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REFRAMING ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN TURBULENT POLITICAL CONTEXTS: AFRICAN SCHOLARS' PERSPECTIVES FROM SOUTH AFRICA

ПЕРЕОСМИСЛЕННЯ АКАДЕМІЧНОЇ СВОБОДИ В ТУРБУЛЕНТНИХ ПОЛІТИЧНИХ КОНТЕКСТАХ: ПОГЛЯДИ АФРИКАНСЬКИХ НАУКОВЦІВ З ПІВДЕННОЇ АФРИКИ

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ABSTRACT

Purpose. *This study examines how turbulent political contexts shape academic freedom in selected African countries, as interpreted by foreign national academics from Africa working in South African higher education institutions. Framed by conflict theory and neo-institutionalism, the article investigates how*

Мета. *Це дослідження розглядає, як турбулентний політичний контекст формує академічну свободу в окремих африканських країнах, як це інтерпретують іноземні науковці з Африки, які працюють у закладах вищої освіти Південної Африки. Спираючись на теорію конфлікту та неоінституціоналізм, стаття досліджує, як*

governance instability, political interference, and executive dominance affect institutional autonomy and scholarly practice.

Methodology. *A qualitative interpretivist design was used. Semi-structured online interviews were conducted with eight academics from Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, employed across public and private higher education institutions in South Africa. The data were analysed through thematic analysis combining inductive and deductive coding processes.*

Results. *Participants described academic freedom as encompassing freedom of expression, teaching, research, access to information, and academic mobility. The findings show that academic freedom is weakened by politicised appointments, compromised institutional autonomy, constrained teaching and research, surveillance, funding pressures, and weak constitutional protection. Participants further noted that universities may be reduced to instruments of state legitimation through curriculum control and the suppression of critical discourse.*

Conclusions. *Academic freedom emerges not simply as an institutional norm but as an indicator of democratic institutional maturity. Safeguarding it requires stronger constitutional protection, transparent governance, depoliticised leadership, and educational cultures that value critical inquiry, accountability, and public dialogue. Sustainable academic freedom depends on a combination of enforceable legal guarantees, institutional integrity, and a broader democratic culture that supports independent scholarly thought.*

Keywords: *academic freedom, African foreign national academics, conflict theory, neo-institutionalism, turbulent political contexts.*

нестабільність управління, політичне втручання та домінування виконавчої влади впливають на інституційну автономію та наукову практику

Методологія. *Було використано якісний інтерпретативний дизайн. Проведено напівструктуровані онлайн-інтерв'ю з вісьмома науковцями з Нігерії, Зімбабве, Уганди та Демократичної Республіки Конго, які працюють у державних і приватних закладах вищої освіти Південної Африки. Дані проаналізовано за допомогою тематичного аналізу із поєднанням індуктивного та дедуктивного кодування.*

Результати. *Учасники описали академічну свободу як таку, що охоплює свободу вираження поглядів, викладання, досліджень, доступу до інформації та академічної мобільності. Результати показують, що академічна свобода послаблюється політизованими призначеннями, скомпрометованою інституційною автономією, обмеженим викладанням та дослідженнями, наглядом, тиском на фінансування та слабким конституційним захистом. Учасники також зазначили, що університети можуть перетворюватися на інструменти легітимації державної влади через контроль над навчальними програмами та обмеження критичного дискурсу.*

Висновки. *Академічна свобода постає не просто як інституційна норма, а як показник демократичної інституційної зрілості. Для її захисту потрібен сильніший конституційний захист, прозоре управління, деполітизоване лідерство та освітня культура, яка цінує критичне дослідження, підзвітність та публічний діалог. Сталий захист академічної свободи залежить від поєднання правових гарантій, інституційної доброчесності та широкої демократичної культури, що підтримує незалежне наукове мислення.*

Ключові слова: *академічна свобода, африканські іноземні науковці, теорія конфлікту, неоінституціоналізм, турбулентний політичний контекст.*

INTRODUCTION

Academic freedom is fundamental to knowledge production, critical inquiry, and the public role of universities. UNESCO's Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel defines it as the freedom to teach, research, publish, participate in institutional life, and express scholarly views without fear of institutional sanction or political reprisal (UNESCO, 1997). In democratic settings, this freedom enables universities to fulfil their public mission: to test ideas, generate evidence, challenge orthodoxy, and contribute to civic debate. It also underpins institutional

autonomy, as universities cannot exercise independent judgement if their scholars work under conditions of fear or anticipatory compliance (Altbach, 2007a, 2007b).

