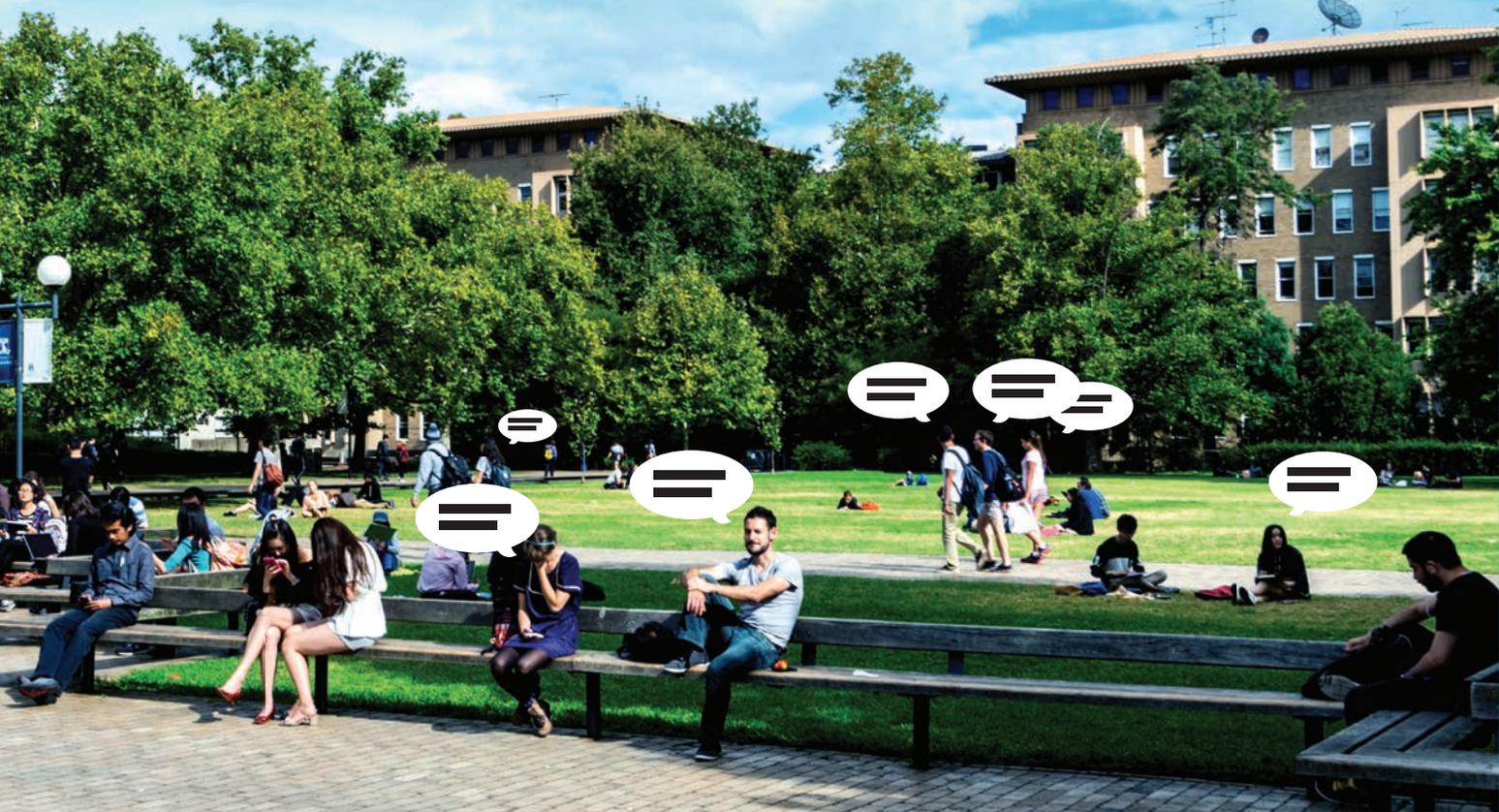


TRIGGERING CENSORSHIP

Political correctness runs rampant on campus as research shows that free speech is now under attack at Australian universities, writes **Matthew Lesh**



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In October 1951 University of Melbourne vice-chancellor Charles Lowe proposed restricting the use of campus buildings for political discussions. This suggestion

came after three professors, at a public meeting held at the university a month earlier, advocated a ‘No’ vote in the referendum to ban the communist party.

The public uproar to Lowe’s restriction on free speech was fast and furious. ‘Tolerance is the keynote of university life’, Melbourne daily newspaper *The Argus* editorialised,

‘it has made possible the audacious thinking that created the common law and its freedoms [and] scientific modes of thought’. A rowdy meeting of 400 students overwhelmingly passed a resolution opposing any restrictions. ‘No group of people has the right to deny us our right to express ourselves’, one student declared.

