



**What's  
happened  
to the  
University?**

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Professor Marguerite Johnson  
Professor Steven Schwartz**

**Introduction by Dr Jeremy Sammut**

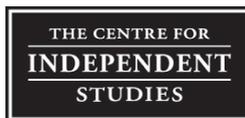


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*Introduction:*

# Jeremy Sammut

**Senior Fellow at The Centre  
for Independent Studies**

I'm sure that many people here may have had a light bulb moment in recent times that made them realise that our universities—the key cultural institution in the formation of knowledge and the transmission of the values of the enlightenment and modernity—were in trouble.

For me, this moment has gradually come over the last year or so when I've been asked to comment by the Australian newspaper in a spate of stories about a range of social engineering initiatives—across everything from early childhood to corporate Australia—that are pushing what has now come to be known as the diversity agenda pertaining to matter of race, gender and sexuality.

What has struck me about all these stories is that the agendas being promoted are not about the classical liberal or humanist principles; or dare I say even the Christian principle that all people should be treated fairly, and we should all treat people the way we would want to be treated ourselves.

What's been clear is that there has been an ideological agenda not only telling people how they should behave in certain instances, but seeking to shape, set, and enforce the boundaries of acceptable as opposed to offensive, racist, patriarchal, or homo- or transphobic thought and speech.

What has struck me through this is the extent to which the precepts of post-modernism that were taking hold when I was an undergraduate 25 or so years ago, extend to this post-modern precepts flooding into the mainstream under these various initiatives. Now the postmodern notions that have taken hold revolve around the idea that the language used by the so called dominant culture or the dominant discourse is what creates social reality and oppresses certain victim groups.

It therefore follows, according to this logic, that it's fair to liberate marginalised groups by restricting or regulating freedom of thought speech and action around a range of issues that are simply no longer up for debate, discussion, and dissent.

Yet debate, discussion, and dissent are the foundations of the freedom of inquiry the universities should stand for as bastions of intellectual freedom; but not in the post-modern academy like Sydney University — Australia's oldest university.

According to Sydney University's latest 'Unlearn' marketing campaign, students will not be pursuing enlightenment while studying for their degrees, but deconstruction by being "taught how to unlearn and challenge the established, demolish social norms, and build new ones in their place." The unlearning university promises not an education in how the world really works based on reason, logic, and rational analysis, but an indoctrination in how academic ideologues with a one-trick agenda demand it should work.

How it came to this and how we might learn our way out of the unlearning university is the problem our distinguished speakers will address.

Professor Frank Furedi is an Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Kent in the UK. He is a sociologist, commentator and the author of *What Happened to the University* and many other books on intellectual culture, the politics of fear, parenting, and education.

Professor Marguerite Johnson is an author, researcher, and Associate Professor of Ancient History and Classical Languages at the University of Newcastle. Professor Johnson is particularly interested in the ongoing dialogues between antiquity and modernity, and holds a keen interest in various facets of the humanities. Early last

year, Professor Johnson discussed Monash University's introduction of a more formalized implementation of trigger warnings and holds concerns for what's next.

Professor Steven Schwartz is a senior fellow at the CIS and a board director at several companies including ACARA and Teach For Australia. Professor Schwartz is the author of 13 books and has served as vice chancellor and president of three universities; Macquarie and Murdoch Universities in Australia, and Brunel University in the UK. He has served as the national chairman of the Fulbright Commission and is also a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, Royal Society Exchange, and NATO.



# Frank Furedi

**Emeritus Professor  
of Sociology at the  
University of Kent, UK**

**J**eremy referred to a light bulb moment. My light bulb moment occurred in 2002 when I was reading a memorandum that was sent by the Dean of Arts and Humanities of Durham University to staff members.

And in this memorandum he told people teaching humanities and liberal arts that they should not lecture on controversial and sensitive topics unless they had approval from an ethics committee. And they basically made the point that it was really not a good thing for lecturers to catch students unaware by raising issues to do with abortion or suicide or domestic violence, or anything that was to us extraordinary.