Across parts of Africa, however, academic freedom faces mounting pressure. Contested elections, executive overreach, economic crisis, a weakened rule of law, and the politicisation of public institutions have intensified constraints on higher education (Kigotho, 2023; Montana, 2023). Turbulent political contexts not only produce visible disruption through protest, unrest, or campus closures; they also generate quieter institutional effects, including compromised leadership appointments, budgetary dependence, pressure on the curriculum, and informal expectations of political loyalty (Appiagyei-Atua et al., 2016; Kitala, 2020; Montana, 2023). Under such conditions, universities may continue to project the language of autonomy while losing much of their substantive independence.

The continental literature increasingly links academic freedom to democratic quality, constitutional protection, and the integrity of governance systems (Appiagyei-Atua et al., 2016; Kratou & Laakso, 2021; Shaheed, 2024). However, much of this literature remains oriented towards indices, legal provisions, or single-country studies. Less attention has been paid to how African academics themselves interpret the relationship between political turbulence and academic freedom, particularly when they reflect comparatively across national contexts. African foreign national academics working in South Africa occupy a distinctive interpretive position, as they can draw on the experience, memory, and observation of their countries of origin while working within a higher education system where academic freedom is formally recognised (UNESCO, 1997). Their accounts reveal how academic freedom is lived, negotiated, or diminished under different political conditions.

The South African location of the study is also analytically useful. South Africa's constitutional order offers stronger formal recognition of rights than in many other settings on the continent. However, it remains part of the same regional political and higher-education landscape. Participants, therefore, speak neither from complete detachment nor from simple proximity. Their reflections are shaped by comparison, professional relocation, and ongoing engagement with home-country politics. This position enables them to illuminate both contrasts and continuities in the governance of higher education across Africa.

This article, therefore, **aims** to investigate how African foreign national academics in South African higher education institutions understand the effects of turbulent political contexts on academic freedom in their countries of origin. The article makes three contributions. First, it strengthens continental debates about the relationship between governance instability and institutional autonomy (Appiagyei-Atua et al., 2016; Kratou & Laakso, 2021). Second, it draws on conflict theory and neo-institutionalism to explain how struggles over power intersect with organisational adaptation in higher education (Bourdieu, 1986; Savage & Finn, 1999). Third, it moves the discussion of academic freedom beyond abstract principles by grounding it in scholars' lived perceptions, whose careers and mobility have been shaped by unequal political environments.

INTEGRATED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between political governance and academic freedom is well established in higher education scholarship. Academic freedom does not exist outside the state; rather, it is embedded within wider political cultures, public institutions, and constitutional arrangements (Altbach, 2007a; UNESCO, 1997). Where democratic institutions are weak and executive power is concentrated, universities become more vulnerable to direct and indirect interference, and the erosion of academic freedom

becomes part of a broader crisis of governance and civic space (Kratou & Laakso, 2021; Shaheed, 2024).

Conflict theory offers a critical lens for understanding these dynamics. Rather than treating universities as neutral sites of truth-seeking, it situates them within broader struggles over power, legitimacy, ideology, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In politically turbulent contexts, universities may become sites where ruling elites regulate dissent, shape national narratives, and subordinate scholarship to the interests of power (Altbach, 2007a; Appiagyei-Atua et al., 2016; Shaheed, 2024).

