources were inequitably and inefficiently allocated to various institutions, racial and ethnic groups.
- Governance structures were undemocratic.
- Access was highly skewed on racial lines.
- There was a lack of coordination, common goals, or systematic planning.
- There was an inability to respond to the economic and social needs of the majority of the population.

When the National Party (NP) came into power in 1948, there were ten government-subsidised institutions of higher learning in South Africa. Four of these institutions had classes taught in English; four with classes taught in Afrikaans; one bilingual correspondence university; and the South African Native College at Fort Hare, in which most classes were taught in English but other languages were permitted. The four Afrikaans universities and one of the English-language universities (Rhodes University) admitted white students only. Students of all races were permitted at the University of Cape Town, the University of the Witwatersrand, and the University of Natal, although some classes at these universities were segregated.

The Extension of University Education Act (Act No. 45 of 1959) prohibited established universities from accepting black students, except with the special

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2 [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+za0068](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+za0068).]
permission of a cabinet minister. The government then opened several new universities and colleges for African, Coloured, and Indian students. These students were allowed to attend a "white" university only if their "own" or designated institutions became too overcrowded. The University of the North, established in 1959, for example, admitted students of Tsonga, Sotho, Venda, or Tswana descent only.

The Extension of University Education Act also gave the central government control over the South African Native College at Fort Hare. The government then instituted a new policy of admitting Xhosa students only. Several technikons throughout the country also practiced their own exclusive policy when recruiting Black students. Most technikons gave preference to students of one ethnic group depending on their locations. This reduced opportunities for university education for Black students, especially African students. By 1978, just about 20% of all university students in South Africa were black.

During the 1980s, several university administrations, anticipating the dismal impact of the long-term racial biases in higher education, and then began admitting students from all racial groups. This expanded the intake of Black students to higher education. By the mid-1990s, South Africa had twenty-one major universities, which were government-financed and open to students of all races. In addition, secondary-school graduates could attend one of 15 technikons, 128 technical colleges, and 70 teacher-training colleges, or a wide array of teacher training institutions.

3. Towards a New Higher Education Landscape in Post-apartheid South Africa

The crucial challenge that faced the new government after the demise of apartheid was to re-evaluate whether higher education could effectively succeed in stimulating, directing and utilising the creative and intellectual energies of a post-apartheid society. There was a strong contention between the government and the rest of the stakeholders in education that higher education, like many inherent institutions from the apartheid era, needed to be reviewed and subsequently transform to keep up with the new political, social and economic developments taking place in the country. Thus, the need to transform the higher education system in South Africa stemmed from two sets of factors: firstly, a historical legacy of inequity and inefficiency which inhibits its ability to meet the moral, social and economic demands of the new South Africa. Secondly, a context of unprecedented national and global opportunities and challenges that required State intervention, especially in expanding access for all people in South Africa regardless of race, gender, age, location and financial position.

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3 The South African Native College at Fort Hare was later changed to the University of Fort Hare.
4 Technikons are advanced-level technical schools.
As a result, in February 1995 former President Nelson Mandela appointed a National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE), which submitted its report, “A Framework for Transformation”, in August 1996. The NCHE report pointed out that the fragmentation, inequity and inefficiency of the higher education system meant that it cannot meet the challenges and goals of reconstruction and development of a post apartheid South Africa. The NCHE then made rigorous and propounding recommendations for the transformation of higher education in the country. Its recommendations set a foundation for the new transformation agenda, not only for the higher education system, but also for the governance, management and teaching of the various higher education institutions that were inherently still practicing systemic apartheid policies.


The key goals of higher education in post apartheid South Africa were outlined in the White Paper as:

“To redress past inequalities and to transform the higher education system to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs, and to respond to new realities and opportunities”.

In keeping with the new trends of higher education institutions across the globe, the government, through the White Paper on Higher Education (1997) redefined the purpose of higher education in the country. The White Paper outlined human resource development as the key role of higher education in a globalising, competitive, knowledge-driven world. It recognises that higher education has a major role to play in mobilising the human potential of the country through lifelong learning, high-level skills training through graduating professionals who have globally competitive skills and are socially responsible, and producing and applying new knowledge through research and development, which responds to the needs of industry and social reconstruction.

