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## PETER RIDD COURT HEARINGS HIGHLIGHT FREE SPEECH CRISIS AT UNIVERSITIES

“The court hearings of the case of Peter Ridd vs James Cook University (JCU) have now concluded and we await judgment. What the case has identified is a culture of censorship when it comes to challenging claims surrounding climate change and the Great Barrier Reef,” said Gideon Rozner, Director of Policy at the free market think tank the Institute of Public Affairs.

Dr Peter Ridd, a professor of physics at JCU, was sacked by the university for misconduct for questioning in the IPA’s publication *Climate Change: The Facts 2017* the climate change science around the Great Barrier Reef and for public statements made on the *Jones & Co Sky News* program. There were three key admissions by JCU throughout the three days in court.

“I was stunned to hear Chris Murdoch QC, acting for James Cook University, arguing that the right to academic freedom afforded by his own client to their staff in the EBA should be construed narrowly. In effect, JCU is saying: ‘We believe in free speech, but...’”

“What is also clear from the case is that JCU failed to take any steps to actually respond to Peter’s comments that the quality of the climate science was not being adequately assessed and verified,” said Mr Rozner.

Judge Vasta said to JCU’s lawyers:

When nothing is done on [Peter’s] quality assurance complaints, but no stone is unturned in the disciplinary process, are the substance of Dr Ridd’s statements [about the behaviour of JCU] so untruthful?

Stuart Wood QC, acting for Dr Peter Ridd, told the court that the “confidentiality” directions that JCU had tried to impose on Peter created a “star chamber” dynamic in which Peter was not even allowed to tell his wife that JCU was taking action against him.

Judge Vasta pointed out that JCU never apologised for the “turmoil” inflicted on Peter for the period of time in which he wasn’t permitted to speak to his wife about disciplinary proceedings. Judge Vasta described the actions of the university as “reprehensible”, which forced Chris Murdoch QC, acting on behalf of JCU, to acknowledge, “that email [re not talking to wife] wasn’t perfect”.

“The three days in court have shown that JCU has shredded the idea that Australian universities have any sort of commitment to scientific integrity and free academic inquiry. JCU’s actions prove the depth of the free speech crisis confronting Australia’s universities,” said Mr Rozner.

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