

Clipping Academic Freedom in Australia. “The Use of Social Media to Express Opinions”

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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Universities have become bastions of managerial madness. The trends began some time ago, when money became the ultimate pursuit, and Mr Dollar became chancellor and chief. The obsession with obtaining grants, the panjandrums awarding grants, the siphoning off funds, underwriting projects, have all made the academy a sad state. Since universities now obsess about having a “marketing unit”, the idea of making education a matter of commercial viability rather than educational worth has become all important.

There is another aspect to this development. Gone are the days when academic exposure was confined, left to the irate letters to the editor section or the occasionally controversial scribble. The great academics of history also doubled up as intellectuals, revolutionaries and, as A. J. P. Taylor showed so well, teledons. They wore many hats in the pursuit of learning, refusing to be holed up as scholar squirrels. Now, the scholar squirrels are everywhere, and more vulnerable. University establishments watch with eagle attentiveness to see that appropriate behaviour in the public eye is observed.

In such an environment, opinions must be carefully expressed. It is one thing to go through the coddling set of such a publication as *The Conversation*, where academics are managed by journalists through the minefield of implications an article might involve. Suggestions of slander, sauciness and political inappropriateness are culled. Bland outcomes are preferable.

The use of social media to express opinions, a system of communication that has given verbiage a good name, bypasses such control. It keeps managers at arm’s length. Technological universality is taken to assume that a personal view becomes a global one. This stance is erroneous, but it is something that corporations or universities accept with religious conviction. Content is suggestive; view points, dangerous. There are no concessions to be made to private accounts, be they on Facebook, YouTube or Twitter. Tweet and be damned. Australia, having a constipated regime when it comes to freedom of expression, tends to be concerned with policing opinion of all shades. If views are deemed racially suggestive, the Racial Discrimination Act intervenes to cut off and punish opinions that do not match the regulated order. If the topic is considered by institutions to be unduly sympathetic to ultra-left, gendered ideals, or suggestive of the views of the right, it is permitted only in so far as market ideals are not jeopardised. This is the overall management dogma.

The Roz Ward case, which exploded across the Australian university sector in May, suggested the extent university managerialism will go to remove an academic for something as simple as a Facebook posting in a private capacity. There was nothing

suggestive in what was posted in by Ward, an irate comment, fuming at the Australian flag as “racist”. (Are there any flags that are not? Was she being punished for the obvious?) “Now we just need to get rid of the racist Australian flag on top of state parliament and get a red one up there and my work is done.”

Ward’s jab could hardly have been a problem. But Ward is known as being one of the architects of the Safe Schools Coalition, a program run in schools to combat bullying of LGBTI individuals. With little surprise, it has been attacked by Christian groups and conservative politicians as unacceptably transforming.

In the alarmist words of a very noisy Australian Christian Lobby, such a program should not be funded as it promoted “radical sexual experimentation” by accepting people of diverse gender and sexuality. Not all the criticisms of the program were virulently insensible. ACL’s Queensland director Wendy Francis had a more than valid point that teachers, in accordance with the program’s aims, had to “work out ways to integrate gender diversity and sexual diversity across your curriculum” irrespective of subject.[1] Some people do see sex and gender in everything, and Francis evidently did not. But such views belong to the cut and thrust of academic argument.

As for Ward, fearing that such a figure might be, if not actually, affecting potential revenues, or the brand label, the La Trobe University establishment rounded up on her. We are not to know at this stage if her initial suspension was cover for naked vengeance, a form of assassination by means of censorship. The letter from the university sent to Ward claimed that she had been suspended from work for “engaging in misconduct”. In all likelihood, it was the sense that Ward was attracting undue attention, and being harassed by such Murdoch outlets as *The Australian* for her Marxist and pro-LGBTI stance. What followed was scandal, union action, and the eating of humble pie. Ward was back before the cock had crowed. Legal action against the university is being considered.

This police state reflex suggests stupidity as much as clumsiness. The institutional brain frays and frazzles in desperation before intense debate and discussion, confusing it with unwarranted controversy. In the war of ideas, it is best not to flinch. Unfortunately, such struggles are taken to be dangerous to the dull suits running the modern university. The modern university needs to be reformed. Not least of all, a return to basic roots, the true radical sense that it be an educational, not a business institution. The corporates have the upper hand at the moment. The first step in making sure that management’s hand, with its cold grip, is lessened by letting academics, at least the good lot of them, speak out. Some of their ideas will be on the daft side, but the only market place permitted should be one stocked with the currency of ideas.

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Note

[1] <http://www.theage.com.au/queensland/acl-says-school-antibullying-program-encouraging-cross-dressing-20150728-gimhz4.html#ixzz49rTmlGDx>

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