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Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

RE: SENATE INQUIRY INTO ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN SCHOOLS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Dear Sirs and Mesdames,

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to tender a submission to this Senate inquiry and contribute to the debate on the issue of academic freedom in schools and higher education.

There have been numerous pertinent examples and experiences of political bias cited by recent participants in and observers of Australia's secondary and tertiary education sectors. Moreover this has also been the subject of several editorial passages in *The Australian* newspaper in response to growing community concern over both covert and overt attempts by academics, lecturers and teachers' unions to politicise curricula with interpretations and viewpoints favourable to their political beliefs and to indoctrinate the impressionable minds of young people with such ideologies. I recall that one particular education union even went so far as to advocate that teachers should do their utmost to ensure that students do not grow up to develop socially conservative attitudes, convictions and viewpoints that might dispose them to voting for the Liberal party, or words to that effect. Many of the schools in my neighbourhood have politically-motivated "your rights at work" and "public education – our future" signs hung on the boundary fences. I believe it is clearly inappropriate and a violation of trust for secondary or tertiary teachers to use their positions of relative power and influence in educational institutions to insidiously indoctrinate and politicise students when they are employed to teach content and skills.

Rather than add to the many documented episodes of such developments in the education sector, in this submission I shall address only the third and final stated term of reference, "*ways in which intellectual diversity and contestability of ideas may be promoted and protected, including the concept of a charter of academic freedoms.*"

Charter of academic freedoms

I commence here by dealing first with the final statement, in that I do not believe a charter of academic freedoms is such a promising solution. Going down the path of a rights-based agenda where we rely on some freedoms with which we are supposedly ordained because they are supposedly guaranteed or enshrined in some civil document is utterly fallacious and fraught with misunderstanding. We are fortunate to live in a free, fair, open and transparent democracy where we enjoy personal and public freedoms, liberties and privileges because our forefathers possessed these convictions and resolved to pay the price for them in blood and iron.

Through "blood, toil, tears and sweat" our future independence, freedom and prosperity were purchased at great cost in the global conflagrations of the 20th Century. Any "rights" we enjoy are alienable privileges granted in patrimony. When proposing and discussing the virtues of an academic charter of freedoms, we should be mindful that the existence of such a charter fundamentally and substantively changes nothing at all. A charter would not grant a person any

privilege that he does not already enjoy. I do not believe this proposed solution would deal with the underlying sources of bias in education.

Democracy and free, competitive markets

Essentially, democracy is a war of ideas, where these ideas openly compete in public forums on their intrinsic merits and extrinsic perceptions. Capitalist democratic ideals and values governed by the principles of free, informed, open and transparent marketplaces combined with the individual freedoms and liberties already mentioned above have emerged triumphant to the point where they are rightly considered supreme and undisputed in mainstream Australian society. Competitive market forces of supply and demand naturally work to ensure efficiency, productivity, progress and continual reform in society, politics and the economy at large.

I suggest that most secondary and tertiary educational establishments are largely sheltered from the competitive realities and pressures of life in the world beyond their gates. These protected and sheltered school/university environments have evidently become safe havens where public money is being inadvertently used to subsidise the practice and dissemination of political ideologies that might struggle to sustain themselves in a free market where the teacher's authority and credibility might be questionable, his assertions subjected to fair criticism and his performance and productivity managed in a commercial manner.

In order to promote and protect intellectual diversity and the contestability of ideas, thereby minimising the opportunities for political biases to arise, the secondary and tertiary education sectors need to be totally reformed to instil and entrench democratic free-market competition at every level thereof: between institutions, between teachers and between students. It must also bring to account the main perpetrators of this bias, namely wayward teachers/lecturers and education unions.

Suggested competitive reforms

Many of the reforms briefly expounded below have been suggested previously in policy statements of political parties both in Australia and overseas, in the media and by various prominent economists, columnists and commentators. Some reforms deal directly with the issue of academic bias, while others are more indirect and work in concert with each other to produce the desired outcome.

New content-based curricula

The subject curricula of several subjects in the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences fields should be recognized as particularly subjective in nature and therefore prone to political bias. The curricula of some subjects such as social studies, history, English, biology, geography, legal studies etc. should be rewritten to focus on the learning of core content such as the traditional method of studying historical events with causes and consequences or plot-setting-characters-themes based analyses of literature. Modern approaches that teach young students to deconstruct media and events through the lens of race, gender and class manifest themselves in distorted understanding, cultural biases and indoctrination with fringe ideologies under the guise of "critical thinking" instruction.

Contentious and unproven theories such as the evolution of species and the greenhouse effect should be properly disclosed, recognized as such and openly contestable by essay in content-based curricula. These should encourage wide and lateral thinking, along with giving proper and

reasonable opportunities for students to contest and discuss these theories, weigh evidence and state supporting justifications before advocating conclusions without fear of adverse consequences or prejudice. In this way, schools and universities would foster the participation of students in the great democratic war of ideas in a fashion that “lets the market decide.”

Clearly some subjects of study at secondary and tertiary level would not require this treatment owing to the low or non-existent potential for cultural, political and ideological biases e.g. engineering, mathematics, accounting, physics, chemistry, finance, foreign languages, etc.

The purpose of schools and universities is to educate people with core, fundamental knowledge and skills. So-called “soft skills” such as perception, introspection, critical thinking, etc. are gleaned largely as the by-products of a personal journey through education, life and work experience, wide reading, observation, reflection, personal growth and maturity. Any attempt to supplant this natural process with guided instruction should be eradicated from the curriculum.