And I responded to this memo by writing an article for the Times higher education supplement, and to my surprise a lot of colleagues were saying, “Well, what’s the big deal?” Why should we worry about the fact that a dean in a good university, Durham University, tells lecturers to censure themselves and to reorganise their teaching material in such a way that it doesn’t really offend the sensibilities of students.

But that was a long time ago, and as it happened the instructions were not implemented. It was too early then, and it would take another 12 or 13 years before what he asked became seen as the convention in many universities.

So what I like to talk about is what's happening and why. I think that very often critics of the problems in the university overstate the issues. I want to preface my remarks by saying that I don't think that there is a plot. There isn't a movement that is consciously driving these changes in the universities. If there was, it would be much easier to deal with it because then you can pinpoint who those individuals are.

What we're seeing in the universities are the products of wider cultural forces that work themselves out according to their inner logic in the university environment.

And secondly I want to emphasise one point which is often misunderstood, which is the current guidelines on campuses that talk about safe spaces, that talk about trigger warnings—that have this imperative to censure anything that moves—do not represent the continuation of the radical moments of the 60s or what happened in the 70s.

It is not simply another step in the relativist turn that took place in the social sciences in the 80s. It is something that has got its own origins and is quite distinct—clearly distinct—from some of the problems and issues that were raised in the universities in the past. I think that what we're seeing today is much more of an apolitical therapeutic term rather than the conscious sort of development of issues that occurred a long time ago.

In my mind, the way that I understand it, is that in terms of the issue of freedom we've gone through several stages. I remember when I went to university, I was a student radical. I did my fair share of occupations and demonstrations and played the role of a bad boy in my youth, so I know what student radicalism is like. And one of the things that I take away from the old days or the 60s, 70s, is that whatever you thought about student radicalism, their sort of focus was expanding the realm of freedom. More free speech, not less free speech. More experimentation, not less experimentation. More risk taking, not less risk taking.

In other words, this was a radical moment that perhaps had its limits and its problems, but it really wasn't a move towards censorship. It didn't have that kind of puritanical censorious impulse that is very much the feature of student political radicalism.

I wouldn't even call it radicalism, but student political protest, at this stage in time. And in my mind the way that I see it, is that as far as freedom is concerned, we've gone through three phases. In the 60s and most of the 70s, and even the early 80s, all people on campuses would sign off to the fact that academic freedom was invaluable and that free speech was a value well worth fighting for. So at that point in time freedom of speech was seen as untouchable, something that you would fight tooth and nail to protect.

Somewhere along the lines around the turn of the century, around 2000, this notion of freedom shifted to what I call 'I believe in free speech, but...' And what really counted, what really mattered, was the 'but', and everybody had their reason as to why in this case or that case, free speech was not allowed.

Or, 'yes I believe in free speech all the time, but these people are so insensitive, they are so provocative, they are so offensive that in this case we need to have a different standard.' We have to apply a different standard in the way that we approach their orientation towards speech.

And then from the 'I believe in free speech, but' we get to the current state, and for the first time in modern times, really the first time since the Enlightenment, you have significant groups of academics and students—they're still a minority but they're quite significant because of their influence—who actually argue that free speech and academic freedom are not a big deal. Why the fuss, why worry about it? Who cares? There are more important things in this world than academic freedom and free speech.

And not only do they say that free speech is not a big deal, but a significant number of people in the academy argue that 'actually, when you come to think about it, free speech is often used as an instrument

of privilege,' that free speech is often used by the elites in order to oppress the rest of society. Totally inverting reality, totally forgetting that it was people from below who struggled for freedom of speech.

That freedom of speech was never a gift given to society. It had to be wrested from the elites in previous times. But the way they present it is that free speech is really the privilege that's exercised particularly by white heterosexual males who somehow have this weird notion that this is something that is well worth cultivating. That's a very important development and now we're having numerous surveys being carried out particularly in the United States.

In many places, 38 to 45% of students asked what they think of the first amendment which guarantees the right to free speech, or asked what they think about academic freedom, answer, "I don't know. Who cares? What's the big deal?" So that's a totally new kind of development that has occurred. In my mind and in my book I call this interesting development the freedom security trade-off.

