

**Submission
Inquiry into Academic Freedom
Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations**

By Brian Galligan,
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My observations concern academic freedom within Australian universities, where I have worked since returning to Australia from completing a PhD at the University of Toronto in 1978. In those three decades, I have been a Professor of Political Science at University of Melbourne since 1995; before that a Professor, and previously Research Fellow, in the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University; and a lecturer at University of Tasmania and La Trobe. I am an active member of the main academic professional association, the Australian Political Studies Association (APSA); I was President in 2005-6, joint editor of the *Australian Journal of Political Science* 1995-9, and Treasurer in the later 1980s and early 1990s. I think I have extensive professional networks and good contacts among colleagues and across the discipline in Australia and overseas.

In my view, academic freedom is not particularly at treat in Australia today, anymore so than in previous decades. This is an ‘on balance’ view, as there are changing opportunities and potential threats from new technologies and managerial and political fashions. There are no obvious mandated restrictions on academic freedom that I am aware of in Australia today. The opportunities and challenges have to do with indirect matters of access to full and diverse materials, intellectual climate and culture, and managerial policies concerning personnel hiring, nurturing and rewards, underfunding research and increasing dependence on particular government or private sources, and always the threat of unintended erosion of the best sort of academic culture.

One potential political threat is the spread of the ‘national curriculum’ syndrome that afflicts public discussion, and to some extent policy, on Australian history in high schools. This seems to have some attraction to both sides of politics, and engages some of my history colleagues in what they see as ‘History Wars’—an overblown term for preferring my view of Australian history to yours. One would hope that the complications of our federal system will stymie such ill conceived efforts by the Commonwealth, and a variety of views will be allowed to flourish in the diverse state and private school systems. Even if it is low on the horizon, this sort of thing needs some attention with respect to universities, given the Commonwealth’s penchant for micro-managing, while at the same time, underfunding Australian universities.

Access

Access to full and diverse sources and views is integral to academic freedom, both for university researchers and teachers, and for undergraduate, professional and research students. An opinionated and biased lecturer will be immediately shown up if students have broad access to other sources and views.

The internet revolution has opened up new avenues of information and expression. Source documents and diverse views are more accessible. University libraries are now extensively on line, and most journals are available on line. One can do an extraordinary amount of research from one's desk, with just about everything readily available. There seem few restraints on access, and if so these are usually for commercial purposes and handled collectively by the university. A couple of examples from my own work and interests can illustrate: the *Oxford Companion to Australian Politics* (ed B. Galligan & W. Roberts 2007) is available in printed copy or on line via Oxford The current number and past numbers of the *Australian Journal of Political Science* are also available in both forms.

Some colleagues have their own web sites where they place recent papers and other personal view pieces. Others make regular use of on line newspapers, blog sites, etc. Students are avid users of web based and on line material, and in many instances that I see in routine papers and theses this has diversified and enriched student research and the quality of work.

The proliferation of on line and web based sources has compensated, in many respects, for the relative decline and neglect of libraries. Otherwise, this latter phenomenon would be alarming. Because of price escalation of books and journals, and constrained funding of Australian universities for the last decade (due to the Commonwealth's refusing to fund normal cost escalations since the beginning of the Howard government in 1996), universities have starved their libraries. Melbourne University is a notable offender, and only now is beginning to turn its attention to remedying a decade of relative neglect. A major concern for Australia and a Committee such as this should be the relative neglect and comparative decline of Australian university libraries. The glib response that most things are now on line is not adequate, especially in a highly developed country that aspires to a knowledge economy. We need great public and university libraries, fully integrated with on line and web access.

Assessment

A claim made by some is that biased lecturers will reward regurgitation of their views, and penalize students with different views. This has not been my experience over a professional career, as a graduate research student or a teacher and supervisor. The best academics encourage and reward critical work and diverse views that are well argued and researched.

There are also many checks and balances in the system. One is that students have a wide range of choice in Arts and Social Science subjects (much more so than in professional degrees where there is more technical and professional knowledge to get across). Students can switch out of a subject without penalty and move to an alternative during a sorting out period of several weeks at the beginning of semester. Student 'alternative handbooks' and word of mouth are ready purveyors of views of who is good, bad or biased as a lecturer. Let me mention some of the procedures at Melbourne University; most universities have variations of these. At the Department or School level there are

procedures for reviewing overall results, including the spread of grades—a bell curve is not used but there are pretty precise rules of thumb, and show cause procedures, for examination results in any subject before the Head counter signs the return sheets. All high and fail marks are double marked as a check. At the Honours level, theses and individual papers are all double marked with at least one independent examiner. Overall Honours thesis and subject results are pored over at a special meeting of the Department/School as a whole, and uneven marks for particular students examined and reasons sought for noticeable variation. Other Universities have an external examiner who assesses a selection of theses and participates in the final Honours meeting when all grades are finalized—I have done this for University of Tasmania for the last 5 years.

