

11th August 2008

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Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee
Department of the Senate

SUBMISSION TO SENATE INQUIRY INTO ACADEMIC FREEDOM

My name is Ben Potts and I am a third year economics student at the University of Sydney. In my time at university, I have run into several cases where I felt that I was ignored or that the opinions I raised in class were 'battered down' simply because they did not align with the perspective of the lecturer or tutor.

For example, in my first year of my bachelor degree, I took a class on international politics and business. In a tutorial on globalisation and the role an emerging China was to play in the global economy of the 21st Century, we were asked to look at China's development and analyse any potential difficulties the Chinese may face into the future. During this discussion, I raised the point that a number of commentators in the media had raised – that China needed to move away from a socialistic style of government and move to a democratic system that enforced private property rights and freedom of speech like the liberal democracies of the western world. The tutor visibly disagreed with this and ignored the point, focusing on other points made. When I raised the point again, I was told it was not a valid point. It was quite apparent to me that she was not going to consider an opinion that was different from hers.

In the same business and politics course, my major assignment that semester was left with comments on it that claimed I was biased simply because I questioned the motives of trade unionists and left-wing academics who campaigned against a 'race to the bottom' in wages as a result of globalisation. The fact that I considered both sides of the argument did not seem to matter to the lecturer, just that I dared to have a different view – a view backed by evidence and texts – from the message the lecturer had been pushing all semester.

Another example of bias I have come across was in one of my macroeconomics classes. During a short test/quiz in a tutorial, I was marked wrong for a question about labour markets. I argued what is considered the neo-classical or orthodox theory that labour markets should be more flexible, whereas the tutor said that this was wrong and that the best thing was for governments to negotiate with trade unions, a policy more in line with Keynesian economics. My problem with this was not that the tutor had a different opinion to me, or that both theories were discussed, in fact I see it as of great educational value that alternate theories are discussed as it provides me, and I would think other students as well, with an opportunity to better understand and critically analyse differing points of view. However, my problem is when a teacher tells you that you are wrong, that a certain theory is wrong and avoids debate over it because it seems to go against his or her own personal or political perspective.

It is examples such as these two that, from my point of view, show what is wrong with the level of bias in tertiary education. It is admirable that students can and should debate alternate and competing ideas while at university. However, it is completely against everything that a university stands for when academics influence their students to simply think the way they do and outcast those who might think

differently. It seems to me that this is the real problem with Australia's education system – there is a lack of ideas, not a lack of tangible resources.

Ben Potts