Neo-institutionalism complements this analysis by explaining how universities adapt to external pressures to secure legitimacy, stability, and resources. Where funding, regulatory approval, and leadership appointments are tied to the state, institutions may align with political expectations and, over time, normalise interference as part of ordinary governance (Appiagyei-Atua et al., 2016; Savage & Finn, 1999). This perspective helps explain why universities may reproduce compromised autonomy internally, even when external coercion is not constant.

Historical and contemporary work on academic freedom also warns that the language of autonomy can obscure unequal institutional realities. Universities may present themselves as autonomous while operating within systems of dependency, political patronage, or managerial control (Altbach, 2007a; Wolhuter & Langa, 2021). In such settings, academic freedom is not removed by a single act of censorship; it is gradually eroded by bureaucratic routines, leadership capture, and the expectation that scholars avoid politically inconvenient questions.

This literature also helps explain why academic freedom is often curtailed in politically sensitive disciplines such as governance, economics, law, history, and the social sciences. In these fields, critical work is more likely to challenge state narratives, expose inequality, or question dominant interests, leaving scholars vulnerable to surveillance, marginalisation, or informal pressure (Bourdieu, 1986; Shaheed, 2024). The issue is therefore not only whether academics can speak, but whether institutional conditions allow them to pursue inconvenient knowledge without sanction.

African scholarship reinforces these concerns. Appiagyei-Atua et al. argue that many higher education systems on the continent continue to exhibit weak institutional autonomy, limited self-governance, and insufficient protection against state interference (Appiagyei-Atua et al., 2016). Omodan (2023) similarly shows that social unrest and institutional responses in African universities are inseparable from broader structural conditions, including weak governance and contested authority.

A major issue in the literature concerns the distinction between rights that are broadly recognised and those that are specifically enforceable. Many constitutions protect freedom of expression or the right to education, yet fewer provide explicit, enforceable protection for academic freedom and institutional autonomy (Appiagyei-Atua et al., 2016; UNESCO, 1997). Shaheed (2024) argues that academic freedom should be recognised as a distinct human right because it safeguards forms of intellectual labour that are especially vulnerable to political interference.

Another important strand in the literature concerns the relationship between academic freedom and the public sphere. Academic freedom matters not only because it protects individual scholars but also because it sustains the production of knowledge on which democratic debate depends (Altbach, 2007b; Kratou & Laakso, 2021). When academic

freedom contracts, the consequences are institutional and societal: public discourse becomes poorer, policy is less open to scrutiny, and universities lose part of their civic function.

The literature also shows that politicised leadership and governance arrangements lie at the heart of the problem of academic freedom. When state actors influence the appointment of vice-chancellors, rectors, chancellors, or councils, institutional autonomy is weakened at its source (Appiagyei-Atua et al., 2016; Omodan, 2023). Governance arrangements are therefore not administratively neutral; they determine whether universities function as spaces of critical inquiry or as extensions of executive power.

The literature further suggests that legal protection alone is insufficient unless accompanied by governance cultures that respect it. Constitutions may mention rights, yet universities continue to operate through patronage, fear, and anticipatory compliance (Hawi, 2010; Shaheed, 2024). Sustainable academic freedom, therefore, depends on legal protection, institutional design, leadership integrity, and a wider political culture that tolerates critique.

Although international monitoring reports document attacks on higher education across regions, they cannot fully capture how academics interpret the lived consequences of these pressures. This is why the perspectives of African foreign national academics in South Africa are particularly valuable. Their comparative position enables them to reflect on home-country conditions from within another African higher education system, revealing how academic freedom is experienced across unequal political settings (Scholars at Risk, 2022; Kratou & Laakso, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The following research questions guided this study:

Main research question: How do African foreign national academics working in South African higher education institutions interpret the effects of turbulent political contexts on academic freedom in their countries of origin?

Sub-research questions

1. How do participants conceptualise academic freedom in relation to political turbulence in their countries of origin?
2. In what ways do governance instability, political interference, and executive dominance affect institutional autonomy and scholarly practice?
3. How do participants describe the effects of turbulent political contexts on teaching, research, and critical expression in higher education?
4. What constitutional, governance, and institutional changes do participants believe are necessary to strengthen academic freedom?

