

4 November 2008

Ms Lyn Beverley  
Acting Secretary  
Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ms Beverley,

Thank you for your letter of 16 October noting adverse comment on the University, made by Liberal students as part of their submissions and evidence to the Senate inquiry on academic freedom.

The University promotes a learning environment where ideas can be considered and differences of ideology tested. Through its Student Expectations and Responsibilities policy, which is available on our website and promoted through orientation and other avenues, the University commits to a 'study environment in which students are able to engage in rational debate and freely express alternative points of view'. The policy also commits itself to equitable treatment of students, irrespective of a range of attributes including political convictions. In specific circumstances, students in Victoria also have statutory protection against discrimination on the basis of their political beliefs.

For their part in creating the University's learning environment, the Student Expectations and Responsibilities policy encourages students to 'respect the rights of other members of the University community to express dissent or different political or religious views...' and 'respect the opinions of others and engage in rational debate in areas of disagreement.'

Particularly in subjects that deal with politically contentious issues, the University understands that students will not always agree with the views expressed by staff or other students. This is an inevitable, and indeed desirable, aspect of university study. The University would only have concerns if students were being treated unfairly because of their political views.

If students believe that they have been unfairly treated, they can utilise the University's grievance policy to seek a review of, or remedy for their concern. Complaints of bias appear to be very rare. As the policy encourages informal resolution of complaints we cannot be certain that there have been no bias complaints in recent years, but none have reached the stage of an appeal to the Academic Board in the last five years.

Students may also raise bias-related issues through the comments sections of various surveys, including the Melbourne Experience Survey, the Course Experience Questionnaire, and the Quality of Teaching survey. Of the university-wide surveys, we were able to identify three bias-related comments in the 2007 Course Experience Questionnaire that is sent to all completing students. Comments in the Quality of Teaching survey are read at the school or departmental level, with the relevant head of school or department being alerted to potential issues with subjects. As with the Course Experience Questionnaire, bias rarely appears as an issue of concern to students. If it was mentioned frequently in comments for a particular subject, this would require action by the head of school or department.

We are disappointed that the Liberal students chose to use a Senate inquiry as the forum in which to first raise their concerns, rather than internal university procedures. Most of their examples are of specific comments by academics that we cannot investigate without a complainant providing detailed information. However, two of their concerns relate to matters that are public information, the content of the Contemporary Ideologies and Movements subject, and the range of elective subjects available in the Melbourne Law School.

I understand that Associate Professor Adrian Little has responded separately to the Senate Inquiry on the Contemporary Ideologies and Movements subject. It is mainly about new social movements that are mostly on the political left, which explains why these movements dominate the subject's lectures and readings. Its guest lecturers have included people from radical political movements, but also from the political right. The guest lecturer this year was John Roskam from the Institute of Public Affairs. As part of the Melbourne Model curriculum reorganisation, the subject is being replaced next year by a broader Introduction to Political Ideas subject. Its reading includes liberal authors such as John Stuart Mill and Milton Friedman, as well as major thinkers of the left.

The Melbourne Law School takes seriously the range of career interests of its students, which include both human rights law and commercial law. While the Melbourne University Liberal Club submission complains of 15 elective subjects relating to human rights law, in 2008 there were more than 20 elective subjects suitable for students seeking a career in commercial practice, as well as family law, advanced criminal law and other subjects likely to be relevant to the careers of our students. The University sees the diversity of subjects on offer in the Law School as a strength, rather than something deserving of criticism.

On the broader academic freedom issues raised by the Inquiry, as part of the University's current review of its Act, statutes and regulations, it is considering a draft regulation that enshrines the right to academic freedom. There have been a series of statements on academic freedom from the Vice-Chancellor and key bodies such as the Academic Board over many decades, but its significance is such that the University is proposing that it be protected further through subordinate legislation.

I hope this information will be of use the Inquiry.

Yours,



**Glyn Davis**  
Vice-Chancellor