What I mean by the freedom security trade-off is this. Historically, authoritarian governments argue that if you give up a bit of your freedom, it will make you more secure. You'll have less freedom to move and to talk and to engage with other people, but you'll be more secure. We'll protect you from all the evil things that are outside. Now, you and I know that when we give up our freedom we never become more secure, but nevertheless that's the argument that's used.

Now, on campuses what we have is the academic version of the freedom security trade-off, and the academic version of that basically says that it's well worth giving up a tiny bit of freedom in order to protect students from insensitive remarks. It's really important that we limit freedom to just simply talk about sensitive subjects because it might offend students. And what you have is this new notion, this new idea, that it's entirely legitimate to constrain the terrain of freedom in order to immunise young people from the horrors of criticism, from the horrors of offense, from the horrors of being challenged and judged, particularly judged in their everyday life.

I think you probably know if you live near a campus or you work on a campus that one of the core values of all universities in Australia,

as much as in England and America, is non-judgmentalism. I mean it's in their mission statement. Just think about it. Our core value is non-judgmentalism.

Now, in a civilised world we presume that we judge each other all the time. I mean the very idea of tolerance is based on the idea that I think your ideas are really horrible. That's where my judgment is. But nevertheless, you have the right to express them. As Hannah Arendt said once, without judging one another we don't take each other seriously. Without being able to judge each other there is no such thing as a public debate and a public dialogue.

And yet we have come to the point when non-judgmentalism is celebrated as really the most important value. And American universities have these mission statements on their web pages: "Come to our university, and we're not going to judge you."

Wow. I'm going to go to this higher education environment and I will be completely quarantined from judgment. Isn't that great? And I think that kind of attitude has become very much internalised in the way that these universities work.

Now it seems to me that what has happened with freedom is that it's become subservient to three important values. The first value is that of diversity, and diversity is seen as being the principal values at the moment, and diversity trumps anything else. When you actually scratch the surface, diversity is one of those empty concepts—it doesn't mean anything.

When you look at diversity, you will find that when people are asked what diversity means they're not able to explain it because in English diversity means 'the many'.

Well that's like an empirical fact. It's not a value, it's an empirical fact. After diversity comes safety and security, and every university advertises that it's a safe space or it's a safe university and the safety of the student is their greatest concern. And the third value is the right to not be offended. They are the three values that are being upheld.

Now I just want to spend a bit of time on this before I conclude. Why has the right not to be offended become sacralised? I mean where does that come from that all of a sudden to be offended is

almost like a form of irredeemable crime? And it seems to me that what has happened is that in our world, in the western world, we've created a form of socialisation through the way we parent children, through the way we school them.

That young people are socialised into a mode of validation. Instead of getting young people to engage with values about what is right and what is wrong, instead of communicating the values that the parents were socialised into, increasingly we live in a world where children are socialised by raising their self-esteem, by telling them how bright they are. They come home from school with 10 smiley faces. They're all told that they're little Einsteins. And throughout school all the way through high school what happened is that they become immunised from criticism.

I remember writing about this in *The Australian* a few years ago when, I think, in one of the school districts in Australia they banned the use of red pens in school on the grounds that it was a form of violence. I don't know how they think and what kind of drugs they're on.

But the very idea—that if you cross something out with a red pen it is a form of violence—is unusually weird. It basically indicates there is an impulse and imperative to validate rather than to question and to criticise.

Now if that's the education that you've had, if that's how you've been socialised, it's not surprising that when you get to university you will be looking for security. You will be looking for safety. It's not surprising that a large percentage of American students, for example, actually invite a paternalistic reaction to their predicament. From their point of view they want to be looked after. It's an interesting development.

There was a time not so long ago when you went on campus as a student and your parents were not with you. I mean do you remember arriving on campus and you said to yourself, "Great. Mom and dad are back there, thank God for that. If they were here it would be social death as far as I'm concerned," and that was the end of the matter.

Well, you come to my university in England and, again, there are more parents than rats. You go anywhere on the first week and there is mom and dad, and sometimes grandparents come as well just to give a bit of backup to the parents because it's such a difficult transition. And in some universities they even have transition counselling.