Melbourne University has an additional set of monitoring procedures. All subjects must be assessed by students in an elaborate, confidential process in which they are asked to rank the subject and lecturer on 9 key points, including ‘whether the subject was well taught’, etc. (see attachment). The results are sent back to Departments/Schools and individual lecturers; and published and reviewed by the Academic Board—defaulters with low scores are highlighted and they and their Head are asked to show cause, and detail remedial procedures. These scores are considered annually in the individual lecturer’s annual review. There are regular visitations by a high powered Academic Board Committee that assesses particular degrees, and previously departments, including interviewing representative students, and reports to Academic Board. (I was previously Chair of this Committee—TALQAC or the Teaching and Learning Quality Assurance Committee of Academic Board.)

Indeed, the level of monitoring, checking and reviewing tends to be excessive in modern universities. Certainly, it is far greater than in earlier decades. It has ensured a higher standard of teaching, and cut out much of the reputed casualness and idiosyncratic peculiarities that older generations like to recall about their university experience. The main thrust is ‘quality of teaching’, but clearly academic freedom and eliminating lecturer bias and preference for pet views would find it hard to persist in such a system. And in my view, they do not.

Colleagues committed to causes

That is not to say that some individual lecturers have strong personal commitment to a cause, ideology or personal philosophy—eg this one is a radical feminist, that one a leftist who was once a member of the Communist party, another (probably in the Economics Faculty or Business School) a rabid free marketeer. I think these are notable exceptions to the large body of academics that mainly share liberal democratic values consistent with the larger citizenry.

It is these special cases that seem to attract most of the adverse criticism. There is an issue of diversity in some niches of academia: the main one that comes to mind is teaching sexuality and gender in Arts faculties. This is invariably reserved for feminists or those who advocate ‘queer politics’. A Catholic nun would not likely be hired in this area, although she might well be a Professor of Fine Art as Margaret Manion was at Melbourne. Is this an infringement of academic freedom and a case of bias in what is

taught and who teaches it? Or is it a positive manifestation of pluralism that gives a minority view a toehold in academia? We can argue it both ways.

Are Arts and Social Science Departments peopled by old lefties and new left ideologies? I'd say most of my colleagues in the Arts Faculty are somewhat left of centre, but probably critical Labor voters, or more likely critical of all political parties and in favour of more direct or 'discursive' models of democracy, if they are political at all. I jointly teach a new first year subject 'Philosophy, Politics and Economics' with an economist and a philosopher. We have quite different views of issues ranging from the meaning of life to what students should be taught in an introductory first year subject. There is no left bias, or left-right split. At the same time, I would think most colleagues in the Commerce Faculty or Business School are committed to free markets and business, and biased against government—probably to the right of the Liberal coalition. Is this a problem? Or the way broad disciplinary areas have developed and maintain themselves?

Managerial Menace

Surprisingly, an excessive variant of managerial has spread across Australian universities, due to intellectual fashion among those academics who take up senior executive positions, the hiring in of professional managers, as well as the general climate of cost containment and productivity increase associated with the Commonwealth's decision not to fund normal cost increase across the sector. There are advantages of better management; but also a good deal of mindless managerialism that produces very little and is sometimes mean-spirited and corrosive of the best academic values. Universities, like for example courts or parliaments, are special places. Management techniques don't produce the particular outcomes of the institution but should assist it in being more productive. In my view Australian universities are currently suffering something of a managerial epidemic that is broadly uncongenial to the best academic values.

Tenure remains the institutional bulwark of academic freedom. People cannot be sacked because of their views and writings are considered unacceptable to authorities, whether within the university or government or other bodies. Tenure has been the institutional mainstay of academic freedom, but has also protected poor performers. In attempting to get at the latter, there is a danger that universities will erode the former. There are some signs of this today, even in my own institution. Australian universities have had rather poor quality control in confirmation of academic personnel—virtually no one is not confirmed, as opposed to the top US universities where getting tenure is a major threshold and many do not make it. There is an obvious case for raising confirmation standards. Also, poor performers have not been adequately mentored and managed, with the ultimate penalty of dismissal in procedurally tight but fair arrangements. There annual reviews, but no hard penalties for bad performance. This surely needs to be remedied. But the danger is that tenure will be eroded for managerial short-termism: eg balancing budgets after financial mismanagement. To oust poor performers, on the grounds of poor performance, for purposes of financial strategy seems to me to endanger tenure. Yet this is what some universities, like my own, are currently canvassing.

Universities have been encouraged/forced to go increasingly to outside ‘partners’ — government, private companies, etc. to fund special research and projects. Much of this is good; but some comes at the price of doing work that is overly applied or consistent with the outside funders’ goals and philosophy. Again, this is a potential danger to academic freedom, but one that can be managed, and remedied by proper funding of Australian research. Partnerships have a role in the spectrum of research provision; but too much dependency can be a problem.

These are some of the issues and challenges for academic freedom in Australian universities. They can all be managed and academic freedom protected. But vigilance is required; and diligence in tracking changes and their intended, or often largely unintended, impact on curbing academic freedom.