

Statement on the escalation of violent behaviour on university campuses

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) has observed, with mounting concern, the phenomenon of violent student behaviour on university campuses in expressing divergent political views. The CHE is of the firm view that such tendencies will do immeasurable harm to our universities and what they stand for, and ultimately detract from open and robust dialogue, which is the very hallmark of a democracy.

The CHE urges all student formations, academics and other stakeholders to commit to and defend the free expression of ideas, especially those which are contrary to their own, and to outlaw intimidatory and violent behaviour, which cannot under any circumstances be acceptable. To fail to do so will threaten the very idea of a university, and lead us along a precipitous pathway. As aptly expressed by John Henry Newman in 1852,¹ 'a university is a place where students from different backgrounds come to acquire knowledge of different natures; a place for the communication and circulation of thought by means of personal engagement and interaction; a place in which thousands of schools of thought make contributions, and in which the intellect may safely range and speculate; and a place where enquiry is pushed forward, discoveries verified and perfected, and errors exposed by collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge'. The university campuses in the country should, as a necessity, embody these fundamental characteristics of a university that have endured across many contexts. They should foster an atmosphere of academic freedom where both academics and students are free to engage one another intellectually on various topics, including politics, without fear, and within the parameters of the law.

Students, for their part, should understand that the rules of academic and intellectual engagement exclude coercion, intimidation, exhortation, physical confrontation, violence and acts of vandalism. No cause can ever justify such acts in modern democratic society, let alone in a university. Similarly, it is critical for students to understand that electoral democracy is based on principles of plurality of ideas and value systems; tolerance for diversity; the right to canvass for support for their point of view without impinging on the right of others to do the same; and the right to freely indicate one's preference through voting for the idea, system or party of one's choice. The electoral processes for student representative councils (SRCs) at various university campuses provide opportunities for students, as future leaders of the country, to learn, put into practice and live by these principles. The CHE therefore finds it disturbing that students at an increasing number of university campuses wantonly flaunt these very principles. This does not augur well for the future of our democracy at the national level in our country. It is therefore the responsibility of every stakeholder committed to the promotion and preservation of democracy to eradicate these destructive tendencies inimical to the idea of democracy.

The CHE urges management of university campuses to take all necessary measures, within the confines of the law, to foster and protect an environment that prizes intellectual freedom and the free expression and promotion of ideas. Such measures should include investing in campaigns aimed at creating a culture of tolerance, and in safety and security infrastructure to prevent possible acts of violence and vandalism on campuses. In particular, every attempt should be made to prevent the institution from being held to ransom by bullying, intimidatory and violent tactics which some may have selected as their modus operandi to promote their cause.

¹ Newman, J. H (1852): *The Idea of a University*. Notre Dame University Press: Indiana