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretivist approach to understand how academics make sense of academic freedom in politically turbulent conditions, rather than to measure it numerically. A qualitative design was appropriate for examining the meanings participants attached to governance instability, political interference, and institutional autonomy in their countries of origin (Merriam, 1998; Jackson et al., 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The interpretivist paradigm was appropriate because the study examined meaning, context, and lived experience. Participants' accounts were treated as situated interpretations of broader institutional realities rather than as isolated opinions. This orientation aligns with research that regards interpretivism as suitable for

understanding social phenomena through participants' experiences and the meanings they construct (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Moon & Blackman, 2017).

Purposive sampling was used to select eight African foreign national academics employed in South African public and private higher education institutions. Participants were drawn from Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. They were selected for their particularly relevant comparative position: they worked within South African higher education while also reflecting on the political and institutional conditions affecting academic life in their countries of origin.

The interview-based design was particularly appropriate because the study sought not only to catalogue incidents but also to understand how scholars linked political conditions to university life. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to define key concepts in their own terms, provide illustrative examples, and move between personal experience and broader national interpretation. This flexibility was important given the study's focus on politically sensitive issues, including state interference, authoritarian governance, and the risks of speaking critically about higher education systems (Merriam, 1998).

Data were collected through semi-structured online interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams. The interview schedule drew on scholarship on academic freedom, institutional autonomy, political interference, and higher education governance, as well as the 1997 UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel (UNESCO, 1997; Savage & Finn, 1999). The interview-based design was particularly appropriate because the study sought not only to catalogue incidents but also to understand how scholars linked political conditions to university life. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to define key concepts in their own terms, provide illustrative examples, and move between personal experience and broader national interpretation. This flexibility was important given the study's focus on politically sensitive issues, including state interference, authoritarian governance, and the risks of speaking critically about higher education systems (Merriam, 1998). Interviews enabled probing into politically sensitive experiences while remaining aligned with the research questions.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis. Coding combined inductive and deductive processes: themes were allowed to emerge from participants' accounts and were also interpreted in relation to the research questions and the article's theoretical framing. This combined approach is well established in qualitative research and is particularly useful when analysis aims to remain grounded in data while engaging with broader concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Clarke & Braun, 2013).

The researchers were attentive to ethical concerns throughout the study, particularly given the sensitivity of discussing political turbulence, governance failure, and academic freedom. Care was taken to minimise participant burden and to avoid any coercion or undue pressure to participate. Potential participants received an information sheet and consent form by email, which explained the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the ethical safeguards in place.

Participants were informed that they could decline to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising participants' identities in transcripts and reports. Because the study involved interviews, the researchers could identify participants; therefore, the study ensured confidentiality rather than anonymity. Data were handled securely, and identifying details were removed from the findings report.

The study was limited to African foreign national academics working in South African higher education institutions, originally from four selected African countries: Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The study did not aim to provide a comprehensive account of academic freedom across the entire African continent, nor did it seek to compare all African higher education systems. Instead, it focused on the interpretive accounts of a small group of academics whose experiences and reflections offered insight into the relationship between political turbulence and academic freedom.

FINDINGS

Analysis generated four interrelated themes: conceptualising academic freedom amid political turbulence; governance instability and the erosion of institutional autonomy; political interference and constrained scholarly practice; and constitutional fragility and the struggle for sustainable academic freedom. Together, these themes show that academic freedom was experienced not as an abstract entitlement but as a fragile condition shaped by the quality of governance, political power, and the institutional climate of higher education.

First, participants defined turbulent political contexts as settings characterised by poor governance, authoritarianism, contested elections, conflict, and socio-economic instability. P2 linked unrest in Nigeria to “bad governance” and “political interference,” noting that a current protest had already led to university closures. P5 described turbulence as an overlap of electoral contestation, conflict, and socio-economic crisis, while P3 argued that “authoritarian governance by the government leads to civil unrest.” These responses indicate that participants did not treat turbulence as a temporary disruption. Rather, they framed it as a structural condition rooted in unequal power, weak accountability, and contested legitimacy.