The National Commission outlined the contributions of higher education to socio-economic development and the consolidation of democracy and justice in post apartheid. It stated that:

“The overall well-being of nations is vitally dependent on the contribution of higher education to the social, cultural, political and economic development of its citizens.”

The Commission envisaged a transformed higher education system that will be able to:

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• Ensure access to a full spectrum of educational and learning opportunities to as wide a range as possible of the whole population of South Africa, irrespective of race, colour, gender or age.
• Meet, through responsive programmes, the vocational and employment needs of a developing economy aspiring to become and to remain internationally competitive. Support a democratic ethos and a culture of human rights by educational programmes conducive to a critically constructive civil society, cultural tolerance, and a common commitment to a humane, non-racist and non-sexist social order.
• Contribute to the advancement of all forms of knowledge and scholarship, in keeping with internationally observed standards of academic quality, and with sensitive to the diverse problems and demands of the local, national, southern African and African contexts\textsuperscript{11}.

After a six-year consultative process that has been hailed as one of the most comprehensive in the world of higher education, South Africa built national consensus around the future direction of higher education in the country. The ratio of Black students in total university enrolment increased from 32% in 1990 to 60% in 2000 while in the technikons rose from 32% to 72% over the same period. By 2000, there was a majority of African students both in the university (60%) and technikons (72%). At some institutions, the composition of student population changed dramatically, for example, the University of Port Elizabeth changed from being 62% white in 1995 to being 87% black in 1999.\textsuperscript{12} The participation of women students increased at a rate three times faster than that of men and, overall, the proportion of women increased from 42% in 1990 to 53% in 2000\textsuperscript{13}.

4. Developing a New National Plan for Higher Education

The National Plan for Higher Education\textsuperscript{14}, which was published in early 2001, marked a turning point for higher education in South Africa. It was the government's follow-up vision for further restructuring and re-engineering the higher education system. It provided a strategic framework for transforming higher education into a system that is designed to meet the needs and challenges of a transforming and democratic society. It created a solid foundation for a major shift away from a divisive past shaped by the geopolitical imagination of apartheid planners, to a confident future in which higher education is now effectively meeting the needs of the whole nation regardless of race, colour, location and financial status.

One primary goal identified by the Plan is the need to rationalise higher education provision to squeeze more efficiency and effectiveness out of scarce resources. There were also concerns from the government and the various stakeholders in higher education that the contribution of higher

\textsuperscript{14} The National Plan for Higher Education was based on proposals by the Council on Higher Education.
education in the gross domestic product (GDP) was likely to drop even further if the government did not intervene with more decisive transformation measures\textsuperscript{15}.

The National Plan identified the following five key policy goals and strategic objectives needed to transform the higher education system:

- Increase access and produce graduates with the skills and competencies needed to meet South Africa’s human resource needs.
- Promote equity of access and outcomes and redress past inequalities by ensuring that student and staff profiles reflect the demographic composition of the South African society.
- Ensure diversity in the institutional landscape through mission and programme differentiation to meet national and regional skills and knowledge needs.
- Build high-level research capacity, including sustaining current research strength and promoting research linked to national development needs.
- Restructure and consolidate the institutional landscape to transcend fragmentation, inequalities and inefficiencies caused by apartheid, and to create institutions consistent with the vision and values of a non-racial, non-sexist and democratic society.

5. Reshaping the Institutional Set-up of Higher Education Institutions

Aside from the ethical repugnance of race-based institutions and a consistence policy designed to sideline the majority of the Black population, apartheid’s imperatives resulted in the expensive duplication of facilities and institutions for higher education. In favouring whites, the State poured resources into historically white institutions, which grew into internationally respected institutions, largely, at the cost of historically black institutions and exacerbating the gross socio-economic inequalities that flowed from the distorted vision and principles of the apartheid regime.

