

# ***INQUIRY INTO ACADEMIC FREEDOM***

## **SENATE EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

*“University is supposed to be a place where you can explore your passions and interests and a time where it is exciting to learn – a place that is free from discrimination, a place to grow in knowledge and to formulate ideas that have yet to be discovered.” (Rachael Jude, Undergraduate Australian University Student)*

### **Attention: Committee Panel**

My name is Rachael Jude, I am an undergraduate student at a well known Australian University, pursuing a Bachelor of Arts, with a dual major in Community Welfare and Politics and Policy. When I first started my degree, I remember a professor stating *‘The personal is political and if you take anything from this degree, you will take this’* however, I did not realize at the time that my lecturer’s personal beliefs in politics would set the primary curriculum for this degree. I entered my degree with the belief that in undertaking social justice courses, which seek to eliminate oppression and discrimination within society, foreseeing social equality as the means of acquiring liberty that these same beliefs and actions of University Lectures and Staff would mirror the ideas taught by my professors. Regrettably, this has not been the case. The following are a few examples of my experience studying at an Australian University.

### **Incident #1**

After attending my second week seminar in “Social Policy and Social Justice”, I met with my professor in his office and requested additional reading materials. I explained my reasoning, i.e., that as a student, it was important for me to have knowledge about all viewpoints, so that I have a proper foundation for formulating my own opinions. As the readings were very one-sided, I was not given the opportunity to review competing viewpoints and therefore my knowledge of the topic would therefore be limited and biased and would not serve me in my future work in public policy and later academic course work at the post-graduate level.

This professor became very upset with my request and stated that I had *“offended and insulted him, to assume that he had an agenda, and how dare I make such a request.”*

I assured my professor that this was not the case and that I merely wanted to have other views instead of just one view. I made a comment of how many resource materials were on his bookshelf and that any help would be of great assistance. This professor then stated, *“I don’t understand what you are saying, this is only the second week and you’re complaining about my reading material. It seems to me that you should just drop out of*

*this course, this program is not for you'.*

At this point I was very confused, as I had thought since universities have historically been about free intellectual inquiry, which assumes that there will always be competing ideas, that I could freely approach my professor, who has knowledge in my area of study and request advice on additional resource material.

I then proceeded to point out an example in the reading so that he could understand, where I was coming from. I turned to my tutorial reading and showed him the following:

*"...Harming innocents are in no sense an accident. It is not the unintended consequence of a deterrent policy misfiring. Rather it is a direct and utterly foreseeable consequence of the policy's working precisely according to plan."* (Social Welfare and Individual Responsibility-David Schmidtz page 175)

I then stated the following:

*"This is coming from a very liberal view. Conservative policy makers who may have drafted and put the policies in question into place, would probably not view themselves as wanting to "intentionally harm innocent people" but have written and implemented policies for reasons other than what is suggested by the reading."* I asked my professor, *"So do you see what I am trying to say?"*

My professor continued to flip through the pages in the tutorial 'Book of Readings' and shaking his head, saying he didn't know how he could help. At the end of the meeting nothing was resolved and my professor seemed very displeased with our meeting. I left his office very shaken and confused about what had just transpired. Later on I had to seek the help of a third year student about possible resource material, which the student very agreeably assisted in doing, in a manner that was free of intimidation or abuse.

After my request for resource material, my professor became very hostile towards me in the weeks that followed and verbally attacked me and humiliated me in front of my class of peers. Over 20 students witnessed this unprovoked attack, which has yet to be resolved by the University despite numerous student statements regarding the incident and my filing of a student complaint/grievance. This same professor communicated his personal thoughts about me to various students in the class stating *"she was asking for it, she doesn't like the reading material, she should leave, she doesn't belong here."*

## **Incident #2**

I attended my first day of 'Introduction to Gender Studies'. I enrolled in this class, as I wanted to further examine notions surrounding gender inequality. I had believed this to be a relevant introduction course. On the first day of class, the Lecturer explained to the class our assessments and how they would be compiled. There were 2 tutorial papers with oral presentations (worth 50% of our mark) and 1 major essay (worth 50% of our mark). The professor stated the following during her explanation of assessments:

*"Your tutorial presentations and papers will be based strictly on your reading material. No other sources other than the tutorial readings can be used".*

At this stage I did not realise that the reading material would be biased, thus forcing me to only write and analyse one point of view, as all of the readings were handpicked readings by the lecturer, and were not derived from an over-arching textbook on the subject matter with competing viewpoints. Since I did not have the knowledge and background of the subject matter to formulate my own viewpoint, the course required that I undertake extensive research outside of class and outside of the class readings, if I were to broaden my understanding and develop my own perspective of the topic.

For example in the reading: 'Looking for God in all the Wrong Places: Feminist Seeking the Radical Questions in *Religion*', the purpose of this reading material was to promote the "WICCAN faith on the grounds of the feminist perspective" (Please Note: prior to this class this professor made it very clear that she personally advocated for the feminist perspective and that she was currently undertaking research on the topic)

A few quotes from the reading are as follows:

*"As a result, the bleeding agony of the cross should never be promulgated as vicarious suffering that redeems human sinfulness and also compensates for all unjustified misery, whether inflicted or encountered. Such a God-figure simply endorses sado-masochistic abuse in the guise of education for subservience".* (Page 114)

*"Other writers, such as Kim Chernin reinterprets Eve as the prototype of the woman who dares to disobey convention-who moves beyond dilemma of obedience versus Knowledge to break through to new vistas of self-awareness and authentic power. These revisions are of course binding nature of the biblical mandate that proscribes women as inferior from the beginning".*

*"Their Jewish-family-centred socialization not only prevents such women from being prepared to defend themselves against their husbands and from believing it has happened but makes them feel guilty and responsible for their husband's actions".* (page 123).