Within this broader context, academic freedom was defined expansively. P8 described it as “the ability to express your views without getting unnecessary and unwarranted feedback,” while P4 referred to the freedom to teach and publish “without fear of any reprisal.” P6 emphasised access to information as a condition of research, and P1 linked academic freedom to the ability to study or work without being compelled to relocate. Participants therefore understood academic freedom as encompassing expression, teaching, research, epistemic access, and mobility. This broader framing is important because it links academic freedom to the material and political conditions that enable scholars to remain rooted in their own contexts.

Second, participants viewed governance instability as central to the erosion of institutional autonomy. Universities were described as vulnerable to top-down policymaking, corruption, politically influenced appointments, and executive control over leadership. P3 criticised the imposition of educational policy “without adequate consultation with the student, university, or society” and described collusion between governments and vice-chancellors over inflated financial decisions. P5 noted that ministries may influence senior managerial and academic appointments, while P7 stated bluntly that becoming a chancellor depends on presidential approval and support for the ruling party. The findings therefore suggest that institutional autonomy is weakened not only by formal state control but also by patronage, compromised governance, and captured leadership structures.

Third, participants reported that political interference directly constrains scholarly practice. P2 stated that such interference limits “the freedom of academics in terms of the

work that they can do," while P6 linked it to restrictions on teaching and research. P5 cited funding constraints and warnings against investigating certain topics. P1 offered the most striking example, describing academic appointments as "very, very political" and noting the deployment of students in lecture halls to monitor discussions and teaching. P3 argued that the university can become "an extension of the government" through curricula designed to promote preferred state narratives. At the same time, P8 suggested that research in the social sciences and economics often fails to address root causes objectively because critical thinking is constrained. These accounts indicate that political interference operates materially through funding, symbolically through surveillance, and intellectually through control of the curriculum and research.

Fourth, participants viewed sustainable academic freedom as dependent on stronger constitutional and democratic conditions. P2 argued that constitutions should not be changed "on a whim" to suit presidential preference, stressing the need for the rule of law and constitutional respect. P1 emphasised that the academic community must retain sufficient autonomy to shape public discourse and contribute to society. Other participants extended the argument beyond constitutional reform alone. P4 called for public awareness campaigns on academic freedom; P3 emphasised leadership development; P7 argued for community engagement and open channels through which people can "speak the truth to power"; and P6 and P8 linked future academic freedom to what universities teach through the curriculum and pedagogy. The data therefore suggest that sustainable academic freedom depends on a combination of legal protection, institutional integrity, public culture, and democratic education.

While the themes are analytically distinct, participants' accounts often moved across them. Comments about politicised appointments, for example, were rarely about governance structures alone; they were also about what such structures meant for curriculum choices, academic speech, and research possibilities. Likewise, constitutional reform was not discussed in a narrow legal sense alone, but in connection with leadership ethics, public awareness, and the cultivation of democratic habits. This overlap suggests that participants experienced academic freedom as an ecosystem rather than as a single right that can be protected in isolation.

The findings also reveal that participants repeatedly invoked the language of fragility, whether directly or indirectly. Universities were portrayed as vulnerable to capture, scholarship as vulnerable to pressure, and constitutions as vulnerable to manipulation. This recurring emphasis indicates that the problem is not only that rights are occasionally violated, but that the broader conditions for intellectual independence are unstable. Academic freedom was therefore narrated as contingent, uneven, and often dependent on the disposition of political actors rather than on secure institutional guarantees.

Across the themes, a common pattern emerges. Political turbulence was consistently associated with weakened institutional autonomy, constrained scholarship, and fragile constitutional protection. Academic freedom was therefore interpreted as reflecting broader democratic conditions rather than as a self-contained matter of the university.