In reshaping the institutional set-up of higher education institutions, the new government took a decisive measure to streamline the number of universities and technikons from the racially based 36 institutions to form 11 universities, four comprehensive institutions of higher education and six technikons. In order to ensure the equitable distribution of higher education institutions across the country, in 2003, the government adopted a proposal to build two Institutes of Higher Education in the Northern Cape and Mpumalanga\textsuperscript{16}. These provinces were systematically deprived access to higher education and flooded with an influx of teacher training collages.

The aims of the government’s new plan in restructuring the landscape of higher education was to:

\textsuperscript{15} The National Plan for Higher Education was based on proposals by the Council on Higher Education.

\textsuperscript{16} The Government has also committed itself to ensuring that the student fee structures and admission requirements of merged institutions do not become or are used by institutions as barriers to entry to higher education.
• Reduce expensive duplication if the plethora of higher education institutions in order to achieve economies of scale, while also ensuring the equal distribution of resources.
• Further, improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the system and its management.
• Raise graduation rates, research outputs and quality education.
• Widen the range of courses and to further expand higher education and make it accessible to a more diverse body of students.

6. Public Funding of Higher Education in South Africa

During the 1980s government expenditure on higher education grew faster in real terms than other education spending and faster than real growth in GDP. Between 1991/92 and 1995/96 public spending on higher education grew at 5.9% a year, while growth in all other education has been 2.2% and GDP growth has been 1.2% a year. In 1995/96, 16.7% of government expenditure on education (1.2% of GDP) was spent on higher education. Total government plus private expenditure on higher education in the 1995/96 financial year amounted to almost R10 billion or 1.9% of GDP, of which the contribution from private sources was R3.9 billion17.

South Africa's present level of public expenditure on higher education is high by international standards and has been growing at a faster real rate than in many other countries. The projection from the current Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) is that government spending on higher education increases to meet the challenges of the restructuring of the institutional set-up of higher education.

In its review of public expenditure on higher education in the country, the Finance Task Team of the NCHE concluded that the overall strategy for improving the financing of higher education needed to be reshaped in order to encapsulate the new vision of a democratic society. The Task Team stated that the focus of the government in shaping the financing of higher education in the country should be on changing the mix of policies and mechanisms in ways that conform to the goals of increasing access and equity, of improving quality and efficiency, and of linking higher education activities more explicitly to national and regional development needs.

During apartheid, policies and procedures for allocating public funds to higher education institutions were fronted with deficiencies, racial and geo-political and racial preferences. The various funding schemes in operation were largely shaped by the differentiation of the apartheid regime. Some institutions were fully funded for all costs that they incurred depending on the magnitude at which they applied apartheid principles in their management, selection, and governance. Others had line-item budgets approved in advance depending on their glaring historical records. Other institutions were funded by means of a

formula that determined a block grant related to student numbers and other irrational factors that were consistently used to channel more funding to white institutions.

Some of the deficiencies of the existing subsidy formulae for universities and technikons were:

- The complexity of the formulae inhibits transparency of resource allocation decisions and their effects.
- The formulae reward institutional over enrolment largely based on race.
- The 'a-factors', which were used as attempts by the government in order to regulate enrolments, were ad hoc and arbitrary.
- Preparatory and remedial institutions were not subsidised for formula funding purposes. This position ignored the legacy of apartheid schooling and the realities of the legacy of the long years of inequity in the system.
- The output factors reward those institutions that took in the best-prepared students, had the best facilities and could afford to hire the best-qualified staff.
- They were not linked to national goals and provided no incentives for performance improvement in respect of transformation objectives.

There were a number of other inefficiencies in the operation of universities and technikons with regard to utilising the resources that they had in their disposal and other government funds. Government funds were not always being put to the best use. Unnecessary and expensive duplication of academic activities were occurred when applying apartheid policies like separate services and facilities for black and white students.

The new government recognised the need for new allocative mechanisms that embrace the new vision of a post apartheid South Africa. These mechanisms would be consistent with the principles and directed towards the goals of higher education transformation. While there was a recognition that they must continue to allow institutions a high degree of autonomy over the use of resources, there were strong emphases that there should be strong accountability measurers for the results they achieve. These mechanisms are the ones that currently assist the government to steer the higher education system towards greater equity, efficiency and excellence.