They counsel students about the fact that you're now in a university. It's a big deal and you might be insecure and you might have all kinds of mental health issues. And the problem is, if young people are socialised into this therapeutic way of engaging with the world, then it's not surprising that they will feel mentally insecure, that they will feel very often a need to be immunised from the pressures and challenge of life.

We've created the problem. They're not responsible for that. And the unfolding of this dynamic in universities I think is what we're seeing when we see trigger warnings and all the demonstrations to be protected from Trump being elected. I need counselling for the next two years because of it. All these things you're seeing are very much the reflection of that and the consequences of that.

So therefore, what we have today is a presumption that students are simply biologically mature children and they need to be treated like that. And if you treat students as biologically mature children, then they will behave in accordance with the kind of definitions that we've endowed upon them. It seems to me that that is really the main problem that we're confronted with.

Identity politics, I think, is the other side of this because identity politics today is no longer what identity politics was in the 70s. For example, the movement for gay marriage today has got nothing to do with gay liberation movements in the 60s and 70s—which were completely different in their dynamic.

All the identity movements of the past had a completely different political edge to the ones that exist now. The identity movements of today are basically based upon one single principle which is 'it's all

about me ... it's all about me'. And if you don't believe me, go on a demonstration, go on a protest. When you go on a protest what you see is that everybody is taking selfies of themselves. I mean I've never seen anything like that. There are 5,000 people on the streets and they are there for the picture. Not the t-shirt even, just a picture. And that becomes their way of saying that I was there, I did the business, and it's really all about me.

And when it's all about you, then identity — your identity — becomes so important that if I criticise you, if I say you're wrong, the way you interpret the fact that I say you're wrong is not that your ideas are wrong, but that somehow I'm attacking you as an individual, that I'm diminishing your humanity. And that's the reason we get these sort of hysterical scenes on university campuses all over the Anglo-American world.

What we need to do is fairly clear and fairly straightforward — just simply stand up and be counted and use our humour, our sense of humour, to demonstrate that there is a different way of running the world.

# Professor Marguerite Johnson

**Author, researcher and  
Associate Professor of  
Ancient History and Classical  
Languages at the University  
of Newcastle**

**A**s Jeremy said I'm a classicist, and I think it's appropriate I begin very quickly with a classical anecdote. In second year at university I had a very important moment, an important pedagogical moment, a learning moment when my professor was teaching Plato's Republic. He was discussing ideas of censorship and he told us the story, retold us the story of the cave, which had a profound effect on me as a young woman.

For those of you who aren't familiar with the story of the cave in the Republic, there is a description of people who live in a cave and their only sense of reality is the shadows on the wall. And they're basically trapped down there and they watch the shadows on the wall.

And the way this was taught to me was in terms of freedom of speech and censorship because if you live in the cave and you watch reality as shadows on a wall, the day comes when you're liberated from the cave. And how on earth are you able to cope with reality because it's far more devastating and amazing and beautiful than these shadows.

So with that in mind—it's always stayed with me—I want to talk about issues that have confronted me now not as a young undergraduate but as a very old academic who is still teaching classics. As a cultural historian of the ancient Mediterranean whose teaching and research involves somewhat confrontational subjects—my areas are ancient sexualities, ancient genders, ideas of eros and amore and eroticism in the Greek and Roman worlds, the roles of women, the roles of violence—I have for a very long time, before it was a current topic of pedagogical and political obsession, used basic content warnings in my course guides.

I won't use the term trigger warning. I think that has become so politicized as to now be rendered redundant. Trigger warnings are also consistently used in the wrong context. They are specifically applicable to people who have post-traumatic stress syndrome and may be triggered by certain images. It's very different to providing course material on ancient sexualities or modern sexualities where I provide a basic content warning to say if this course is not for you then I suggest you do something else.

So these warnings, if you want to use the term warnings, are at my discretion, and as an experienced teacher and an expert in the field they're designed to signal to the undergraduates, as I said, that my courses will contain confronting material.

