

# The intellectual gap goes to university

Major reform is needed to fix the problem of academic bias, argues **Sinclair Davidson**.

Following a campaign by the Australian Liberal Students Federation, a Senate committee is investigating the level of intellectual diversity at Australian universities. It is well-known that academia—and more often than not those who are university educated—have a left-wing progressive bias.

The best and most comprehensive analysis of that left-bias comes from the United States. A recent US study found that 72 per cent of 1,643 academics identified themselves as being ‘liberal’ in the US sense and only 15 per cent as being ‘conservative’. US academics are more likely to have left-wing views than the population and also to have views that are more progressive than the average.

Australian universities are unlikely to be much different. Anecdotal evidence supports the notion that Australian academics have left-wing views, and that these views may spillover into the classroom. One self-identified Greens Party member told his first year law foundations class that ‘I believe my role at the university is to teach you my opinion and [for] you to learn from it.’

Similarly a communications lecturer described John Howard and his ‘blue-eyed Aussie cultural jihadists’ as the true fundamentalists endangering Australian society. These may well be isolated incidents and there could even be plausible explanations for this type of political commentary. There is nothing inherently wrong with holding firm political

and economic opinions—even left-wing opinions.

The real issue lies in the consequences of that progressive bias. Progressive intellectual bias permeates the entire university structure before it reaches the classroom. In other words, classroom bias is a symptom of a larger problem.

For example, many conservatives allege that conservative academics are less likely to receive research funding, or be promoted, that conservative ideas are less likely to be taught in the classroom, and conservative ideas would be discouraged amongst the student population.

The overwhelming dominance of a single world-view within the university system generates and reinforces a series of misconceptions about university education.

The first myth is that good universities require substantial public funding. Certainly, good quality is never cheap. Yet many Australian academics would rather campaign for more public funding than work for more private funds. Nowhere is this more apparent than the incessant left-wing campaign against the so-called commercialisation of universities. This campaign has taken on an ugly undercurrent of vilifying international students.

The second widespread view is that universities exist primarily to promote an egalitarian society. The great irony is that many academics are both intellectual snobs and, often, intellectual bullies. Yet schemes to attract ever more students from low socio-economic backgrounds continue to be devised; never mind that individuals from those backgrounds may not want to attend university. Af-

ter a generation of either free or highly subsidised university fees, there is at the moment no financial impediment to university education.

## Academia in Oakeshott’s absence

The greatest conservative philosopher of the twentieth century, Michael Oakeshott, has described education as the initiation of a human being into their inheritance of human achievement. In his 1950 essay ‘The idea of a university’ Oakeshott describes a university as being ‘a corporate body of scholars’, ‘a home of learning, a place where a tradition of learning is preserved and extended’.

There is nothing in Oakeshott’s formation about public funding or egalitarianism. And we would be hard pressed to find an Australian tertiary course that prescribes Oakeshott as a required, or even recommended reading. It seems that he is not part of our intellectual inheritance—at least, not according to the Australian academic community. This could be due to his view that ‘a university will have ceased to exist when its learning has degenerated into what is now called research, [and] when its teaching has become mere instruction’. Indeed that explains exactly what Australian universities have become. But a more likely culprit for his absence from Australia’s intellectual life is Oakeshott’s reputation as a conservative thinker that has seen him written out of our intellectual heritage.

He is not alone. Many, if not most, economics students will never have heard of Friedrich von Hayek. This is an even greater oversight than Michael Oake-

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shott—Hayek won the 1973 economics Nobel Prize. James Buchanan, the 1986 economics laureate, has explained why Hayek has been written out of economics education and not just in Australia. Buchanan argues that, following the publication of *Road to Serfdom*, Hayek could never have returned to being a technical economist. He had ‘politicised himself, and for the wrong cause, an unforgivable sin in the intellectual atmosphere of mid-century’. That academic sin remains beyond the pale even today—at least for those outside the left establishment.

George Stigler, the 1981 Nobel economics laureate, wrote a lot about academic freedom and intellectuals in the marketplace. Stigler makes the very important point that it is prosperous capitalist economies that can best support a large comfortable intellectual class.

Not only does capitalism provide for better universities, but Stigler also tells us that capitalists ‘have personally been strong supporters of intellectuals, and in particular those in the academic world’. Far from being anti-intellectual, captains of industry ‘are remarkably tolerant of almost everything except a mediocre and complacent faculty’.

But, of course, most academics and intellectuals oppose the capitalist economy.

## What happened?

How did this state of affairs come about? Both Joseph Schumpeter and Hayek provide a theory of intellectuals. Schumpeter’s is a theory of incentives; intellectuals are forever questioning and attacking social institutions. Hayek provides a psychological argument—intellectuals are rationalist and require detailed ex-

planations of all phenomena. It is not enough that something should work in practice; it also needs to work in theory. Hayek makes the prediction that the more intelligent an educated person is the more likely they are to hold socialist views.

Of course, universities are full of highly intelligent and educated people. It is important to point out that there is no conspiracy of academics and intellectuals to create a soft-left bias at universities.

Rather, the capitalist system itself creates incentives that interact with human psychology to create such institutions. The solution to this turn of events revolves around the application of free market principles to universities; in particular, consumer sovereignty and stakeholder accountability.

In the case of universities it is possible to combine these two principles.

Australian students make a modest financial contribution to their university costs through the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS). The government allocates HECS places to universities and sets the HECS payment. Students face a Hobson’s choice when going to university. While many universities talk about having student centred learning programs, the student funding system is very much a producer centred system. Adam Smith warned against such an education system.

He argued that public education ‘is in general contrived ... for the ease of the masters’ while those parts of education ‘for the teaching of which there are no public institutions, are generally the best taught’. The government could empower students by making HECS funding portable. Students who are dis-

satisfied with their university education should be able to seek out another provider and take their funding with them.

Fully portable HECS places would require universities to substantially improve their teaching performance beyond the rhetoric of student-centred learning.

After graduation most students have a personal debt, but no other attachment to the university education system.

Yet graduates have the greatest interest and incentive to preserve the reputations of their alma mater. In many respects they are akin to being shareholders in the university. The alumni, however, play no role in university governance at all.

University councils are long overdue for major reform. At best they are self-perpetuating oligarchies. Adam Smith had recognised the corporate governance problem inherent in universities. Self-governance leads to idleness and complacency, while external governance may be arbitrary and capricious. The external monitor may have little knowledge of the internal workings of a university. The alumni, however, have an intimate knowledge of the university and by virtue of their qualifications have an incentive to improve the university quality standards and reputation.

The alumni should elect representatives to the university council to ensure that universities reflect the interests and concerns of their past students.

After all it is those students who can best determine the quality of the student centred learning that they have received. And their values will permeate through the institution, at least partly mitigating the problem of academic bias.

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