

Submission to the Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee  
Inquiry into Academic Freedom

Robert Langdon

August 2008

Dear Committee Secretary,

Thank you for the opportunity to make this personal submission to your inquiry into Academic Diversity and Freedom. I am a 3rd year Law and International Relations student at La Trobe University (Bundoora).

Before addressing the terms of reference provided, I would like to elaborate on what I believe academic freedom is.

I believe academic freedom, from the perspective of a student, is best defined as the 'freedom to express, publish and share opinions without fearing unfavourable treatment from academics'. Unfavourable treatment can refer to being marked down, or being ridiculed for differing points of view in front of other students. Such a practice should not be tolerated.

I would like to submit the following:

The level of intellectual diversity and the impact of ideological, political and cultural prejudice in the teaching of senior secondary education and of courses at Australian universities, including but not limited to:  
the content of curricula,

My experiences as a student of Law and International Relations have led me to form the view that intellectual diversity at La Trobe University could be improved.

With this in mind, I am led to believe that the curriculum being studied is highly relevant when assessing the levels of intellectual diversity. My fields of study, especially International Relations, are areas where the distinction between a right and wrong answer, or good and bad answer is blurred. This differs from other fields of study such as accounting, mathematics, and medicine, where such a distinction is minimal or does not exist at all.

I believe this is where the issue of academic diversity and freedom arises, when this distinction is blurred. This distinction is what makes these fields of study so intellectually challenging and rewarding, there are no right or wrong answers, and this is not something I begrudge. Rather my point is simply, it is when this characteristic exists, I believe the issue of intellectual diversity and freedom becomes an issue. This issue is more relevant in humanities subjects.

the content of course materials,

This distinction between a right and wrong answer, or a good and bad answer changes the dynamics of how a subject is taught. In subjects where the distinction is clear, the course materials are not questionable, they present the relevant information. Academics have less discretion in what they put forward to students to learn, in comparison to subjects where the distinction is blurred.

In subjects where the distinction is blurred, the content of the course materials becomes an issue. Often after completing required readings presented to me each week, I feel bemused by the lack of diversity presented in the readings. I have complained in the past to my lecturers and tutors that the readings are one-sided and that I feel as if a political agenda is being pushed upon me.

One example occurred in a second/third year politics subject of mine. The topic for the week was Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). Presented were three essential readings for students to complete, as well as a number of supplementary readings they could read at their own discretion. The readings presented a view that TRIPS was unfair on the economies of the third world, using the example of patents on treatments available for HIV. Half a paragraph was dedicated to why this may not be true. This is an example of the disproportionate volume of course materials dedicated to one political view over the other. This practice occurs on a wide range of issues discussed in politics classes.

This practice was not just limited to TRIPS in this one particular class, other one sided issues were:

Refugee flows, in particular, the Howard Governments response with the Pacific Solution  
The War in Iraq

In both circumstances, I found myself reading materials that failed to adequately offer other points of views on the issues. I would like to note however, I am not saying an equal amount of time should be offered to differing points of view. I believe academics should be reasonable and offer more than half a paragraph to different but important views.

However what is of greater concern is that in my time at University, that there have been many critiques of economic rationalism in my classes, yet not once has there been anything offered that at the very least outlines the views of Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman, political philosophers that have influenced the way government runs in this country and others, more than anyone else in the second half of the twentieth century. How can students of political science realistically grasp the realities of today without even understanding the ideas presented by these two political philosophers that represent a highly influential school of thought? As put by Rafe Champion “nobody can consider themselves broadly educated at present without the same grasp of Hayek's ideas.” I echo these sentiments.

If such a practice continues, graduates from Australian Universities will leave with a

skewed, one-sided and incomplete view of the world. This will affect the integrity and international standing of our academic institutions.

the conduct of teaching professionals, and

In my experience, despite a lack of intellectual diversity being offered in course materials, academics have been more than willing to listen to criticism of readings presented to students. This is a good thing. Whether such criticisms are acted upon is another matter however and remains to be seen however, and is an entirely separate issue that I have not yet experienced. My experiences are not limited to this however.

There have been instances where I have felt intimidated from sharing my point of view. In my first class at Universities, an Anthropology tutorial, the tutor unashamedly said if you are a Liberal Voter or if you support John Howard, that you should leave the tutorial immediately. As an impressionable first year student, I felt discouraged from sharing my opinion in class. I feared I would be ridiculed in front of my peers should I say something contrary to the tutors point of view. This practice just should not happen at a University. Students should be encouraged to share different points of view, not intimidated from doing so.

the conduct of student assessments;

As mentioned above, the lack of distinction between a right and wrong answer or a good and bad answer in some fields of study gives the academic large amounts of discretion in determining the grade given to an item of work. As a whole, I would say the conduct of most academics at La Trobe University in their assessment of students work is fair and reasonable. However, there have been times I have felt I have been the victim of academic bias; receiving marks for items of work that I felt were undervalued. I understand however assessing such an accusation is difficult, given the lack of an objective standard to examine such claims. What does concern me however is that I am not alone who shares such feelings. There are large numbers of students in my experience who would say that their work has been marked down due to the political point of view offered in their work.

