The Academic Freedom Charter Experimenter

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In October 1989 Minister for Employment, Education and Training John Dawkins announced his intention to recommend to Cabinet a charter of institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

The purpose of this paper was to legislate to give expression to the principle that institutions should be free from government interference and to ensure:
- methods of assessment;
- the conduct of research;
- the appointment of staff, and
- the free expression of view and opinion.

The context in which Dawkins announced his Charter was a period when sweeping changes in staffing arrangements, including reversionary tenure, staff assessment to ensure inadequate performance not be protected, more short-term and part-time appointments, enhancement provisions, strengthened dismissal procedures, and more flexible salary packages.

The Green Paper's second reference to academic freedom was embedded in these staffing proposals, giving the appearance of more than a token appeal to the argument that security of employment is a prerequisite for academic freedom.

The Green Paper acknowledged academic freedom as 'essential to the effective operation of higher education in Australia'. Indeed, the Green Paper argued that it was 'an essential constituent of the academic charter'; the Government 'would be prepared to consider legislation providing academic freedom in this area if appropriate means could be devised' (Dawkins, 1987, p.57).

In the very next paragraph, however, there is the cautionary note that 'academic freedom should be no protection for inadequate performance or lack of commitment on the part of staff'.

There was little response to this proposal for legislation followed in the Green Paper. Most of the submissions responding to the Green Paper from institutions, staff associations and individuals were in favour of autonomy. The Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee was hostile to the proposal to limit academic freedom and evaluation of performance through tenure.

The origins of the charter proposal

The association between autonomy, management and academic freedom had been established in the Government's Higher Education Policy discussion paper (the 'Green Paper') of December 1987. There were two references to academic freedom: a call for institutions to direct academics' concerns about changes in higher education away from the Government and Ministerially towards Vice-Chancellors. Dawkins concluded:

My belief is that by committing to manage institutions as an essential part of the autonomy in education and for the future prospects and problems that management should be able to meet the academic demands. In other words, the Green Paper intended a new kind of university, they argued, and the government ‘would be prepared to consider legislation providing academic freedom in this area if appropriate means could be devised’ (Dawkins, 1987, p.57).

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The interests of staff and management

The charter proposal was a genuine attempt to protect academic freedom, but it had not been fully supported by academics. While the Green Paper was supported by some academics, there was no question of the same strength or voice of opposition from academics. Many academics were concerned that the Government’s higher education policy might lead to a decline in the quality of higher education institutions.

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History of the concept of academic freedom

Any mention of academic freedom has to deal with the fact that universities are not mere religious or religiously inspired institutions, but secular institutions. The concept of academic freedom has been around for centuries. It is often traced back to ancient Greece, medieval monasteries, and the Enlightenment. The triumph of the Enlightenment in the West led to the establishment of modern universities in the nineteenth century, which provided a platform for the development of the concept of academic freedom in the twentieth century.

One picture of the history of academic freedom is that it evolved from the control of the church to the emergence of the university in the twelfth century. Bands of scholars and students established centers of education that were able to secure their complete autonomy and freedom through the combined efforts of intellectual geography and the local community. The state adopted academic freedom as a formal policy in the late nineteenth century. The emergence of the university as a liberal institution with the dominant concern of the state was in the twentieth century.

The period after World War II was a key moment in the development of academic freedom. The United Nations and the United States, among others, played a role in promoting academic freedom and protecting it in the face of political pressure. The concept of academic freedom has been crucial in the development of modern universities and has served as a model for institutions of higher education around the world.

The failure of the academic system to function as a model for other institutions is reflected in the fact that academic freedom has been a central issue in the development of modern universities in the twentieth century. The failure of the academic system to function as a model for other institutions is reflected in the fact that academic freedom has been a central issue in the development of modern universities in the twentieth century.
(g) it is not possible to predict areas of knowledge which will become major areas of future academic work. Areas of intense activity in the 1980s will differ from those of the 1970s and the 1990s. So much of academic work is diachronic and many areas of research may well develop rapidly. It is unwise to try to predict the outcomes of such developments in advance.

(h) a nation needs to protect its ability to export rapidly into areas of emerging importance and to avoid the equitable costs of skill and expertise of academics are the bedrock of this capacity.

(i) the formulation and dissemination of opinions about various aspects of local life is constrained by the institutional in which they are delivered. Many media, public sectors, bureaucracy and the business world all have their own rules and genres (having subject to period change). The institutional values of universities should support the reverse trajectory, in order to to admit necessary change in other spheres.

(j) major shifts in conceptions of knowledge are of their nature challenging to au-

(k) national and international network of universities exist as does an international system for the circulation of academics work. These networks should operate freely in order to make the possibilities of these systems realisable, and to provide an international dimension to the process of generating new knowledge and the dissemination and ignorance of knowledge. An open network of this sort is of particular importance to academics in Australia.

(l) the development of knowledge within a particular disciplinary or interdisci-

(m) the greatest number of both academic and student staff should be given the opportunity to participate in the most up to date, cutting edge of areas of importance, and to develop their talents on a regular basis. The opportunity is not provided in the same way in universities as in other places of work, and once the momentum is lost, making return of the relevant expertise becomes impractical.

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