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that academic freedom in selected African contexts cannot be understood in isolation from broader patterns of political turbulence, governance instability, and executive interference. Participants linked unrest, authoritarian tendencies, electoral contestation, and socio-economic crisis to failures in political leadership and weak institutional accountability (Naidoo, 2025). This interpretation

aligns with scholarship indicating that instability in African states is driven less by diversity itself than by fragile institutions, weak governance, and ineffective political management (Elbadawi & Sambanis, 2000; Montana, 2023).

Participants' definitions of academic freedom also broaden the literature on academic freedom (Kotsokoane, Seeletse, 2025). Their accounts align with classic formulations that emphasise freedom of inquiry, teaching, research, and publication without fear of reprisal (Andreescu, 2013; Van Alstyne, 1972, as cited in Andreescu, 2013). At the same time, the findings suggest that academic freedom in turbulent contexts also includes the ability to remain academically rooted in one's own society rather than being displaced by repression or instability. In this respect, the study extends arguments that academic freedom shapes not only scholarship but also the conditions under which scholars can meaningfully participate in public life (Hawi, 2010).

One of the most striking implications of the findings is that academic freedom appears as both a condition of scholarship and of belonging. Participants repeatedly linked freedom in teaching and research to the freedom to remain, contribute, and speak from within their home contexts. This insight is significant because much of the literature treats academic freedom as an institutional or legal entitlement rather than as an issue entangled with mobility, displacement, and professional location (Shaheed, 2024).

The findings on governance instability reinforce Altbach's critique of managerialism, but they point more specifically to political managerialism. Participants described appointments, policy decisions, and institutional leadership as shaped by ministerial influence, presidential preferences, patronage, and corruption. This suggests that universities in these contexts are not only bureaucratised but also politically managed in ways that undermine institutional autonomy at its core (Altbach, 2007a; Appiagyei-Atua et al., 2016).

Conflict theory helps illuminate why these findings matter. Participants' accounts suggest that universities in turbulent political settings become contested spaces where ruling elites seek to regulate dissent, shape intellectual agendas, and define legitimate knowledge. The findings on surveillance, politically inflected curricula, and constraints on critical inquiry are consistent with a conflict-theoretical view of the university as embedded in wider struggles over power and symbolic control (Bourdieu, 1986; Shaheed, 2024).

The findings are equally consistent with neo-institutionalism. Participants described institutions adapting to political pressure by normalising compromised autonomy, reproducing state-approved narratives, or accepting interference as ordinary. This is important because it shows that academic freedom may be eroded not only through visible repression but also through routinised organisational accommodation to political expectations (Appiagyei-Atua et al., 2016; Savage & Finn, 1999).

Participants' reports of surveillance, constrained teaching, restricted research, and funding pressure also align with international evidence of attacks on higher education. Monitoring reports indicate that these pressures trigger self-censorship, weaken institutional life, and reduce the social benefits universities can offer (Scholars at Risk, 2023). The present findings, therefore, link macro-level evidence to the lived perceptions of academics who have experienced or observed these conditions in African contexts.

The study further underscores the fragility of constitutional protection. Participants repeatedly emphasised the need for the rule of law, principled leadership, public awareness, and stronger legal safeguards. This echoes the literature, which shows that

academic freedom and institutional autonomy are often insufficiently entrenched in legal frameworks, even where education rights are recognised more broadly (Appiagyei-Atua et al., 2016; Shaheed, 2024; UNESCO, 1997).

The study also suggests that constitutional and university reform cannot be meaningfully separated. Participants did not envisage stronger academic freedom arising solely from legal reform; they emphasised the need for institutional accountability, democratic leadership, and public recognition of the value of academic freedom. This supports Hawi's (2010) argument that academic freedom depends on a broader environment of rights, democratisation, and stakeholder participation.

Another notable insight is that participants viewed the curriculum as a site of both vulnerability and possibility. Political interference was seen to distort curricula by privileging state narratives, yet participants also regarded teaching as a long-term means of cultivating democratic values and responsible leadership. This reinforces claims that the university's pedagogical function is inseparable from its democratic function (Hawi, 2010; UNESCO, 1997).