Through extensive work between the government, and the various education stakeholders, the government has managed to device a more efficient and equitable funding framework for higher education.

The funding framework is aimed at:

- Creating a more efficient and equitable funding system that will further expand higher education and make it accessible to a more diverse body of students.
• Creating financially viable and sustained institutions that will be able to expand access to the historically disadvantaged communities through a government financed financial aid system.

The new funding framework encourages more goal-oriented planning at the institutional and system levels in the higher education sector. It encourages higher education institutions to be more efficient and accountable. Most importantly, the framework encourages higher education institutions to play a major and leading role in transforming and redressing the imbalances created by the long years of apartheid in the country.

The new funding framework is also used to promote the following principles:

a) Creating a Goal-oriented Funding System

Due to the huge inequalities of the apartheid funding system in higher education institutions, the government created a more goal-oriented funding system. The provision of a goal-oriented funding system is intended to result in more equitable student access, improved teaching, learning and research, increased student progression and graduation rates, and greater responsiveness to social and economic needs. The system is aimed at creating the following:

• An appropriate balance between institutional autonomy and public accountability.
• Procedures, which are simple, transparent, flexible and fair.

The goal-oriented funding system is intended to result in:

• A simplified mechanism for allocating general purpose, block funding of institutions on a rolling triennial basis.
• The provision of earmarked funds to achieve specific purposes, including the redress of inequities in access and capacity, student financial assistance, academic development, staff development, curriculum development, research development, libraries and information technology, capital works and equipment, and planned improvements in operational efficiency.

Although, the appropriate division of available funds between these two broad mechanisms is a complex and challenging issue. The inherent subsidy formulae for universities and technikons represented about 85% of the public funding of higher education institutions in the country. The remainder comprised funds for capital works, loan servicing, and in 1996 the allocation for student financial aid. However, it was evident that the 15% share of funds provided through nonformula, ad hoc and targeted funding was too low to address urgent needs and to lay the foundations of a transformed higher education system that would meet the challenges of a newly transformed society.
The government took a decision to increase the proportion of earmarked funding for each of the budget years 1998, 1999 and 2000. The proposal was to have a redress fund allocated for this purpose by Parliament. This fund will ensure that all the apartheid features in the system were redressed effectively across board.

There was also evidence of a backlog of buildings, overcrowded residences, poorly resourced libraries, inadequate information technology and other similarly quantifiable deficiencies in many higher education institutions across the country, especially in the historically black institutions.

In 1997, the government committed itself to redress these imbalances by making an allocation of over R150 million dedicated to a capital works programme to universities and technikons. The belief from the Ministry of Education was that in order to reverse the inequities of the past and for institutions to modernise and respond to socio-economic imperatives, additional investment for redress and expansion of the higher education system is essential in the long term.

b) **Earmarked Funding**

The mechanism of earmarked funding was established primarily to meet specific and often short-term needs of the higher education system. There are three classes of earmarked funds:

- **Funds for institutional redress.** Funds provided through this programme are available to support improvements in the following areas: staff development, academic development, curriculum development, library holdings, student amenities, buildings and the development of institutional capacity.

- **Funds for individual redress.** Funds allocated in this programme are used to ensure that capable students are not excluded from access to higher education because of their financial means; it is essential to have in place a well-functioning student aid scheme. In 1996, the Ministry established a National Student Financial Aid Scheme with a budget of R300 million.

- **Funds for other specific purposes.** Funds allocated in this programme are used for development purposes to encourage innovation and adaptation, and to build capacity in new areas. Institutions applying for funds through this programme are required to relate their submissions to their strategic plans. Funding through this programme is confined to three specific purposes: research capability development, postgraduate training and management information systems development. The allocation of this funding is also guided by the following three broad principles:

  (i) To preserve and strengthen existing areas of research excellence.
(ii) To develop areas of research excellence at the historically black institutions to realise redress and equity.

