

Senate Inquiry into Academic Freedom

What is academic freedom defined as? It is the freedom to think, to have opinions and to express them in an academic environment. The fundamental protection of diversity and academic freedom in all universities is tenure: the guarantee of continued employment. Since tenure was removed in Australia in the early 1990s, academic freedom has been under threat here more than in any other country in the democratic world. The unpleasant truth is that academic freedom is almost non-existent in modern Australian universities.

To understand why this is important, one must consider history. The most striking and original case is Galileo Galilei of Italy, whose book comparing theories of whether the earth rotated around the sun, or vice-versa, was investigated and eventually banned by the Catholic Church. Yet Galileo had tenure - his job at the University of Pisa was guaranteed by a contract. Despite his conflicts with church opinion, Galileo was able to work, continue his ground-breaking research and publish books that laid the foundations of modern science.

Tenure does not exist in Australia. Minor transgressions like telling the truth to reporters are punishable by immediate dismissal. This happened to Ted Steele, who merely told a newspaper how grades are inflated at Wollongong University. Dr Steele, an associate professor of biochemistry, was sacked immediately. He took his university to court and even won (twice), but was not re-instated. The university continued to oppose the rehiring of Steele. Similar attacks on free speech occurred this year at Queensland University of Technology.

Internationally, a sacking for these reasons is nearly impossible. At Harvard University, Professor Harvey Mansfield has long spoken publicly about grade inflation. Being tenured, he could not be sacked: instead, Mansfield won. Harvard decided to investigate the problem and change its policy. No sacking or suspension for free speech has ever occurred in other universities of major democracies. If it did, there would be storms of public protest. Does Australia really prefer Wollongong's sacking over Harvard's free speech?

Other serious incidents like this have happened. In the mid 1990's, The University of Queensland dismissed its Physics Department, later re-instating some. This reduced diversity by removing complete fields of teaching and research, including atmospheric and marine physics. Today, with renewed interest in global warming, these fields are central to Australian public policy. Australia now has very few scientific experts to determine the reliability of the relevant research and proposed solutions. This is not optimal for our country's future.

The threat of sacking that hangs over every academic's head in Australia has a subtle yet chilling effect. It leads to silence: an unwillingness to become involved or to speak publicly. Academic contracts are now written with clauses that demand management approval of public statements. This devalues the democratic rights central to our form of government. How can the public make informed decisions, if academics are gagged? How can we rely on research when university management can suppress results, for example, on drug side-effects?

We should look to international standards, return to our democratic roots, and demand tenure in Australia, with freedom of inquiry and freedom of speech. This may seem difficult to achieve, but change we must to preserve our freedom.

A charter of academic freedoms should include the following components:

- 1) Tenure and free speech in continuing academic teaching contracts, after a probation period.*
- 2) Part year salaries with summer research contracts to encourage research.*
- 3) Commitment to increased numbers of academics in tenured positions.*
- 4) Reduction of fixed term contracts, which prevent independence.*
- 5) Legislation to prevent management persecution of academics who speak to the press.*
- 6) An enforceable bill of rights covering freedom of inquiry and free speech.*

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This submission is a personal one, and is not the official policy of any academic organisation.