

Reflections on students and academic freedom

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When students encounter problems, they are most served by having the skills to pursue solutions. A charter would give only an illusion of protection and would be open to abuse.

On Thursday 9 October I appeared before the Senate committee conducting an inquiry into academic freedom.¹ The first question I was asked concerned whether students are included in conceptions of academic freedom. I replied that there are two main pictures of academic freedom, one oriented to institutional autonomy from outside impositions and the other oriented to academics being able to comment on public issues without reprisal. Students are not normally brought into the picture.

However, the focus on the inquiry was on student issues. This wasn't an academic freedom inquiry but rather an inquiry into dealing with problems raised by students.

Student issues are certainly important. Over several decades dealing with suppression of dissent in universities and other institutions, I've mainly dealt with a variety of problems facing academics, scientists, government employees and many others, including attacks on dissent, bias in appointments, bullying and plagiarism. But along the way I've had plenty of exposure to problems afflicting students. They exist and deserve attention.

Considering the importance of the issues, there's surprisingly little research on problems at either the employee or student level. There is an increasing amount of research into whistleblowing, but it's still a sideline overall. I know of no studies into the frequency of attacks on dissent comparing different countries, different occupations, different time periods or different organisations.

There seems to be even less investigation into student issues. I have encountered quite a few cases during my time in academia, enough to realise that few researchers are probing into problems, patterns, impacts or remedies.

¹ The Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Inquiry into Academic Freedom, 2008.

I know enough about the area to know that lots of problems can occur that adversely affect students, such as bias against individuals, bias in assessment, harassment and incompetence. But the prevalence and seriousness of such problems is a matter of speculation. There simply isn't enough sound information to make strong conclusions.

From what I know about problems at the staff level — quite a bit — and what I know about problems at the student level — less — I can draw some preliminary assessments. The most common problems facing academics are interpersonal and organisational, including personality clashes, damaging policies, bullying, patronage and nasty behaviours in the competition for scarce resources. Ideological bias is, in the greater scheme of things, a lesser concern.

In mentioning ideological bias, I should say that there is far more evidence of attacks on left academics than on those with more conservative orientations. Two decades ago, I was co-editor of the book *Intellectual Suppression* and compiled a chapter called “Archives of suppression,” drawing on sources from Australia, Britain, the US and other countries. It was easy to find cases of left-wing academics who had come under attack. I went to great efforts to track down documentation on three Australian academics more identified with right politics who had been discriminated against (Arthur L. Burns, Frank Knopfelmacher and Patrick O'Brien).²

My impression is that the same patterns apply at the student level. The biggest problems are interpersonal disputes, bullying, harassment, cheating — mostly problems caused by student behaviour that affects other students. The students at greatest risk from academic bias are those at higher levels: honours and research students. When I served on university sexual harassment committees, I learned about the problems of conflict of interest and abuse of trust when academics form sexual relationships with students, especially students in their own classes.³

As for ideological bias, no doubt it occurs but it's a low-profile issue for most students. In terms of dissent, the biggest factor for students is their pursuit of grades and degrees and hence willingness to adapt to whatever the teacher wants.

² “Archives of suppression,” in Brian Martin, C. M. Ann Baker, Clyde Manwell and Cedric Pugh (eds.), *Intellectual Suppression: Australian Case Histories, Analysis and Responses* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1986), pp. 164-181.

³ “Publications on sexual harassment by Brian Martin and others,” <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/pubs/sexualharassment.html>

Of course there's bias in teaching, research and every other part of universities — just as there is bias in every occupation. The key question is not the existence of bias. What is more important is the prevalence and significance of bias and what to do about it. There has been little investigation into prevalence and significance.

A large part of my research over many years has been on strategies against perceived injustice. I've looked especially at dissent in science,⁴ more widely at whistleblowing⁵ and more widely yet at major social issues such as massacres and wars.⁶ One key conclusion from this research is that official channels — such as codes of conduct, grievance procedures, appeal bodies and courts — are not the solution. In fact they often give only an illusion of protection.⁷

By far more effective is for opponents of injustice — targets and their supporters — to develop skills in analysing problems, mobilising support and campaigning. With this approach, targets do not have to rely on formal procedures and expert advocates to fix problems after they occur. Instead, they can act themselves. Furthermore, when individuals are empowered this way, they are less likely to be attacked in the first place.

To attempt to defend students from bias using a charter is likely to fail. What students need instead are skills in understanding and acting to achieve timely resolutions to problems. To go through formal processes runs the risk of transforming small issues into time-consuming and counterproductive battles.

Empowered students are a better way to keep academics on their toes. An academic may be doing something that offends students but not realise it because students do not have the skills or confidence to raise the matter in a productive way.⁸ If students go directly to some agency for redress, the potential damage is enormous, far greater than any benefit.

⁴ For example, Brian Martin, "Suppression of dissent in science," *Research in Social Problems and Public Policy*, Vol. 7, 1999, pp. 105-135.

⁵ Brian Martin, *The Whistleblower's Handbook* (Charlbury, UK: Jon Carpenter, 1999).

⁶ Brian Martin, *Justice Ignited: The Dynamics of Backfire* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

⁷ Brian Martin, "Illusions of whistleblower protection," *UTS Law Review*, No. 5, 2003, pp. 119-130.

⁸ As an example, I wrote advice for students wanting to raise issues with their teachers: Brian Martin, "Classroom feedback," *Tertangala* (University of Wollongong Undergraduate Students' Association), Issue 4, 2007, pp. 46-47.

Summary

- There are plenty of problems facing students, but there's little systematic evidence about how serious they are.
- Ideological bias is likely to be relatively low on any list of student problems.
- Setting up formal processes to deal with problems is likely to be a waste of time or worse.
- The most effective way to help students is to give them the insight and skills to address problems themselves.

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PS Why am I writing these comments *after* appearing before the committee? Because after hearing the questions, I have a better idea of the issues the committee is addressing. And I'm a better writer than speaker. I've written 12 books and hundreds of articles and have learned how to express myself through text. The result is a more considered treatment of the issues than anything I could say in on-the-spot responses to questions.