



Committee Secretary

Senate Education, Employment and Workplace and Work Place Relations Committee

Department of the Senate, Parliament House

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Dear Committee Secretary,

#### **Inquiry into Academic Freedom**

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to such an enquiry. Bias is rampant within learning institutions that purport themselves to be a place of learning and freedom of thought, a place to develop ones idea and to form a learned opinion. Throughout my university career I have found this overwhelmingly not the case. This bias exists not only in the ideas expressed by lecturers but also in their marking considerations and learning materials such as text books. In effect this takes place as there are no ramifications for this kind of behavior and no peer assessment as the views expressed are almost universal.

##### **A. Call for a Code of Conduct**

I am 20 years old and I believe this is one of the most important issues in Australian Education today. Are we really promoting critical, analytical thinking in Australian educational institutions? Or is there a much more powerful hidden curriculum.

Australian universities proudly espouse freedom of thinking and freedom of speech. I am a student of Politics and International Relations and have been disappointed and disturbed at the number of times I have observed students being ridiculed in front of their peers, prevented from commenting and marked down without legitimate reasons by academics simply because they hold conservative political views and are participating in particular University subjects in which the lecturers appear not to respect the inherent value of consideration of a range of views.

There appears to be no code of practice governing the right of the student to receive balanced information. Text materials are often selected deliberately to present a strongly biased view of the issues being addressed. Expression of views which are divergent from those of the lecturer are treated with ridicule and intimidation. It would appear that the selection of lecturers themselves is determined not by their capacity to engender a disposition towards analytical thought and expression, but by their political bias entirely.

#### **B. The Damaging Effects of unchecked Bias**

Throughout my time at university I have been exposed to teachers whose political opinions are in conflict with my own. This is not a problem and is to be expected in any environment where debate is encouraged. My concern is that these teachers "believe that what they speak is gospel" so to speak...to the extent that they present it as doctrine or fact and regard and purport their own positions to be conclusive.

This, I believe is as dangerous as any teacher anywhere in the world imposing their narrow view of the world on their students.

In turn, these academics clearly have "power" in terms of the dialogue which takes place in the classroom and the assessment results awarded, use ridicule and intimidation to suppress divergent views discouraging others from exploring ideas that are different. Free thought and free speech are suppressed.

Rather than analysing material produced for assessment purposes based on the merit of the argument, biased academics allocate marks on the basis of whether the student agrees with their view of the world...or not. Non-aligned students receive poor results, no matter what the strength of their argument.

It is strangely frequent that lecturers will state that universities are founded on the principles of academic freedom and in the same breath ridicule any view which does not reflect their own.

Throughout my time at University of New South Wales I have recorded several clearly biased statements presented as statements of fact by lecturers. These include:

- Communism still has merit in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and was never given a fair chance;
- America is the greatest threat to world peace today;
- America seeks to establish a torture regime;
- It will be a land of milk and honey when that bastard is gone (referring to John Howard);
- John Howard has not done one positive thing for aboriginal people;
- Israel is an illegal state;
- Hamas and Hezbollah are community organisations much like the Red Cross;

- Israel is the greatest human rights abuser in the world today.

These statements were not clarified with "maybe" or "perhaps" or "this is only my personal opinion," they were made as statements of supposed fact made by publicly funded academics responsible for facilitating education in Politics and International Relations. My concern is... How will our graduates be regarded overseas if their perspectives reflect these types of sweeping generalisations as positions of fact?

To clarify, my views are widely held conservative views. It is not that I am expressing fringe or non-mainstream views. How would these academics treat a student with extreme views? Certainly not with respect, I don't believe.

There are also many examples of bias within assignments. These assignments are worded in such a way that the position you should take when answering the question is assumed. Below is an example of an assignment which asked for comment on a set of questions. Please note the first question refers to the statement on which we were to comment as being "plainly erroneous". I happened to disagree although I dared not say so.

**POLS3043**

**Exercise Question**

***On 9 April 1997 John Bolton testified before the US House International Relations Committee. At that time he was a former Assistant Secretary of State for International Organisation Affairs in the George H Bush Administration. The Yale Law graduate tendered a written statement in which he asserted that***

***"Treaties are 'Law' only for U.S. domestic purposes. In their international operation treaties are simply 'political', and not legally binding"***

***Mr. Bolton drew legal criticism in response to what were widely perceived to be inaccurate remarks. A political scientist is likely to grasp Mr. Bolton's conduct in a somewhat different light.***

- 1. What political purpose(s) were served by Mr. Bolton's assertion of a premise that was plainly erroneous?***
- 2. What does his behavior suggest regarding the relationship between US hegemony and International Law?***
- 3. In the eleven years since Mr. Bolton's opinions were put to the House, do you consider his views to have served or hindered the interests of the United States government?***

### **C. Ridicule and intimidation in the class room**

On a personal level, I have been emotionally bullied and ridiculed by lecturers who mock me in front of my peers in what appears to be an attempt to intimidate me such that I will not express my views

There is a fine line between ridicule from an academic in a position of power and the peer level debate (which sometimes involves ridicule) which occurs normally in University classrooms. The peer debate which can involve banter and laughter as a form of argument may be acceptable from peers engaged in a healthy debate. However, it is not appropriate from someone charged with the responsibility of encouraging free thinking and more importantly with the responsibility of assessment of a student's capacity to present an argument based on theory sourced from a range of perspectives.

The role of a teaching academic is to encourage critical, divergent thinking, not to eliminate it.

Challenging thinking by posing questions for analysis and ridiculing students by dismissing and mocking their views are two very different approaches to "teaching." The former is acceptable. The latter is not.

### **D. Assessment, Power and Intimidation**

The power held by academics to assess and award marks is central to the issue.

I feel as do many other Australian students that I do not have the right to contribute openly to class discussions or express dissent. The negativity I have experienced has influenced me such that I have taken to writing essays and other work which I regard as baseless but aligned with the lecturer's views, just to ensure that I pass the subject. I have witnessed the damage that occurs in terms of students' results when the student view is not supportive of the lecturer's own bias. The suppression of academic freedom which is occurring is more typical of life under a political dictatorship than of the open democratic learning environments Australia purports to uphold. Even my family and friends, (many of them also conservative Australians) are saying, "Shhh.... don't let them hear you say that...!" "Just tell them what they want to hear..."

This is Australia and this has gone too far. Do we value free speech? Or do we not?

To provide a further direct example recorded in writing, I have had essays by certain lecturers marked very harshly.

Comments on these essays included:

- "Your ideas are too concerned with reality" (An essay on current Australian Politics);
- "Your ideas are not in keeping with current political thinking"

## **E. Conclusion**

The central issue is the "Power" of academics to intimidate and therefore to influence thought and expression due mainly to their capacity to control assessment outcomes. When biased academics are selected to teach a particular subject the discussion of issues can be dangerously one-sided, unhealthy and un-Australian. All views should be respected and encouraged.

Academics should not be allowed to resort to ridicule and intimidation to "control" thinking and expression in their classrooms. The University Ethics committee should monitor the references provided for each subject ensuring that each nominates a balanced selection of reference material.

I wish for an Australian University environment which encourages free thinking and freedom of speech without ridicule and intimidation by academics. I hope that is not too much to ask. Please feel free to contact me for clarification on any of these issues.

Yours Sincerely,

Jaimi Primrose - Levi