

Subject: Academic Freedom Charter - The Managerial Dimension

This submission argues that the way in which a school or university is managed is critical to the effective implementation of any fine words in any academic freedom charter.

As resources have got scarcer and scarcer in education, so the need for efficient management has become more and more widely appreciated. An idealised view of business practice has been the source of some 20 years or so of 'managerialist' universities and schools. By 'managerialist' I mean an approach to running an institution that uses competitive pressure and scarce resources to justify an authoritarian, non consultative, horizontal-barrier-building and profit driven approach. Good research is judged primarily by successful bids for research grants and good teaching judged primarily by enrolment, retention and pass numbers. Unions and other organs of staff expression are marginalised, avoided and distrusted in this philosophy. The result is an absolute failure to generate trust or sense of community between management and staff and an impoverished learning experience for students. There are also consequences for academic freedom, as will be argued next.

Academic freedom means freedom to teach and research a subject independently of outside interference, especially political or religious interference. It never meant ignoring resource constraints unless those constraints are politically driven. When the UK's Warwick University decided against building a campus in Singapore, it was just this classical kind of academic freedom that it thought would be at risk. Within Australia, widespread lip service is still paid to the notion of collegiality, something thought to be a birthright of ivy league and group of eight universities but not available to the ex colleges and ex institutes that form the majority outside that group. By collegiality is usually meant a style of management by meeting, consultation and consensus where the two most visible symptoms of firm leadership is how meetings are chaired and from where most new proposals originate. Academic Boards, Senates and Councils are all run on a consensus basis and no significant decisions are made by a cabal, by a the senior management group alone or by any kind of special purpose entity formed to run (unaccountably to the university community) spin- off teaching factories. Collegiality is thought to deliver better ideas because the ideas have been filtered through more critics; to deliver better research because it is sourced in bottom-up communality of interest rather than politically driven competition for resources; and to deliver better teaching because the people delivering the teaching are fully engaged members of the university community rather than disposable 'human resources'. Conversely under managerialism, faction replaces community, people fear to discuss internal political matters for fear contract non renewal, and there only managerial pressure to perform as opposed to the peer group pressure likely to flourish in a collegial community. Accordingly, collegiality is far more likely than a managerialism to promote and protect both academic freedom and academic productivity in every sense. That in turn suggests that any charter of academic freedom should attend adequately to issues of organisation and management.

Just as the 2002 Sarbanes Oxley Act in the USA prescribed 'town hall meetings' inside large corporations to force transparency and so reduce the chances of Enron type scandals from repeating, so any new charter of academic freedom might enshrine internal accountability by university management to staff and students. If organisational change committees between the unions and university management were already working well, there would be no need for this; but it is very rare that such committees are used collegially to inform, communicate and mutually support. Monthly general meetings open to all staff to receive news from management and to clear up misunderstandings should be mandated. Management here means any member/s of the senior management group appointed to represent that group to the wider constituency. Institutional reviews of universities should audit the way in which such meetings have been held and their effectiveness in achieving the requisite minimum level of transparency necessary to support academic freedom.

A similar meeting series with elected student representatives is perhaps more sensible than any bigger assembly.

I would be happy to elaborate or evidence the above if the Committee so wishes. This submission is a personal one and does not represent any official position or institutional view except by sheer coincidence.

Gabriel Donleavy
