

Two Ideas of a University

Speech by Matthew Lesh, Research Fellow at the Institute of Public Affairs, to the University Chancellors Council's Conference on University Governance, Adelaide, Australia, 4 October 2018

Thank you very much for the invitation to address this august gathering. In particular, I pay my tribute to Peter Shergold who graciously organised this session in the spirit of free speech and viewpoint diversity.

Let me start by telling you about Amelia and Steve.

Amelia, an academic at an Australian university, reached out to me earlier this year after seeing my work on free speech. She didn't tell me anything in text but asked for a call. I could hear the passion yet the fear in her voice. Amelia is of the political left, has voted Labor all her life, but is now in touch with someone from a free market think tank about free speech.

Amelia's ordeal began when she was asked to take down articles from her office door because they were, allegedly, making others feel unsafe. The articles were general medical science articles, not some extreme viewpoint. Nevertheless, Amelia was interrogated and reprimanded at a meeting with the head of her faculty. Reflecting on the experience, Amelia says she felt 'gaslighted' – that's when you're told to believe one thing but your observation of reality is the opposite. "I was told that academic freedom exists and then I was told to take down these research articles," Amelia tells me.

Steve is a student at an Australian university who I met a few months ago. He tells me about a lecturer who relentlessly makes fun of Donald Trump and instructs students to voice their outrage on Twitter. The lecturer tells students they are doing the wrong thing if they are not pursuing social justice causes.

Steve tells me about a student in his class that presented an assignment on male domestic violence. During the presentation the student was interrupted and berated by the lecturer simply for expressing a contrary perspective – and told that male domestic violence is not an issue worth talking about and because it was a right wing perspective he would get lower grades. The student making this presentation didn't even realise what he was doing, he isn't a political guy, he was just trying to present a different angle on the topic.

Steve, the student I met, says that he pretended to be a 'satirical feminist,' which led to good grades. After seeing what happens to those that express a contrary position Steve says he's too scared to express his views on political issues in class.

The challenge

Campus free speech issues have featured prominently in national debate in recent times.

Last month the riot squad was called to the University of Sydney in response to students violently disrupting an event with psychologist Bettina Arndt. Earlier this year geophysicist Peter Ridd was sacked by James Cook University after expressing a contrary position on the health of the Great Barrier Reef. The Australian National University has been criticised for

refusing to partner with the Ramsay Centre on Western Civilisation. Last year it emerged Monash University and the University of Sydney capitulated to demands for course content censorship — including a quiz and a map — by nationalistic Chinese international students. In response, both Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Education Minister Dan Tehan have raised concerns about the state of free speech on campus.

These recent incidents are merely the tip of the iceberg. Australia's universities are increasingly becoming closed intellectual shops. I speak to academics and students at your institutions almost every day, people just like Amelia and Steve, that tell me about a worrying culture of censorship. This is a real and serious problem.

Australia's universities are lacking in viewpoint diversity – a range of perspectives challenging each other in the pursuit of reason, truth and progress. This leads to groupthink, self-censorship, and sometimes active shouting down when people express a different viewpoint.

Bill von Hippel, a psychology professor at the University of Queensland, says he's a "lefty", but "a monoculture is always a risk, whether you're part of it or against it." He's "very worried that the left-leaning ideology of most members of our field might skew the nature of the questions we ask and the way we interpret our findings."

We live in an era of disruption. There is no guarantee that the traditional university model will continue to exist in the future. There is an extraordinary quantity of knowledge already available on YouTube for free. There are online competitors to universities that have much lower costs. The Uber of education could be just around the corner.

If universities are to survive, they must be places where all ideas can be freely expressed and debated in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding.

At this juncture, Australia's universities have a choice to make. They must decide the purpose of their institution.

Jonathan Haidt, who is a professor of psychology at New York University, has talked about how universities cannot be both social justice institutions and protect free intellectual inquiry.

A Social Justice University

A social justice university is one with a specific ideological purpose, to 'improve' society towards a predefined outcome using certain methods. It is a university that tells students not to try to understand the world, but to be activists who try to change the world.

An example of a social justice university can be found in the Student Charter of Charles Sturt University. The Student Charter states that 'all members of the University community are expected to value': 'social justice including ethical practice and global citizenship' and 'economic, social and environmental sustainability, including the responsible stewardship of resources'. This effectively banishes anyone who holds a different idea about society's goals or on environmental issues. Charles Sturt University's Anti-Racism policy states that curriculum design must be undertaken in a 'culturally inclusive' manner. This policy forbids the at times necessary criticism of particular cultures.

From the social justice perspective, following in the footsteps of French social theorist Michel Foucault, knowledge is power and there is no objective truth. Some knowledge should be restricted to ensure that students are 'safe'. Not physically safe, but safe from ideas that may challenge their perspective and identity or get in the way of the activist mission of their institution.

From the social justice perspective you judge ideas based on identity of the speaker, and not the content and strength of the argument. You dismiss arguments presented by 'white straight cis gender men' because they supposedly cannot be trusted, ignoring the value of an idea is more important than who is saying it.

