

# Precarious work and funding make academic freedom precarious

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During January 2021, students and staff at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul were arrested and detained for protesting against the appointment of a new rector who is an ally of President Erdoğan. University staff and students, along with journalists, civil servants and members of the judiciary have been targets of Erdoğan's relentless smothering of opposition. While many have been jailed, many others have charges hanging over them, have been suspended or dismissed from their jobs and had their passports seized.

An initial focus of Erdoğan's ire against universities was the Academics for Peace, who, in 2016, organised a petition protesting the persecution of the Kurds and calling for a negotiated just peace. Similarly, international organisations in support of academic freedom and workers' rights – including Scholars at Risk (SAR) and Education International (EI) – debated whether an appropriate course of action would be to boycott interactions with all Turkish universities, or focus specifically on those doing the Government's bidding, including by seeking to silence staff and students with tactics such as making students spy on their lecturers. At one stage, deans were dismissed across the country, and university senior professional officers have also been removed. The dilemma was would a boycott, stopping collaboration on research and publishing, or excluding participation in conferences have the unintended consequence of further isolating our Turkish colleagues.

Turkish academics urged international supporters to be very public about why they were boycotting collaboration – and why particular Turkish universities were targeted. This has meant clamouring to be heard in the crowded higher

education space, alongside the even more crowded mainstream and social media spaces. Calling on our own governments to act is subsumed amongst competing priorities and cowardice. And, of course, other governments and universities do not have clean hands. In Australia, university staff may not be rounded up, detained and dismissed for signing a protest letter, but we have seen our governments behave similarly to the Turkish Government in blatantly interfering in the allocation of government funded research grants.

## Scholars at Risk

Turkey's Academics for Peace were awarded the Scholars at Risk (SAR) Courage to Think Award in 2018 'for their extraordinary efforts in building academic solidarity and in promoting the principles of academic freedom, freedom of inquiry, and the peaceful exchange of ideas.' (<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org>)

SAR continues to protest against the ongoing attacks on university workers and students and has also supported academics fleeing Turkey to find safe havens in other universities around the world. SAR was established for exactly such a purpose, and over the past two decades, the SAR network has relocated many persecuted academics across the world. For its program to work, the cooperation of university senior management is needed to put the principles of academic freedom into concrete action. Seven Australian universities and the NTEU are SAR affiliates.

Rahil Dawood was the recipient of SAR's Courage to Think Award for 2020. Dr Dawood, an Associate Professor

in the Human Science Institute of Xinjiang University, and founder of the Minorities Folklore Research Centre in Xinjiang University, was recognised for her work, alongside that of other academics and students of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, who continue to struggle for academic freedom and freedom of opinion, expression, belief, association, and movement. SAR reported that in December 2017, Dr Dawood told a relative of her plans to travel from Urumqi to Beijing, and then disappeared. It is suspected that she continues to be detained at an undisclosed location.

These are clear academic freedom cases. They are clear human rights and workers' rights cases. They impact upon all those directly involved and have wider implications locally and globally. In SAR's 2019 annual report of the Academic Freedom Monitoring Project, SAR's Executive Director, Robert Quinn declared, 'Attacks on higher education communities, regardless of their location, scale, or scope, hold consequences for societies everywhere.' He continued, 'In our increasingly interconnected world, these attacks erode an essential, global space where academics, students, and the public at large can come together to understand and solve the complex problems that are affecting us all.' (<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org>)

The attacks on university staff and students engaged in teaching, researching and speaking out against the state, military and religious powers, and for fairness, democracy, and equality, are increasing. Violent attacks – including bombings and murder – wrongful imprisonments and prosecutions, pressure on student expression and restrictions on academic publishing and travel, are each common across the world, from the US and Israel, to Hong Kong, Brazil and Sudan. From the relative safety of Australia, we also hear of more cases of Australian academics being harassed and detained while working overseas. As has been noted by many academics and commentators, liberal democratic principles of free speech and movement, alongside academic freedom, are very much a battleground in the 21st century. Free movement of academics and students around the world is critical to freedom, of thought and action.

Seeking to make comparisons between being persecuted for exercising academic freedom and freedom to organise internationally, and here in Australia, can seem pretentious. (I just read in an international student's essay of the military bursting into her university library and residential college with tear gas and firing weapons in retaliation to an anti-government protest.) We can, and should, encourage

solidarity actions and demand Australian universities back such actions, but is that enough?

## Jailed for teaching feminism

When I listened to an Iranian feminist anthropologist speak of being jailed and then having to escape her country for advocating equality between women and men as part of her teaching, I paused a moment to reflect on my comparatively petty frustrations at the persistence of sexism in the Australian academy and its institutions. But I only paused a moment, as I know it matters to my sisters in Iran, and elsewhere, that we keep supporting feminist scholarship and fighting for justice and equity here. I just need to listen to the women in my classrooms, both local and international students, rail against the injustices towards them as women, to be emboldened to keep on teaching and advocating. Being a consistently nagging

feminist is not very popular in Australian universities, but it's also easier for me with an ongoing job and established reputation.