They are listed on the front page. This is all that I do. I don't fetishize it, I don't go on about it, I don't pre-empt my students' responses to material. That is up to them. And I certainly don't patronize my students or feel that I need to maternalize them.

What I want to do with my students is to place the onus on them. They've chosen to enroll in a course and my course is usually very unambiguous in their titles. Sex and Scandal and History should tell you what it's about, as should Ancient Sexualities. Course descriptions are always widely available online, and so anyone can tap into any university and read a course description before they decide to enroll in it. These sorts of statements may seem like stating the bleeding obvious.

But I find now that it is something that one needs to do. I want to place the onus on the students because university is about knowledge, and knowledge is not pleasant. It's always beneficial

though, not only to the individual but to the community. And that is a very basic statement of the bleeding obvious, but as I said, I think we're heading into a contested period of academic inquiry and teaching.

The onus is also on the individual student because university is about preparing you for life, for leaving the cave and forgetting about the shadows on the wall and experiencing life firsthand. And it's also about instilling a love of the liberal arts and the humanities, which is also about empathy, agency, contribution, sacrifice, and service.

These should be aspirations, aspirations to contributing to the achievement of communal goals, not serving a western cult of the individual. So this is my experience, and I want to also now move on to what is happening around us at the universities, where trigger warnings really are so frequent, as I said, as to become somewhat redundant.

I would like to say to people who consistently suggest that people like me use trigger warnings, is that the more order that's implemented the more order needs to be implemented. By ordering, formalizing, codifying a system of trigger warnings at any tertiary institution, more power is handed over to governing bodies and more academic freedom is threatened.

I would oppose my courses being vetted by a governing body for the purposes of assessing them for trigger warnings, and that was the sort of topic that was very much at the forefront of the media earlier this year when Monash did begin to explore formalization of trigger warnings and reviewing content of course material.

I would oppose my courses being vetted not only because I believe I know best, but it's because I would be subjecting the course material I teach and research to a governing body that may not be wholly objective to what I am doing. Knowledge is precious, but knowledge is also vulnerable. It's vulnerable to moral judgements including religious judgements. It's vulnerable to the judgements of those who advocate extreme forms of political correctness.

These equate in some instances, particularly in the work that I research and teach, to censorship. It's vulnerable to economic rationalism. It's vulnerable to the media. And in the case of the last two points, certain knowledge can be erased because it may be seen

to be contributing to falling enrollments, negative student surveys, institutional financial losses. And someone in the classics really needs to be very much aware of those sorts of issues.

I think about why I have put content warnings in for a long time, and the reason that I do it is partly because, if I were looking out at a sea of students right at this very moment, I am not to know that one person in my class is being raped, and just a basic content warning out of the respect for the dignity of that human being is something that, as a feminist in particular, I feel I need to honour.

Moving on though to what I regard as trigger warnings getting out of hand, and this is what frightens me. As Frank said, there is not one agenda, no political imperative and organization that you can point your finger to and say this is, for want of a better phrase, the enemy, this is the group who is organizing it, because it is fluid, and it appears in different guises. But the internet as we know it is the source of all information.

And I did some quick surfing online prior to this, and I wanted to title this section, "You say tomato I say tomahto. One person's trigger warning is another person's pit."

Once an entity such as trigger warnings become materialized, there is a threat of a snowball effect. And a quick search on the internet reveals that one person's trigger warning is another person's pit. And I will give you a list for an example which suggests what should be labelled when you're lecturing, what topics require a trigger warning. This is a direct quote:

"Swearing, rape, abuse; physical, mental, emotional, verbal abuse, child abuse, pedophilia, self-injurious behaviour, self-harm, eating disorders, etcetera. Talk of drugs, talk of drug use; legal, illegal or psychiatric. Suicide. Descriptions, pictures of medical procedures, even if they don't contain blood or gore. Description, pictures of violence or warfare including instruments of violence such as knives or guns.

