

16th March 2001

News release

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Academic freedom - study released

An overwhelming majority of Australia's social scientists is concerned about the adverse affects of commercialisation on universities, according to a new report by the Australia Institute.

The report, *Academic Freedom and Commercialisation of Australian Universities*, was released today by Institute Executive Director Dr Clive Hamilton. Dr Hamilton said the study analysed perceptions of the present state of academic freedom in Australian universities.

He said the study was exploratory but its findings reflected deep unease among Australian academics and could not be ignored.

He said key findings included:

- 92 per cent of academics surveyed reported a degree of concern about the general state of academic freedom, with 37 per cent reporting major concern.
- 73 per cent felt there had been a deterioration in academic freedom over the past four years, with 45 per cent saying the impact was major.
- 17 per cent said they had been prevented from publishing contentious research results.
- 49 per cent said they had experienced a reluctance to criticise institutions that provided large research grants or other forms of support.

Commenting on the release of the study, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Canberra, Professor Don Aitkin, said:

“This important study allows us to put some substance to some commonly used but often empty remarks about issues such as commercialism and academic freedom. It makes even more timely a further look at what is an appropriate level of public funding for universities both in teaching and research.”

The survey results were based on a questionnaire of social scientists across 13 universities.

Dr Hamilton said the academics surveyed defined academic freedom as “the right to teach, research and publish contentious issues, to choose their own research colleagues and to feel supported by the institution to speak on social issues in areas of their expertise without fear or favour”.

“The study sounds warning bells for the university sector”, he said.

“Most of the academics surveyed remain moderately satisfied with their freedom to define their own research topics and to publish without fear or favour but it is important to note that this satisfaction was most often expressed as moderate rather than high.

“In a number of other areas commercialisation has brought new concerns such as restrictions on sharing ideas with colleagues arising from commercial-in-confidence arrangements.

“At the institutional level, almost all had experienced an emphasis on funded over unfunded research and a valuing of courses that attract high student enrolments and full fee-paying students over other courses.”

Other points of concern raised by the academics surveyed included:

- Increased workloads, in part arising from competitive tendering and the need to develop and market commercial courses, are significantly reducing academics’ independent research time.
- The pressures to attract research funding from industry and engage in a range of consulting and other services increasingly channel research effort into safe, well-defined areas, rather than speculative or curiosity-driven ones.
- The emphasis on full fee-based courses, in particular for domestic and international postgraduates, is lowering student standards.
- The emphasis on full fee-based courses benefits disciplines that are vocational, rather than speculative and critical, and sometimes re-directs the teaching focus of academics to areas tangential to their expertise.

“These findings give urgency to the debate between government, industry, universities and academics about the directions commercialisation is taking higher education in Australia and the place of academic freedom in the new environment,” Dr Hamilton said.

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