*"... We begin to develop a feminist interpretation because the Bible is part of the fabric of the oppression of battered women".* (Page 124)

*"Whether the vision of those feminists who believe that to be a Christian today is to remain faithful to Jesus' teachings on radical justice can prevail is a moot point. What is decisive is that these women have become a conscience not just for the church itself, but also for the violence that is an inevitable, and seemingly irrevocable consequence of a patriarchal hegemony".* (Page 125)

The above citations contained in the Professor's handpicked "book of readings", suggests that 'feminists' perceive Christianity, Judaism and Islam in a certain way. This professor did not provide alternative reading material with a competing viewpoint, nor did the professor convey in class that there are in fact feminist religious movements that support Christianity, Judaism and Islam. This reading material, along with the others provided in the professor's "book of readings" were very one side and provided only one narrow viewpoint and perspective which placed

one set of ideas as the positive or “right” way of thinking and other side as the negative or “wrong” way of thinking.

During tutorial discussion this particular professor agreed with me that the reading material provided to the students showed a very harsh side to the Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths. This professor asked students if they felt the same way about the reading. One student in particular stated that the reading material just confirmed why “she was happy she was an atheist”. This professor laughed along with another student. During discussion the professor pointed out her ridged catholic background and what was “wrong” with Christians and Christianity. After listening to course discussion in class a while, I began to realize that what was transpiring was not a “general” topic on the negatives of these particular faiths, but rather the professors personal views were being projected and that the ‘book of readings’ simply re-inforced and academically legitimized the professor’s viewpoints and biases. The professor continued to condone the negative view of the Christian faith and a few times even quoted biblical scriptures that condoned the killing of witches and the hate Christians have for such “sinful people” as well as what God’s character was. I then spoke up and said “but doesn’t the bible actually say, “Thou shall not kill”. The professor then stated “yeah, your right, but that’s the problem with the bible there are too many contradictions with it”. After the Lecture my professor stated in front of the classroom “you should get into religious studies” I explained to my professor that my current degree was a passion of mine and that I did not want to pursue Biblical Studies, as my interests were in the realm of public policy.

## **Summary**

For the record, I hold no political bias. I am still formulating my beliefs based on the knowledge I acquire, which is why I undertook my degree in the first place. I currently have a Commonwealth Supported Placement for a Bachelor of Arts, but I still pay approximately \$636.00 per unit, and therefore, the cost of my degree over three years is still \$15,265.00. As the consumer of an educational service, I think that I am entitled to a broad education which provides foundational core knowledge of my discipline, so that I can in turn apply that broad knowledge in real life practical situations in the work place. Since I hope to eventually work in some area of Australian public policy, a very narrow perspective and viewpoint, will not give me the breadth and depth of knowledge that is required to apply higher order critical thinking and know applications to knowledge. It could be that my situation at my particular university in my particular discipline is an isolated incidence, but I think the problem is probably more wide spread, therefore it would seem that further investigation and study should be undertaken to determine if Australian university students are paying for a narrow education with a particular set of values and viewpoint. Otherwise, if the education, I have experienced is the norm rather than the exception, than my generation of Australian leadership will be limited in their perspectives and knowledge and therefore the future quality of our leadership ability may be short-sighted by our short-sighted viewpoints derived from our short-sighted narrow education. *“The Personal is Political”* holds great value in the sense that if policy (and perhaps penalties imposed) is not drafted and implemented to ensure true academic freedom, then the values and prestige of higher education institutions will falter along with our nation as a whole. We are taught that education is the key to a

prosperous future, yet there are no measures in place to ensure that quality education is provided. A degree for many students has become merely a piece of paper in hopes to secure a low to minimum level job and nothing more. The tools that are being provided in Australian higher education, do not prepare students so that they in turn can provide quality services to the public, because students are being short-changed by a single viewpoint as the 'right way of thinking'. Most students, out of fear of retaliation, simply accept the status quo. I however, took on my university and my professors, by filing a student grievance. Eight months later, nothing has been resolved and I am now in the process of filing a complaint with the State Ombudsman. I honestly do not think anything will come from filing my complaint with the State Ombudsman, and therefore, because of ongoing retaliation by my university and professors, I will probably be forced to transfer to another institution. There are no policies to protect students against retaliation. Universities are required to have in place student grievance policies, but in reality, these policies and procedures are only window dressing. Short of filing a lawsuit against a university, the student has no voice and merely pays for their education services, regardless of how shoddy the services may be. I have come forward, in hope that the committee will look at their children and their children's children etc. and see that while issues surrounding academic freedom may not affect them personally, it eventually effects us all.

I thank you for your time and consideration this the above mentioned matter

Kind Regards,

Rachael Jude