The situation on campus in

2016 could not be more different. Today academics, students and administrators work in tandem to limit what ideas can be expressed and who can express them on campus. In the name of limiting opposing perspectives, pandering to student comfort, and preventing offence, a censorious culture is developing that seriously threatens the core mission of our universities.

The IPA's Free Speech on Campus Audit 2016, the first-of-its-kind systematic review of free speech at Australian universities, found a wide variety of policies, and a range of actions, which damage intellectual freedom. Thirty-three (79 per cent) of Australia's universities received a red ranking for their policies or actions that unambiguously infringe free speech; eight (19 per cent) received an amber ranking due to potential threats; and just one (2 per cent) received a green ranking for no threats to free speech.

The University of New South Wales' Diversity Toolkit epitomises the toxic mix of political correctness and the prioritisation of not causing offence above intellectual pursuits.

The guide instructs students to refer to Australia as 'invaded' not 'settled'; to say 'Dreaming/s' not 'Dreamtime'; and to not claim Aboriginal people have lived in Australia for 40,000 years, because this 'tends to lend support to migration theories and anthropological assumptions'.

Universities should be encouraging students to listen to different perspectives and come to their own conclusions, not dictating historic truth through language guidelines. Students should debating and discussing whether Australia was settled, colonised, invaded or occupied. And students, while understanding that indigenous Australians claim to have been here since the 'Dreaming/s', must not be

forbidden from discussing well-supported anthropological theory about Aboriginal origins from Asia about 40,000-60,000 years ago.

A UNSW spokesperson, responding to uproar from students surrounding the guide, justified the toolkit as 'commonplace' at universities across Australia. Indeed, the UNSW toolkit was adopted from Flinders University and is also operating at the University of Queensland. And these toolkits are just the tip of the politically correct iceberg on our university campuses.

Inclusive language is commonplace. The University of Wollongong instructs students to avoid using words such as 'man', 'manpower', 'man-made', 'sportsmanlike' or 'groundsmen'.



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The University of Western Australia has an extensive list of forbidden occupational descriptions, including 'craftsman', 'founding fathers', 'spokesman', 'tradesman', 'workman' and 'mankind'. These guidelines are supplemented by a range of policies that prioritise feelings above intellectual debate. Federation University has an explicit rule against hurting 'feelings', which could include 'laughing at comments or mistakes'. Macquarie University forbids making speech that is 'not welcome'. Swinburne University prohibits making people feel 'uncomfortable'. Meanwhile, in a *fantastic* move, the University of Queensland and Western Sydney University prevent 'sarcasm'.

The most typical restriction on free speech is a broad statement against 'offensive' conduct, contained in a university's bullying, harassment or social media policy. In many cases these vague restrictions lack a reasonable person test or requirement that the behaviour be repeated (both necessary preconditions for actual bullying or harassment).

The Australian Catholic University defines bullying as 'offensive or demeaning language or displaying written or pictorial material which degrades or offends an individual'. Murdoch University's by-laws define assault as including 'insulting language' and 'offensive' behaviour, proscribing a \$50 penalty for breaking the by-law.

Taking it one step further, Monash University's social media policy forbids students from making comments on social media, whether in the context or education or research or personal use, that 'might be constructed' to be offensive. They also prevent students from criticising the university online—so much for holding administrators accountable for educational quality.

The idea that causing offence amounts to bullying is an enormously problematic notion. Offence is an arbitrary, subjective feeling. One student's offensive comment could easily be another's genuine political or social commentary. In effect, these policies require students to ascertain their classmate's subjective individual sensitivities before making a potentially controversial statement. This has the consequence of discouraging the expression of certain ideas—chilling the diversity of ideas on campus.

It is not just universities administrators who are writing up these absurd policies. Students themselves are often the biggest advocates of limiting debate.

▶ CONTINUED

The Melbourne University Debating Society’s ‘Equity Policy’, written by the club’s student leadership, states that all debaters have the ‘right to just generally feel comfortable’. The very people on campus who are supposed to welcome intellectual combat are now concerned with the ‘right’ to feel comfortable.

LIMITING THE DIVERSITY OF IDEAS

The picture only gets worse when intertwined with university administration and student representatives’ actions.

Last year the University of Western Australia withdrew from a contract to host an Australian Consensus Centre, led by Danish environmental economist Bjørn Lomborg. The UWA Student Guild president stated that the money should be rejected because it was associated with someone who has a ‘controversial track-record’. The simple fact that Lomborg is provocative was enough justification for UWA, and later Flinders University, to not host the centre.

