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EIGHT IN 10 UNIVERSITIES RESTRICT FREE SPEECH: IPA REPORT

Free speech at Australian universities is under serious threat according to a new report from the free market think tank the Institute of Public Affairs.

The Free Speech on Campus Audit 2016 is a first-of-its-kind systematic review of university policies and actions that threaten intellectual freedom and have limited the diversity of ideas on Australian campuses.

Thirty-three (79 per cent) of Australia's universities have received a red ranking for their policies or actions that unambiguously infringe free speech; eight (19 per cent) have received an amber ranking due to potential threats; and just one (2 per cent) has received a green ranking for no threats to free speech.

"There is a growing culture of censorship on our university campuses that threatens the entire purpose of higher education. The very essence of university life is that ideas are able to flourish, be debated, and either lose, or win, in the market place of ideas," Matthew Lesh, Research Fellow in the IPA's Future of Freedom Program said.

University policies prohibit a wide variety of speech, including "insulting" and "unwelcome" comments, "offensive" language, and, in some cases, "sarcasm" and hurt "feelings."

Federation University's definition of bullying includes hurting another person's "feelings". Central Queensland University forbids engaging in "unwelcome" or "distressing" behaviour. Meanwhile, the University of Queensland, as well as Western Sydney University, forbid "sarcasm" on campus.

"These policies set a preposterously low bar that seriously chills campus free speech. Students should not be sitting in tutorials fearing that if they express a contrary opinion it could hurt a classmate's feelings." Mr Lesh said.

Additionally, university administration and student representatives have cancelled and protested controversial speakers, and restricted student political speech. In one case students were removed from campus for displaying a poster with former Prime Minister John Howard's quote "we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come."

"It is becoming increasingly difficult to voice a different opinions at our universities. There are relentless organised efforts to shout out and shut down opposing views," Mr Lesh said.

The report calls for universities, as well as governments, to take action to protect intellectual freedom on campus.

"The scathing results of this audit send a strong message to our universities and government that they have substantial work to do in order to improve free speech at our public universities. If immediate action is not taken the situation will only get worse," Mr Lesh said.

The Free Speech on Campus Audit [can be downloaded here](#).

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