Simple, transparent scoring of results

All secondary and tertiary institutions should be compelled to report student results as percentages against nationally-accredited, consistent and challenging examinations. Grades awarded for certain percentage scores should be meaningful to the potential end-users of this information (i.e. parents and employers) and accurately reflect the student’s performance in demonstrating his knowledge of content and his application of skills learned. Arrangements where a student may gain a theoretically-perfect grade point average score despite having never scored higher than 80% in an assessment should be summarily abolished since they are clearly deceptive, misleading and representationally unfaithful to both the students and the end-users.

This reform aims to engender competition between students for scholarships, admittance to higher education courses and public honours, thereby broadly raising the levels of achievement and success in the education sector.

Compulsory public reporting of aggregate student results

Each secondary and tertiary institution should be required to make available aggregate student results in national qualifications for publishing in newspapers. This practice was commonplace in New Zealand until the recent dumbing-down of their secondary education system. On the day when School Certificate and Bursary exam results were released a section of the *New Zealand Herald* was published showing for each high school in the country (both public and private) the distribution of grades awarded (A, B, C and Fail) to the students in that year and the median exam score in each subject offered. This provides parents with useful, concise, objective information on the efficacy of each school’s academic programmes against other schools and national benchmarks relative to the subjects which their children study.

The compulsory public reporting of aggregate results has been shown to enable parents to make informed choices about where to educate their children and to foster competition between schools to attract the most promising students. This approach is equally valid for tertiary education, where the student would use this information to assist his decision on where to invest his own time and money in undertaking undergraduate or postgraduate education. Moreover it would encourage universities to make investments to improve the quality, content and outcomes for their degree courses in line with the market’s expectations, not ideological causes that lecturers may want to shamelessly promulgate whenever they feel inclined to push a political barrow.

Voucher-based funding

Concisely, this concept involves the granting of a voucher for education funding to each student who is eligible for state or commonwealth funding of his education, i.e. all Australian citizens, permanent residents and New Zealand citizens. The student redeems the voucher when he enrolls at his chosen school or university and hence the institution's funding is directly relative to the number of enrolments it manages to secure. Universities are already substantially funded in this manner, but secondary schools are not and should be.

Voucher-based funding is based on the principle where the funding follows the student. It relieves the parents of children attending private schools from paying for a public education which their children cannot possibly receive. It ensures that all students receive fair and equal government funding contributions in the form of a free education or an equivalent discount on school fees and encourages free and individual choice of institution with direct benefits flowing thereto. The scheme would place competitive pressure on schools to organize and resource their subject offerings to suit demand in the marketplace for education, giving them clear benefits for success in these operations. Conversely it would pressure underperforming and unpopular schools to make the necessary improvements and reforms. Institutions that focus their programmes around political correctness and critical thinking at the expense of substantive content would expose themselves to severe financial punishment. "Hitting the back pocket," is widely known to be an effective method for changing such behaviour.

Practically the amount of funding allocated per student would need to be substantial and include amounts for capital investment by schools in facilities and resources since, for public schools, it would be their only significant source of income. The voucher amount for the government's funding contribution would be equal irrespective of the student and type of institution chosen and must not vary by postcode, town, suburb or city – though the amount might reasonably vary with the student's age and between states, since the states contribute most of the funding for secondary schools. Variations by location would enable state governments to favour certain socio-economic groups for their own political advantage. Performance bonuses for schools based on high aggregate student results could also be considered as an incentive to achieve against a content-based curriculum.

Of itself, voucher-based funding will not eliminate academic bias. However it's an integral component of a broadly competitive, free market-oriented reform of education that should indirectly achieve this aim.

Competition between students for secondary education

Compulsory taxpayer-funded education is a valuable privilege of living in our free, prosperous society – not a guaranteed right. A fully-competitive secondary education system should grant all schools total discretion and freedom of choice whether or not to accept any particular applicant, just as for universities. This places competitive pressure on students and their support networks to facilitate their success and market demand would accordingly work in favour of schools that demonstrate competence and excellence in education, not indoctrination.

Corporatisation of schools

The advent of a voucher-based funding system would manifest itself in the corporatisation of schools. In order to prosper in a competitive system where education funding is totally separated from education provision, schools must be managed with the customers of their education services

in mind. This lends itself to the elimination of political bias in education through dealing with the teachers/lecturers who propagate it.

The executive management of a market-oriented education establishment would naturally employ teachers on individual contracts; they would hire, fire, manage and appraise the performance of the school's teachers in the same way in which a manager administers his subordinates in the private sector. The teachers would be employed by and accountable to the school itself. A teacher/lecturer's pay would be entirely linked to his performance, productivity, the market forces of supply and demand for his services and the wealth of the institution, rather than the absurd current system where seniority is the primary determinant. The corporatisation of state schools could lead to substantial pay rises for valued and productive teachers, far beyond the current regulated pay scales, and thereby encourage more talented people to enter the profession since the market will determine their remuneration levels.


Reforms that ultimately encourage competition between teachers directly address the root causes and participants responsible for occurrences of academic bias. Teachers who are more interested in indoctrinating students rather than educating them to a high-quality standard would not survive, let alone prosper, in a competitive workplace environment. The unwarranted power of the combative and obstructive education unions and teachers' federations with antiquated mentalities would diminish, to prevent them using the sheltered playgrounds of our education sector to repackage their discredited and irrelevant cultural and political ideologies in order to attempt to re-fight battles that they lost decades ago.

Concluding remarks

It is worth noting that bias has flourished in parts of the education sector not through the lack of an academic charter of freedoms, but rather because this sector and the people working in it have been isolated and shielded from the realities of free and open markets. This is why I believe that a wholesale, market-oriented reform of the education sector is more likely to bring about the gradual elimination of bias, although this approach is inherently less direct than a charter of freedoms, because it aims to expose and root out the underlying causes of the problem.

Thank you for your time spent considering this submission.

Yours faithfully,

 14/8/2008

Michael Dromgool