Liberal students at the University of Melbourne were removed from campus for displaying a poster with former Prime Minister John Howard’s ‘we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come’ quote. Academics labelled the students ‘racist’ and ‘disgusting’ for using the sign during an orientation week membership drive, and, following complaints, campus security removed the stall from campus. Liberal politicians, including Julie Bishop, Sophie Mirabella, and Tony Abbott, as well as pro-Israel speakers, such as British colonial (ret.) Richard Kemp, have been aggressively protested.

The Evangelical Union and Catholic Club at the University of Sydney faced deregistration earlier

this year from the University of Sydney Union for their requirement that voting members or the executive be Christian. After a public campaign against the move the threatened deregistration has now been withdrawn. Nevertheless, later in the semester the Catholic Society faced an aggressive protest at an event, which included the yelling over a guest speaker and unplugging the microphone system multiple times.

Meanwhile, in a particularly concerning case currently before the courts, students at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) are facing proceedings under section 18C of the *Racial Discrimination Act* for expressing opposition to the existence of a computer lab on campus reserved for Aboriginal students. Former university administrator Cindy Prior is seeking \$250,000 in damages against the students. A censorious atmosphere is developing on our university campuses.

▶ HOW CAN WE EXPECT STUDENTS TO FULLY UNDERSTANDING THEIR COURSE CONTENT IF DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES CANNOT BE VOICED?

It is becoming increasingly difficult to express a contrarian viewpoint, to go against the campus zeitgeist. In class, students do not express their viewpoint, erring on the side of caution to avoid persecution. They write essays mimicking their tutors’ politics, not expressing their own viewpoint, to avoid lower marks. For many students the rationale approach is to avoid making waves or expressing a contrarian viewpoint, and just aim to get out with a degree.

This is a dangerous situation that threatens both universities themselves, as well as the value

of higher education to society at large. The core educational mission of higher education, teaching and research, depends on free intellectual debate. The role of universities is to teach students how to think, by exposing them to different perspectives—not telling students what to think. It is impossible to develop and discuss ideas, from the scientific and technological to the political and the historic, in an atmosphere where certain concepts are restricted.

Everyone loses in an atmosphere where feelings and intellectual conformity are prioritised. How can we expect students to come out of university well-rounded and fully understanding their course content if different perspectives cannot be voiced? How can we hope to achieve progress if we create a culture in which students are fearful to challenge the status quo? We all have a stake here. Universities are built on public land and funded by public money. Australians are paying billions of dollars every year for the system that is supposed to encourage intellectual debate and provide benefits to society at large. Not only are students entitled to freedom of speech like any other public space, taxpayers expect value for their money and would be shocked by what passes for a higher education these days.

THE COMING DANGER: SAFE SPACES & TRIGGER WARNINGS

Sadly the situation on campuses will likely get worse before it gets better. Trigger warnings, content disclaimers to avoid the feeling of discomfort, along with safe spaces (physical locations where students cannot challenge each other) are emerging on Australian university campuses. The La Trobe Student Union mandates list of 57 trigger



■ Melbourne University cloisters (Geoff Penaluna)

warnings, including ‘chewing’, ‘slimy things’, ‘eye contact’, and ‘hair pulling’. This same list of required trigger warnings is used by the annual Network of Women Students Australia’s conference.

These mechanisms encourage a prioritisation of feelings over intellectual combat on campus. They defeat the entire purpose of higher education by encouraging the dismissal of challenging ideas.

Over 80 per cent of Australian universities, including the

University of Sydney, Australian Catholic University, and Flinders University, operate ‘culturally safe spaces’ for Indigenous students, as well as ‘safe spaces’ for women and LGBTIQ students.

Safe spaces are anti-intellectual by design, a place where identities cannot be challenged and intellectual conflict is expressly forbidden.

There is an alternative path. The University of Chicago, noting the threats to campus free and

open discourse across American campuses, established a Committee on Freedom of Expression in July 2014. The committee’s report stated:

Debate or deliberation may not be suppressed because the ideas put forth are thought by some or even by most members of the University community to be offensive, unwise, immoral, or wrong-headed.

It continues:

It is for the individual members of the University community, not for the University as an institution, to make those judgments for themselves, and to act on those judgments not by seeking to suppress speech, but by openly and vigorously contesting the ideas that they oppose.

Indeed, fostering this debate is an ‘essential part of the University’s educational mission’. Our universities should be making similar statements, committing themselves to free and open debate against the forces who prioritise safety above intellectualism.

We also all have a responsibility to hold our universities to account. Following public scrutiny in the United States, universities have amended their policies.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education has assessed American university speech codes annually for a decade. As a consequence of public pressure the number of universities with a red ranking has reduced from 75 per cent in 2006 to 49 per cent in their 2016 investigation.

Higher education should expand young minds to new ideas and make students feel uncomfortable by challenging their perspective.

This ultimate goal is under threat. Our universities too often encourage the reinforcing existing perspectives, rather than the challenging with new ones. 