(iii) To develop research links with industry and to facilitate industry-related collaborative research.

The funds for each of these three categories are grouped into three categories:

- Categorical funds, for fixed assets and current expenditures, allocated based on applications plus assessment of need.
- Initiative funds allocated based on applications plus assessment of merit.
- Incentive funds allocated based on institutional achievement in designated performance areas.

7. Academic Freedom and Government Involvement in Higher Education

The Global trend in government involvement in higher education indicates that the transformation of national higher education systems is often influenced by a political agenda. In many countries, particularly in Europe, the higher education sector is being urged to ‘modernise’, ‘adapt’, ‘diversify’, ‘marketise’, and is expected to become ‘entrepreneurial’, ‘competitive’, more ‘efficient’ and more ‘effective’, more ‘service oriented’, and more ‘societal relevant’. It is also expected to improve the ‘quality of its processes and expand its products and services to all individuals. Many countries have acknowledged that the transformation of higher education can only be successful if the traditional steering relationship between State authorities and higher education institutions is changed dramatically. This is by no means an indication of control of higher education and influencing their freedom of speech and independence. However, it is a mechanism of ensuring that higher education institutions are relevant to global social, political and economic challenges.

Although during the last quarter of the 20th Century, the central steering role of the European nation-states with respect to higher education became a serious, issue of debate, particularly on the infringement that government involvement my cause. However, this debate was part of the general ‘reshuffling’ of relationships between the State and the public sector. Arguably, in many European countries higher education has been one of the sectors where this ‘reshuffling’ has been most extreme and most successful in achieving a certain agenda, especially in using education as key to individual empowerment and fostering greater economic viability.

In particular, the socio-political demands and expectations with respect to higher education have grown, especially concerning its economic role, whilst at the same time in most countries the level of public funding of higher education is stagnating or decreasing. This has led to an imbalance between the demands many stakeholders make on higher education, expecting a rapid reaction, and the capacity of higher education institutions to respond
adequately to these demands.

Although, the State is becoming less dominant in steering higher education and the (quasi) market is becoming more influential, there are indications of government involvement in ensuring that higher education plays an instrumental role to achieving certain objectives. In many countries, there is no introduction of a “pure” market approach but rather a hybrid system of a certain degree of government involvement as it is currently the case in South Africa.

The main challenge that is facing higher education institutions is that they are still learning what it means to be a public service enterprise. They are still in the process of developing approaches and methods to manage their resources effectively. The influence of governments on academic freedom and independence of higher education institutions is rather limited. The indication is that in order for governments to ensure that policy processes are more effective they should acknowledge that the role of politics is limited to design, adapt, and monitor the ‘framework’ conditions within which higher education operates.

Although higher education institutions should be expected to operate autonomously in implementing policies and realising higher education goals within the agreed framework, this should not influence their independence, particularly on policy issues. The indication is that politics should not interfere in the detailed operation of higher education institutions. But governments should put in place more effective monitoring structures for evaluating and analysing the ways in which higher education policies are handled in practice.

8. Conclusion

This paper has shown that government involvement in ensuring that higher education plays an instrumental role to achieving certain objectives. Although the indication is that politics should not interfere in the detailed operation of higher education institutions. Governments have an important role to play in putting in place more effective monitoring structures for ensuring that higher education contributes to the advancement of the socio-economic and political aspiration and objectives of a country.

Like in many countries, the crucial challenge that was facing the new government after the demise of apartheid regime in South Africa after the 1994 elections was to look re-evaluate the role of the institutions that were systematically embedded with apartheid practices and policies in driving the new transformation agenda. There were indications the historical legacy of inequity and inefficiency of higher education in South Africa inhibited the ability of the country to meet the moral, social and economic demands of the new South Africa. As a result, the involvement of government in higher education was relevant, instrumental, strategically and according to international practices during an era of transformation. Accordingly, there are no indications of any quest to influence and interfere with the academic freedom of higher education institutions.
9. References

17. UNESCO. 2003. The Right to Education.