A social justice university introduces trigger warnings to stop students from confronting challenging ideas, like Monash University. It is a university that censors content that nationalistic Chinese international students find offensive, like Monash and Sydney universities. It is a university that maintains policies which prevent speech that 'makes a person feel offended,' like James Cook University. It is a university which puts a price on expressing controversial ideas by charging for security, like Sydney University.

It will perhaps not surprise you that I do not subscribe to the social justice idea of a university.

There is of course some truth in the social justice perspective. There are limits on people's capacity to flourish, there are injustices in our world. People's viewpoints are limited by their experience. But there's a danger when the entire purpose of a university becomes one ideological endpoint and you stop trying to discover the truth. Simply, it's no longer really a university, it's an activist organisation. It will tell students what to think rather than letting them decide for themselves. And the research that comes out will be skewed, potentially harming society by getting things wrong.

A Free Inquiry University

I ascribe to the free inquiry idea of a university.

A free inquiry university protects free expression for academics and students because the only way to find out whose ideas are more valid, more correct, is to discuss and debate.

A free inquiry university follows in the footsteps of German philosopher Immanuel Kant who argued that in order to achieve Enlightenment one must have the 'freedom to make public use of one's reason in all matters' which means the ability to argue, debate, and converse.

A free inquiry university lets students and academics decide for themselves what is a good and bad idea, not seek to prevent some speakers. A free inquiry university does not state the purpose of the university is to achieve a specific social outcome.

A free inquiry university encourages academics from a wide variety of perspectives to challenge each other's research, to find flaws, and improve quality in the academy. A free inquiry university exposes students to variety of perspectives, including those they find uncomfortable, distressing or downright offensive, so that students understand all sides of an argument and can grow intellectually.

Universities should be the freest places in society, where people feel capable of exploring ideas in the pursuit of truth, where hierarchies and orthodoxies are relentlessly questioned.

A lack of viewpoint diversity

Australia's universities are being captured by the social justice idea of a university.

Florian Ploeckl of the University of Adelaide warns that certain contested fields are being ceded to “activists with their fundamentalist convictions” who do not approach topics scientifically. He says that, “Funding is easier and more plentiful if you pick the right topic, publishing is easier if you don't rock the boat and life in the department is easier if you see the world in the same way your colleagues do.”

Foremost, this is a question of personnel. University staff and academics, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, are dominated by those on the progressive left side of politics.

A US study found less than 10 per cent of academics identify as conservative, while another study found 39 per cent of US campuses have no Republicans. While there is no reliable data on Australian universities, the situation appears to be similar. Australia's universities are relentlessly seeking gender and racial diversity. But they are missing the diversity that is crucial for their effective functioning: viewpoint diversity.

How many academics in Australian universities foresaw the rise of Donald Trump or Britain voting to leave the European Union? How many academics have a strong sense of national identity? How many academics are in favour of free market economics?

Philosopher John Stuart Mill wrote that ‘He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that.’ You have no reason to prefer your own ideas if you do not understand the opposing perspective. Nor is it good enough to ‘hear the opinions of adversaries from his own teachers,’ Mill says, ‘He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them... he must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form’.

Because of a lack of exposure, academics simply cannot comprehend a range of ideas and the viewpoints of many Australians. And a lack of exposure to people with different ideas breeds overconfidence, misunderstanding and hostility.

Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind* explores how conservatives and progressives have different moral palettes. Progressives prioritise care and fairness; the moral palette of conservatives includes these concerns, in addition to group loyalty, submission to legitimate authority and disgust. These moral institutions drive progressives and conservatives in opposing directions.

An individual is incapable of simultaneously holding multiple perspectives at the same time. We are all biased. Humans suffer from confirmation bias, interpreting information to support pre-existing beliefs, and motivated reasoning, developing logic to support pre-existing beliefs. Those who are intelligent and highly educated are not immune from these prejudices, in fact, they are more susceptible.

This was confirmed by a recent study by Dan Kahan of Yale University. Kahan tested how people with different levels of education respond to information about a partisan issue. He

found that individuals with better numeracy skills were more polarised after seeing the data about gun control. The more educated individuals used their 'quantitative-reasoning capacity selectively to conform their interpretation of the data to the result most consistent with their political outlooks'. The better informed an individual, the more skilled they are at manipulating information about the world to favour their ideological perspective and accordingly are more likely to become polarised.

In order to undermine these biases it is necessary to have people with different perspectives challenging each other. Conservatives must question the findings, premises, data and methods of progressives, and vice versa.

Without people from different perspectives challenging each other viewpoints harden. Views become 'strongly held but weakly supported' because of a lack of challenge. When you don't understand the other side of the argument you start to think they are evil. This point was made by a Matthew Blackwell, a student at the University of Queensland, who has experienced hostility firsthand. He has written that a 'heavily left-biased education' is creating a 'Frankenstein generation of fanatical students.' When these left wing students hear a conservative perspective they have no idea why the conservative would believe that and assume they're probably a racist.

Meanwhile, the institutional incentives at Australia's universities are all wrong.