Participants' recommendations for public awareness, leadership development, community engagement, and curriculum reform also extend the discussion beyond legalism. Sustainable academic freedom requires not only enforceable rights but also a social and institutional culture that respects critique, enables dialogue, and does not automatically penalise truth-telling (Kratou & Laakso, 2021; Shaheed, 2024).

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of comparative interpretive accounts in research on academic freedom. Indices and legal analyses remain important, but they cannot replace scholars' own interpretations of how turbulence is experienced within higher education systems. By centring African foreign national academics in South Africa, the study offers a perspective that is both empirically grounded and comparatively illuminating (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Moon & Blackman, 2017).

Finally, the perspectives of African foreign-national academics working in South Africa proved especially valuable. Their narratives provided a comparative lens through which academic freedom emerged as a barometer of democratic institutional maturity. Where governance is unstable, leadership is politicised, and accountability is weak, academic freedom becomes precarious; where constitutionalism and institutional integrity are stronger, the conditions for scholarship are more secure (Kratou & Laakso, 2021; Shaheed, 2024).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings suggest that protecting academic freedom in turbulent political contexts requires action at constitutional, institutional, governance, and pedagogical levels. First, constitutions and higher education legislation should explicitly protect academic freedom and institutional autonomy as enforceable democratic principles, rather than leaving them implied within broader rights frameworks (Shaheed, 2024; UNESCO, 1997).

Second, universities need protection from partisan interference in leadership appointments, governance structures, and strategic planning. Transparent, merit-based, and institutionally led appointment processes are essential to ensure universities function as autonomous public institutions rather than as extensions of executive or ministerial power (Altbach, 2007a; Appiagyei-Atua et al., 2016). Third, internal university governance must become more transparent and accountable to prevent autonomy from being compromised by corruption, elite collusion, or opaque decision-making (Hawi, 2010).

Fourth, institutions should adopt stronger protections for teaching, research, and the curriculum so that academics are not constrained by surveillance, informal censorship, or funding pressures. Public awareness campaigns, leadership development, and curriculum reform are also necessary, as academic freedom is sustained not only by legal texts but also by democratic cultures that value critique, ethical leadership, and critical inquiry (Andreescu, 2013; Hawi, 2010; Scholars at Risk, 2023).

These recommendations imply that reform must be understood as layered rather than sequential. Constitutional protection without institutional accountability may remain symbolic; institutional autonomy without democratic values may become hollow; and curriculum reform without broader public dialogue may have limited impact. Sustainable academic freedom, therefore, depends on legal safeguards, institutional design, leadership integrity, and civic cultures that protect dissent and scholarly independence (Kratou & Laakso, 2021; Shaheed, 2024; UNESCO, 1997).

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that academic freedom in selected African contexts is deeply entangled with the quality of governance, institutional autonomy, and democratic accountability. Drawing on the perspectives of African foreign national academics working in South Africa, it demonstrates that academic freedom is weakened by politicised appointments, compromised governance, restrictions on teaching and research, surveillance, funding pressures, and fragile constitutional protection (Appiagyei-Atua et al., 2016; Shaheed, 2024).

The study also shows that academic freedom is understood as more than the liberty to speak or publish. Participants linked it to mobility, access to information, professional security, and the ability to contribute intellectually within one's own society. This broadens dominant understandings of academic freedom and positions it as both an institutional and a democratic condition (Andreescu, 2013; Hawi, 2010).

Although the study is limited by its small purposive sample and focus on four countries, it offers analytically rich insight into how academic freedom is interpreted in turbulent settings. The findings reinforce the view that safeguarding academic freedom requires stronger constitutional protection, depoliticised governance, institutional accountability, and educational cultures that sustain public reasoning and critique (Kratou & Laakso, 2021; UNESCO, 1997).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE STATEMENT

No artificial intelligence tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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