It concerns me that too many early career academics have learned to be silent about feminism, and queasy about even talking and researching

on gender. They know, and have even been warned, not to jeopardise their opportunities. Young women say they do not want to always have to raise gendered discrimination and sexist behaviour. Many young men can see what is going on but are apprehensive about intervening. LGBTIQ students and staff continue to protect themselves and one another by not being out at university. I look for inspiration and courage to Chilean student feminists who bared their breasts to protest about sexism and gendered violence in and beyond universities. I am currently in awe of the students and university staff of Myanmar leading and joining the current mobilisation against the coup – at great personal risk – to continue the fight for a fair society, for equal rights and democratic institutions.

## Rising up for Black Lives Matter

So, we have to ask: why are our universities so quiet in comparison with students, staff and even university leaderships in many other places? Why didn't our campuses ignite, joining the rising up (again) of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020? Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and activists argued that we had to take to the streets despite pandemic public health restrictions. They argued that we must seize the moment created by the brief spotlight that exposed the shame of disgraceful levels of incarceration and

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deaths in custody of First Nations peoples in Australia. Bitter experience has taught that the spotlight would not linger – and it has not.

But in Australian universities, the call for decolonisation has not erupted, nor demands to dismantle the structures and institutions of white supremacy. The mumbblings are certainly there, but let's face the reality. Australian universities may have opened the doors to more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, staff and communities, but it is a constant battle to get in, and to stay in. At the same time, most university staff and students are able to go about their daily lives without thinking about history and racist legacies today. Meanwhile, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues are left to carry the load of expectations that they will alert the rest of us to respond and mobilise, while also carrying the heavy weight of their community responsibilities as well as intergenerational trauma – and facing racism and discrimination every day, including in universities.

## Equity and access to academic freedom

If racism, sexism, discrimination and harassment are part of your everyday experience at university, you do not have equity and access to practise academic freedom. 'Academic freedom' is not a philosophical debate, nor even a political one. It can be quite pragmatic. We can have debates about the extent of the extra licence and the privilege for academics to research, teach and publish without censorship. We do need clauses in collective agreements and policy and legislation recognising academic freedom. But this is often a discourse of, and for, the privileged. Scientists and other researchers in government employment envy the academic freedom of their university colleagues. They look to us to speak out, as they can be silenced and sacked if they do so.

Academic freedom is a responsibility, not a right. It is to speak truth to power; to honour the liberal university goal of working for the public good; and for the publicly funded university, in particular, to act in the public interest.

What then is stopping us speaking truth to power in Australian universities today? There are but a handful of academics and other university staff and students, who have been disciplined, suspended and dismissed for activities that arguably fall within academic freedom definitions. It is troubling that there are thousands of academic staff and students who are feeling censored, and censoring themselves, every day.

## Precarious work and funding curtail academic freedom

There are three big and intertwined obstacles to the exercise of academic freedom in Australian universities today, which are

not unique to Australia but are often overlooked in focussing on the bigger human and professional rights picture. These are insecure employment, unreliable funding and pressure in partnerships.

## Insecure employment

Insecure employment is now the norm in Australian universities. Academics no longer have 'tenure' even when employed in an ongoing capacity. There were very good reasons for academic tenure, and they were not because of any commitment by employers to workers' rights. Tenure facilitates the academic freedom to fearlessly pursue answers. Academics were hard to dismiss, even if their research had gone down rabbit holes or they offended someone.

Today in Australia, most academic staff are employed on contracts – mainly sessional contracts – which are in effect the same as doing piece work. This has been extensively exposed, documented and analysed elsewhere. The reality of living from one contract to the next means that speaking out may mean no job next time around. Sessionally-employed academics are reluctant to make suggestions on changes to content or pedagogy as this may be construed as criticism by their supervisor. They are often reluctant to act independently in their 'classroom', and indeed are directed to stick to the script. Staff activity can be monitored and recorded in the digital classroom. Sessionally-employed academics are not usually really part of a course team and cannot initiate new or revamped units of study. They can only undertake the work assigned to them. They are not eligible to stand or vote for academic boards or councils and discouraged from getting involved in the university. Contracted staff have a little more opportunity to be part of the team but are still always conscious of keeping their heads below the parapet.

