

Australian Universities Quality Agency
Submission to Enquiry into Academic Freedom

August 2008

1. Introduction

The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) is pleased to provide a submission to this inquiry. AUQA is Australia's national quality agency for higher education, with responsibility for: quality audits in higher education institutions and accreditation authorities; reporting on performance and outcomes; assisting in quality enhancement; advising on quality assurance; and liaising internationally with quality agencies in other jurisdictions, for the benefit of Australian higher education.

AUQA supports public debate in the area of academic freedom, and the role of academic freedom in higher education and in broader society. There are many dimensions, including political, social, economic and academic, to a debate on academic freedom, and much can be gleaned from discussion and exploration of good practices in the meaning and impact of academic freedom in higher education, in both established and developing democracies around the world.

2. What is Academic Freedom?

The Standing Committee may well develop and provide a definition of academic freedom within the mandate of this inquiry. For the purposes of this discussion we have borrowed a working description from the South African Education White Paper, 3 (1997).

The principle of academic freedom implies the absence of outside interference, censure or obstacles in the pursuit and practice of academic work. It is a precondition for critical, experimental and creative thought and therefore for the advancement of intellectual inquiry and knowledge.

3. Rationale

Any democratic society encourages open inquiry and criticism because this is how a society develops and continues to evolve. One mechanism used by democratic societies to achieve 'friendly criticism' is to establish organisations charged with carrying out research and teaching, i.e. universities, and then to give them the freedom to do this, and to speak freely about the results of their research and thinking. In New Zealand, for example, a five-part definition of a university is included in legislation, and one of the parts is that the institution 'accepts the role of critic and conscience of society'. In Australia, also, we live in

a democratic society it is our duty – as well as being in our best interests - to protect and celebrate this academic freedom.

Academic freedom underpins Australia's objective to become an innovative economy and society, which can be fostered by a wide ranging research agenda which is open, and transparent, and where the result of research is published without interference or limitation.

4. Discussion

Institutional Autonomy

It is important that academic freedom is not confused with institutional autonomy. Institutional autonomy refers to how an institution is administered and self-regulated. Institutional autonomy is broadly defined as the university's management of its operational activities. It is how the institution decides, for example, the most effective use of resources to support the achievement of the university's strategic objectives. This can be reflected in the types of programs the university provides. Universities have a responsibility to manage their institutions to ensure the best use of public resources. Although, in Australia, government funding for higher education has been decreasing, universities are considered as major contributors to the public good of our society.

Academic freedom is a necessary pre-condition in the development of a knowledge society and in the foundation of knowledge institutions such as universities. Institutional autonomy should be used to create the conditions to protect academic freedom both within the institution and to protect staff from pressures on academic freedom from the external environment. This includes protecting the academic freedom of staff from external government, public or private sector interference.

Institutional support of academic freedom has resulted in some universities developing statements and codes of practice with regards to academic freedom, and academic freedom is a condition of some university enterprise agreements. Historically, academic freedom has been upheld through discussion and debate at Academic Boards and Senates. In acting for the public good, universities are charged with a responsibility to protect academic freedoms and the pursuit of inquiry and research within the institution.

The use of Academic Freedom

Those working as academics in universities also have a responsibility not to squander their academic freedom, but rather to use their positions to research, inquire, and provide evidence to further the overall knowledge and development of society. At the point of conflict where academic freedom clashes with

institutional autonomy, or external pressures, then this conflict needs to be openly and transparently considered.

Students must also be aware of the academic freedom they are accorded. Students have many opportunities to research and learn in areas of interest and as they learn to explore and develop divergent opinion this must also be respected and protected as a right to academic freedom. This diverse pursuit of knowledge is how students learn to think independently and to form opinions and debate within an academic context, ultimately contributing to the creation of new knowledge.

Academic freedom is not absolute but is always qualified and this qualification is generally provided by the discipline within which an academic is working and researching. Whilst an academic may be an expert in a particular area or suite of discipline areas, and be providing leading edge research and public discussion within these disciplines, this does not then qualify an academic to make ill-informed commentary and remarks in those areas outside their own discipline or knowledge base. Academic freedom can, be likened to freedom of the press. Like press freedom, academic freedom exists for the good of society by allowing people to say unpopular things for the good of society. It does not primarily exist for the good of the academic or journalist. Further, academic freedom must also be approached and treated ethically. The rights of academic freedom enable academics to explore their disciplines, but ethically this does not provide a mandate to injure others.

The Role of AUQA

Nationally, the spirit of academic freedom is currently protected through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes, October 2007, in:

Protocol A – Nationally agreed criteria and approval processes for all higher education institutions, states that:

An institution involved in Australian higher education delivery must meet the following criteria:

- A3. has a clearly articulated higher education purpose that includes a commitment to and support for free intellectual inquiry in the institution's academic endeavours.

Other relevant agreed criteria under this protocol include:

- A4. delivers teaching and learning that engage with advanced knowledge and inquiry

- A5. has governance arrangements, quality assurance processes and a staffing profile appropriate to its goals and academic purposes
- A8 its academic staff are active in scholarship that informs their teaching, and are active in research when engaged in research supervision.

AUQA in undertaking quality audits of self accrediting institutions is charged by MCEETYA, with checking each institutions adherence to the National Protocols.

The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), Audit handbook for non self-accrediting Higher Education Providers, (March 2008), provides further protection for academic inquiry in non-self accrediting institutions through the:

Quality Audit Factor One – Institutional and Educational Objectives and Institutional Governance,

Criteria of Institutional and Educational Objectives:

- F1.3 The institution encourages open intellectual inquiry through its academic goals, processes and services

Again, AUQA in undertaking quality audits of Non-Self Accrediting Institutions is charged by MCEETYA, with checking each institutions adherence to the Quality Audit Factors, which in turn reflect the National Protocols.

Whilst academic freedom is best managed at the institutional level, AUQA contributes to the monitoring of academic freedom within institutions through the higher education quality audit process. In practical terms, this translates to AUQA using as a basis both the National Protocols and the DEEWR Audit handbook for Non-self Accrediting higher education providers as the standards upon which AUQA monitors amongst other things, academic inquiry as a component of the quality assurance process within institutions.

5. Recommendation

AUQA recommends that:

- **The National Protocols and Quality Audit Factors be strengthened in relation to the requirement for institutions to display academic freedom. Then AUQA's audits will provide a check on the health of academic freedom within our society.**

6. Conclusion

As Australia reaches towards its aspiration to be an innovative knowledge economy and society, the health of academic freedom in higher education institutions in Australia must continue to be monitored and protected. Future challenges to academic freedom include the growth of the cohort of non-self accrediting providers and how these providers join with universities to contribute to the development of the higher education sector. The notion of academic freedom underpins a knowledge society. We must continue to debate, and discuss academic freedom to ensure that academic freedom is enshrined within Australian Higher Education.