

Commercialisation erodes academic freedom in Australian universities

Mike Head
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The Australia Institute last month published the final results of a survey of 1,000 social science academics from 13 universities. The findings, compiled by Dr Carole Kayrooz of the University of Canberra, Pamela Kinnear of the Australia Institute and Paul Preston of the Australian National University, underscore how far the corporate restructuring of universities has undermined academic freedom.

Of the 165 teachers and researchers who responded, 92 percent expressed concern about the general state of academic freedom, with 37 percent reporting major concerns. Most—73 percent—thought that the state of academic freedom had deteriorated.

Of those, 81 percent blamed the increasing commercialisation of their university, with 48 percent regarding it as a major factor.

Almost one in five—17 percent—reported that they had been prevented from publishing contentious research results, and 41 percent said they had experienced discomfort with publishing such results. Almost half—49 percent—had experienced reluctance to criticise institutions that provided large research grants or other forms of support.

Approximately five percent said they had experienced pressures to admit and pass full fee-paying students and more than a quarter—27 percent—expressed low levels of satisfaction with their freedom to determine student standards.

Asked to nominate the systemic effects of commercialisation, academics listed:

- * increased workloads, in part due to writing competitive tenders and developing and marketing commercial courses.

- * pressure to attract industry research funding and consulting contracts, which has the effect of channelling research into “safe” areas.

- * emphasis on fee-based courses, resulting in a lowering of student standards.

- * the promotion of vocational courses and research at the expense of speculative and critical disciplines.

- * more corporate management structures, which undermine collegial decision-making processes.

One academic commented: “‘Research’ is increasingly defined in terms of bringing in money and ‘friend raising’ in the wider community—which often means tailoring research projects and findings to flatter the funders/friends.”

Queensland University academic Dr William De Maria highlighted the growing business domination of universities in a submission to a Senate committee inquiry into higher education. De Maria, of the university's Centre for Public Administration, reported that large companies were funding some 100 professorial posts at universities.

De Maria referred to the Colgate-Palmolive chair of general dental practice at the University of Queensland, the Microsoft chair of computing at Macquarie University, and the FAI Insurances chair of finances at the Australian Graduate School of Management. Other examples included Newcastle University's Clay, Brick and Paver chair in structural clay brickwork and the BHP professor of steelworking at Wollongong University. Aristocrat, Australia's largest poker-machine manufacturer, funds the University of Western Sydney's chair of gambling research.

In addition, major companies invest considerable sums in establishing university research centres. De Maria cited Motorola's \$50 million software centre at the University of Western Australia.

De Maria said that in some of the partnerships, university departments became a firm's de facto research division, with the company often holding the

rights to exploit results for up to 18 months before the university could release them publicly.

Even where corporate research grants had no such strings attached, researchers were pressured not to produce findings critical of, or unhelpful to, the company involved.

De Maria told the Senate hearing that his university's commercial arm, UniQuest, had refused to disclose its contractual obligations to Colgate-Palmolive, citing commercial in-confidence clauses. This secrecy denies the public any right to know how the universities are being commercially exploited. Moreover, it prevents academics from examining the impact of sponsorship on the integrity of research.



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