For research staff, academic and professionally employed, contract employment is highly problematic. When researchers had tenured positions, it was expected that they would call out, debate and even close down research activities that were judged to be dangerous or not independent. Whistleblowing was always dangerous and could backfire and end careers, but today even with whistleblowing protections, there is probably greater reluctance to jeopardise employment for both income reasons and being able to continue monitoring and intervening in a project. The tenure era though, was largely a pale male enclave amongst whom many resisted opening up research inclusive of the standpoints and experiences of women or First Nations peoples, because that could be deemed dangerous and challenge dominant paradigms. So there have been improvements in opening gates but is it just coincidence that pushing open the gates has happened alongside the shift from 'tenure' to 'ongoing' – with most staff not ongoing at all.

Insecure employment practices of universities continue to contradict lofty proclamations of employment opportunity and equity. Researchers have produced the evidence that women are more likely to have careers stalled and stopped through job insecurity. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff are more likely to be on contracts and experience systemic and systematic racism.

Senior academic and professional staff too are on contracts, which also helps explain the timidity, bordering on cowardice, of our university leaderships. Most are on three-to-five-year contracts and will work to their KPIs with an eye on the next contract and promotion at their current, or next, university. There is usually little long term personal investment in the university. Being brave means a pretty quick end to university management and leadership careers.

However, there continue to be idealistic and genuine commitments to the public good, but these strategies and initiatives are strangled because there are not resourced to make them happen. Understaffing and overworking staff, the majority insecurely employed, is the hallmark of our universities. Restructures and job cuts are constant. So, another reason for reluctance in speaking truth to power is that staff are chronically overworked and stretched too thinly.

## Unreliable underfunding

Government investment in public universities in Australia is amongst the lowest in the OECD and continues to decline. Students also pay higher tuition fees than most other countries. The dirty secret that Australia's universities ran on the fees of onshore international students has now been exposed, as international students stopped coming in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Increased competition over research funding leads to often conservative bids in areas of government determined priority areas to the neglect of other areas and of blue-sky projects. Universities cut the breadth and depth of course offerings and are reluctant to experiment or to support courses and new or old areas of merit unless they are self-sufficient. Many of our universities now have a very restricted disciplinary spread even in their priority fields of study, and with very few ongoing early or late career academics.

The reliance on insecure employment is explained by university managements as being due to government underfunding. While this is largely true, it is also true that university managements decide not to spend their income

on employing more secure staff. That increasing numbers of universities are being found to have engaged in wage theft from the already vulnerable sessional academic staff is testimony to a very unhealthy obsession with employing staff on the cheap.

The responsibility of university councils and vice-chancellors is to advocate for more funding, rather than continue acquiescing to government insistence on lower and lower expenditure on higher education. Universities are terrified of offending and grants being further reduced. They do not take positions critical of Government, or Opposition policy, or pronouncements on anything – let alone on higher education funding.

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The impact of and how we respond to climate change arguably constitutes the greatest crisis for our universities today. So, maybe this should be a measure of whether academic freedom means anything – and whether our universities are fulfilling their mission to work for the public good and in the public interest – fearlessly speaking

truth to power. Instead, we have timid governing bodies and managements reluctant to provide any ammunition for a vindictive government to further cut funding.

None of our Australian universities have declared a climate emergency. Climate scientists have called on universities, governments and industry to do so. Even the UK Tory Government has. Our universities have not, and climate change deniers continue to secure a public platform. We should not forget that Australian climate scientists have not only had to deal with constant funding cuts, but some also experienced death threats just a few years ago.

In lieu of government funding, university leaders have sought other avenues of income, and thus become much more reliant on research partners, 'philanthropists', private, corporate and civil society donors, as well as commercial partnerships.

## Pressure in partnerships

There have been cases of censorship and disciplining of staff whose comments are construed as possibly offending funding sources, whether from our governments, foreign governments, individuals, companies or organisations. Staff who speak out are accused of potentially jeopardising an income source, and thus not acting in the interests of their employer.

The request to remove social media posts from private accounts, the refusal to allow events and particular speakers,

or insistence on particular event sponsors, are all examples of anticipating, and seeking to circumvent, offence from partners. There may not even have been a complaint.

It seems to be assumed that these partnerships, even commercial ones, are very fragile. Even implementing waste reduction strategies has been avoided in the past because it may upset commercial partners. These days many such companies are racing ahead on their own social responsibility and environmental sustainability commitments. The universities may well be left behind, still justifying partnerships with weapons manufacturers and big polluters.

So, the onus is also on university communities to not be intimidated by insinuations that they may be damaging university reputations, and thus the financial bottom line.

It is the students and the staff in ongoing jobs that are in the strongest positions to speak truth to power. Speaking out is unlikely to land you in jail in Australia but can still threaten your career and livelihood. But still, don't we have a responsibility to stand up, act up and back up others? Academic freedom is of little use as a concept if we do not exercise it; and fight the conditions that strangle it – in Australia, and in solidarity with university workers and students internationally.

Follow Scholars at Risk at <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org> and Education International at <https://www.ei-ie.org>.

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