Corpses, skulls, skeletons. Needles. Discussions of isms. Shaming or hatred of any kind. Racism, classism, hatred of cultures' ethnicities that differ from your own, sexism,

hatred of sexualities or genders that differ from your own. Anti-multiple non vanilla shaming, sex positive shaming, fat shaming, body image shaming, neuro atypical shaming. Any time slurs are used in your class;

This includes words like stupid or dumb, which are still widely considered to be socially acceptable. Trans, de-gendering or anti-trans views of bodies. Dismissal of lived depressions, marginalization, illness or difference. Kidnapping be it forceful, devaluation—when is kidnapping not—or disregard for personal autonomy. Discussions of sex (even consensual). Death or dying. Spiders, insects, snakes, vomit. Pregnancy, childbirth, blood, serious injury.

Trypophobia, which is phobia of irregular patterns or clusters or small holes or bumps. Scarification. Nazi paraphernalia. Slimy things. Anything that might inspire intrusive thoughts in people with OCD.”

This list which was the first of the search results that appeared on Google, covers the entire cohort of disciplines taught at universities from history, media studies, dietetics, medicine, nursing, engineering, architecture, biology, and the list goes on. Not one for hysteria or catastrophizing, I find myself as an academic and a teacher close to a mild panic.

The list is also a testimony to an arrogance of entitlement and lack of empathy that is characterized by an absence of self-awareness. That list infuriated me. In categorizing and formalizing a list of topics deemed worthy of trigger warnings, the authors have conflated, and I say how dare they, rape and child abuse and pedophilia with talk of drug abuse; legal, illegal or psychiatric, spiders, insects, snakes, and vomit.

And if we are not mad and angry I ask why are we not. The Network of Women Students Australia has a more comprehensive list including flashing lights and food, and they place these also in the same list as rape and child abuse.

I would suggest rather strongly that there is a problem here, and again not one for hysteria or catastrophizing, I find myself as an academic close to hysteria. The conflation of the horrendous with objects and topics that upset some individuals, is testimony to identity politics gone mad, and the inequitable championing of individual self-esteem at the cost of objective delivery of knowledge for the benefit of the group or the community.

The lists also speak to the self-selection of the so called advocates who see it as their inalienable right to speak on behalf of others, including minorities, the dispossessed, and in so doing perpetuate the practice of rendering such groups and individuals without agency.

Taken to its most logical end, if one were to apply the logic, a term I use wisely, is to organize social mechanisms to put trigger warnings on billboards or forms of advertisement, music of all genres, twitter feeds, Facebook feeds, television, doctor surgery, dentists, zoos, supermarkets, places of worship, hospitals, parks and recreational facilities. Funerals, funeral homes, art galleries, museums, radio stations, public transport, veterinarian clinics, animal shelters, fast-food outlets, restaurants or news services.

Libraries, excavation and public work sites, documentaries, historical commentaries, bars and educational institutions. Only then would individuals feel safe and validated and protected, or they could stay in Plato's cave watching shadows on the wall.

What particularly incited me to begin to engage in this academic environment about trigger warnings and what's happening to the universities is partly my own research. As a classicist, one of my main research areas is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a very, very controversial text in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and one that is now the target of cries for abolishment to have it removed from syllabi particularly in the United States.

Ovid in fact ironically was sent into exile for writing material by the Emperor Augustus which I find incredibly ironic.

I want to end not with Ovid though but with Oscar Wilde who wrote, and Ovid would have appreciated this I feel, "The books that the world calls immoral are the books that show the world its own shame."

# Professor Steven Schwartz

**Senior Fellow at The Centre  
for Independent Studies**

**W**hen the announcement of my retirement was made at Macquarie University, I was walking across the campus and I encountered a well-known science professor. She came rushing up to me and she said, “I’ve just heard this news you’re leaving. This is terrible.”

And I said, “Don’t worry, the university council will search far and wide and I’m sure they’ll find a really good person to be vice chancellor.” And she said, “Oh sure. That’s what they said the last time.” So you can see I’m used to the academic.

A trigger warning for all of you, I might say that someone’s stupid, but I’m not sure yet. I’ve got to get this out of the way. When I was vice chancellor of Macquarie University I received a letter, an irate letter from a member of the public, and he wrote to tell me that there were Macquarie academics who were distributing what he called pro-Palestinian propaganda on a publicly available website.