The IPA's Free Speech on Campus Audit 2017, which analysed more than 165 policies and actions at Australia's 42 universities, found that four in five universities have policies or had taken action that was hostile to free speech. University policies prevent 'insulting' and 'unwelcome' comments, 'offensive' language and, in some cases, 'sarcasm' and 'hurt feelings'. Hearing an idea that you dislike can easily cause offence and hurt feelings. These speech codes encourage students and academics to err on the side of caution rather than express a potentially controversial idea, and could be used to punish students for expressing their opinion.

A loss of faith in universities?

There is a serious danger that if universities continue to go down the monoculture social justice path, they will undermine their own existence.

The Australian Election Study produced after the 2016 election indicates that while there is still widespread confidence in universities there is, nevertheless, an emerging partisan confidence gap.

The net confidence – total who have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence minus those with not very much or no confidence in universities – varies by party voters. The net confidence rating among Liberal and National voters is 50 per cent, compared to 55 per cent for Labor voters. A larger gap emerges between minor party voters. The net confidence among Greens voters is 66 per cent, compared to just 6 per cent for One Nation voters.

This data was gathered before recent public debate emerged about free speech at universities in Australia.

For an idea of how rapidly universities could become a partisan issue, it is worth looking at the United States.

Pew Research Centre, who regularly track American public attitudes, have found a substantial growth in partisan difference since 2015 when debates about free speech on campus emerged. In 2015, a majority of Republicans had a positive attitude towards the effect of universities on the country. By 2017, Pew found that just 36 per cent of Republicans have a positive attitude. By comparison, 72 per cent of Democrats have a positive attitude towards universities.

Australia's universities are particularly susceptible to the repercussions of a loss of public support. Unlike in the United States, Australia's universities are predominantly funded by the government and government-subsidised loans. Universities becoming a partisan political issue could endanger the \$16.9 billion that universities receive from Australian taxpayers every year.

Some commentators, such as Sydney radio host Alan Jones, have talked about stripping funding from universities that fail to uphold free expression for conservatives. The calls for doing so will grow louder in the future.

More directly, incidents and public attention have the potential for very real reputational damage. I would point to the case of Evergreen State College, a public liberal arts college in Washington state. In May 2017, Evergreen students targeted professor of biology Bret Weinstein because he objected to a reverse 'Day of Absence'. Weinstein identifies as 'deeply progressive' and supported Bernie Sanders during the last presidential election, however he opposed calls for all white staff and students to not attend campus for a day of absence.

Weinstein does not believe in responding to racism by banning another racial group from campus. In response, he was labelled a racist and a mob aggressively interrupted and protested his classes. In the chaos that followed security was instructed by administrators to stand down, and buildings on campus were occupied and trashed. Weinstein was told by campus security that they could no longer guarantee his safety. He has since resigned, and settled with the institution for half a million dollars after he alleged that the college failed to protect him from physical hostility.

In a new twist, it has emerged in recent weeks that there has been a 'catastrophic drop' in enrolment at Evergreen. The number of first years has declined by 50 per cent from just two years ago. In response, Evergreen have cut their budget by 10 per cent and laid off 20 faculty and staff. If the decline in enrolment continues the institution will presumably have to cut further if it is to survive at all.

What to do about it

I will finish off by discussing three concrete steps that universities can take to address this issue. As this is a governance conference, these will be steps that can be taken at the administrative level.

Firstly, universities should adopt the Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression from the University of Chicago or develop an Australian equivalent.

The Chicago Statement 'guarantees all members of the University community the broadest possible latitude to speak, write, listen, challenge and learn' and states that 'it is not the proper role of the University to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive'. The Chicago statement also welcomes criticism of invited speakers, but states that it is wrong to 'obstruct or otherwise interfere with the freedom of others to express views'.

The University Chancellors Council could adopt this statement or perhaps develop a similar statement.

Secondly, universities should introduce a standalone intellectual freedom policy.

Australia's universities are mandated by existing law to protect free intellectual inquiry. The Higher Education Support Act 2003 requires that, as a condition of receiving federal funding: 'A higher education provider... must have a policy that upholds free intellectual inquiry in relation to learning, teaching and research.' This section was introduced into the legislation in 2011 by the Gillard Labor Government.

Former chief justice of the High Court of Australia and Chancellor of the University of Western Australia Robert French has pointed out that universities, which are public institutions, likely operate under the "implied freedom" to political expression in Australia's Constitution. Nevertheless, the IPA's Free Speech on Campus Audit 2018 found that just 8 institutions have a standalone policy which protects intellectual inquiry. Universities should introduce explicit free speech policies.

Finally, reform existing policy that limits free expression.

As I mentioned earlier, Australia's universities maintain an array of policy that seriously threatens free expression. This policy should be reformed. Policy that says you cannot 'offend' or hurt someone's 'feelings' are prima facie attacks on free expression. I would be happy to discuss individual cases further with any interested university.

In conclusion, if universities are to survive they must provide a service to society and to students. You will devalue your institution if you follow the Social Justice Idea of a university. You must protect your special role in society, your very purpose, by facilitating free inquiry.