The fact such a phenomenon is occurring in the campuses of Australian Universities is a cause of concern and should be examined further.

The need for the teaching of senior secondary and university courses to reflect a plurality of views, be accurate, fair, balanced and in context

The need for teaching in university courses to be accurate, fair and balanced is of the utmost importance in my opinion. To put it succinctly, a phrase I have heard many times, the role of Universities should be to teach students "how to think, not what to think." When course materials are presented that are not balanced, when students are marked down because their views differ from an academics point of view, when facts and statistics are twisted to suit a certain political agenda, the loser is the student. The student

is being bullied, intimidated, and steered to arrive at a certain outcome.

If such practices are allowed to continue, then the standing and integrity of our Universities will suffer, as will the students of these institutions.

Ways in which intellectual diversity and contestability of ideas may be promoted and protected, including the concept of a charter of academic freedoms.

As it stands at my University, the University has released in its code of conduct, a paragraph that affirms it is committed to academic freedom:

The University is committed to the principle that academic freedom is essential to the proper conduct of teaching, research and scholarship. In this context staff should recognise not only their own rights, but also the rights of others. Moreover, staff must comply with the policies of the University with respect to equity and access.

I believe that such vague terms do little to ensure that intellectual diversity is encouraged.

It is of my opinion that the best way to promote and protect intellectual diversity is through an Academic Bill of Rights, provided mechanisms exist at our universities to take up grievances and that considerable steps are taken to make students aware of these mechanisms. Such a measure would represent an increased effort by our Universities to ensure academic freedom.

The American Experience with an Academic Bill of Rights shows what such a project in Australia should seek to address:

All faculty shall be hired, fired, promoted and granted tenure on the basis of their competence and appropriate knowledge in the field of their expertise and, in the humanities, the social sciences, and the arts, with a view toward fostering a plurality of methodologies and perspectives. No faculty shall be hired or fired or denied promotion or tenure on the basis of his or her political or religious beliefs.

No faculty member will be excluded from tenure, search and hiring committees on the basis of their political or religious beliefs.

Students will be graded solely on the basis of their reasoned answers and appropriate knowledge of the subjects and disciplines they study, not on the basis of their political or religious beliefs.

Curricula and reading lists in the humanities and social sciences should reflect the uncertainty and unsettled character of all human knowledge in these areas by providing students with dissenting sources and viewpoints where appropriate. While teachers are and should be free to pursue their own findings and perspectives in presenting their views, they should consider and make their students aware of other viewpoints.

Academic disciplines should welcome a diversity of approaches to unsettled questions. Exposing students to the spectrum of significant scholarly viewpoints on the subjects examined in their courses is a major responsibility of faculty. Faculty will not use their courses for the purpose of political, ideological, religious or anti-religious indoctrination. Selection of speakers, allocation of funds for speakers programs and other student

activities will observe the principles of academic freedom and promote intellectual pluralism.

An environment conducive to the civil exchange of ideas being an essential component of a free university, the obstruction of invited campus speakers, destruction of campus literature or other effort to obstruct this exchange will not be tolerated.

Knowledge advances when individual scholars are left free to reach their own conclusions about which methods, facts, and theories have been validated by research. Academic institutions and professional societies formed to advance knowledge within an area of research, maintain the integrity of the research process, and organize the professional lives of related researchers serve as indispensable venues within which scholars circulate research findings and debate their interpretation. To perform these functions adequately, academic institutions and professional societies should maintain a posture of organizational neutrality with respect to the substantive disagreements that divide researchers on questions within, or outside, their fields of inquiry.

I believe these are fair principles for an Academic Bill of Rights to address in Australia, and that they would go a long way to ensure intellectual diversity and academic freedom at Australian Universities.

The next question is how such a scheme should be implemented. There are two broad options in my opinion, one is a top-down approach through legislation, and the other is that Universities seize the initiative and develop solutions themselves. Ideally, it would be best if Universities seized the initiative developing their own Academic Bills of Rights, best suited to their own individual circumstances, as opposed to legislative measures being introduced.

Conclusion

It is in my experience that levels of intellectual diversity and freedom at Australian Universities could be improved. If I were to succinctly summarise the state of affairs at our Universities, it would be that they have been hijacked by left-wing intellectuals who are unashamedly abusing their positions to push an ideological agenda on students, instead of teaching them in a fair and balanced manner. I believe an Academic Bill of Rights, influenced by the American experience would go a long way to ensuring impartiality at our Universities, and ending this abhorrent practice.

Yours Sincerely,  
Robert Langdon.