And he and some of his friends found this irksome and therefore it was incumbent upon me as vice chancellor to make them stop, in other words, to shut them up. On investigation I found that they were indeed university academics who were writing articles about Middle East politics and making them available on a public website. As it turned out, the website did not actually belong to the university.

But as I wrote to my correspondent in reply it wouldn't matter if it did. I wouldn't be able or willing to do anything to make them stop. This is what academics do. They write articles in their area of expertise, they make them publicly available so others can read them and comment on them and discuss them. Disapproval alone is not grounds for silencing these academics or anyone else for that matter.

It doesn't mean that I endorse what they say, it doesn't mean that the university endorses what they say. In fact the university doesn't have a foreign policy. But in a phrase that's often misattributed to Voltaire, we would defend their right to say it. I offered to invite my correspondent or one of his friends who had expertise in Middle East politics to come and speak on campus.

But even as I was writing the letter and sending it, I knew this was not the reply that he expected or hoped for, and I was right. I soon received a copy of a letter that he had written to the Federal Minister for Education asking her to intervene. Now you would have hoped that the Federal Minister of Education would respond with a robust defense of freedom of expression in general and academic freedom in particular. You would have hoped, but you would have been disappointed.

Rather than mount a spirited defense of academic freedom and freedom of speech, the Federal Minister decided to sidestep the whole issue. She wrote back and said that she couldn't do anything about it because universities are under the jurisdiction of the state government and she is a federal minister.

So my correspondent and I shared a few more desultory exchanges, each one shorter than the one before, until he eventually suggested that I go forth and multiply, but not exactly in those words, and that was the end of the matter.

Now I received much similar correspondence and very many similar requests over the 16 years that I was vice chancellor. They came from politicians, from business executives, from community leaders, from parents, and as Frank pointed out, they almost always were written in the same way.

They would say, "I believe in freedom of speech, but," and the 'but' of course is what counts. I drew the conclusion that everyone,

everyone in the world is in favor of freedom of speech in the abstract, but they cannot resist calling for censorship whenever someone is saying something that they don't want to be expressed.

But of course that's the only time it actually counts, isn't it? Freedom for an idea to be expressed, an idea that you actually despise, that you actually hate. That's when freedom of speech actually counts. Now vice chancellors are still getting these complaints, but something profound has changed over the years. My complaints all came from people outside the institution. They came from outside the university. Now most of the complaints are coming from inside the institution and mainly from students.

Last week the Brooklyn Institute, which is a central left think tank located in Washington DC, published a survey of 1500 American college students. And I want to read you a question from the poll. This is the question:

A student group opposed to a speaker disrupts the speech by loudly and repeatedly shouting so that the audience cannot hear the speaker. Do you agree or disagree that the student group's actions are acceptable? 51% answered yes. A majority agreed that such behaviour is acceptable. Just think about it. A majority of students believe that it's okay to silence a speaker by shouting as long as they find what that speaker is saying to be offensive.

It's pretty bad, but it actually gets worse, much worse because here is the follow-up question. A student group is opposed to the speaker and decides to use violence to prevent the speaker from speaking. Do you agree or disagree that the student group's actions are acceptable. 19% of the respondents agreed. One in five students thinks that it is okay to use violence to silence a speaker that they disagree with.

Later questions were about what sort of climate a university should have. Should it be a positive learning environment in which certain things are not allowed to be discussed, or should it be an open learning environment in which everything is allowed to be discussed? 61% chose the first option, a positive environment where certain things can't be discussed.

Now these are American figures and maybe, maybe it's different here in Australia, but I suspect it wouldn't be. I expect that from these

stories, that we would be very similar. Moreover I expect that if this was a poll of academics as opposed to students, the results would be pretty much the same. Now these are, as you already heard, the students that call for safe spaces and trigger warnings, and who are trying to avoid challenging ideas and challenging concepts.

They probably don't realize it, but they themselves are actually challenging. They're challenging the very basis of a university, what it's actually there for, what its mission is. Universities are there for more than simply preparing you for a career. There's nothing wrong with preparing students for a career. In fact a good career is part of a fulfilling life. But the university's mission goes well beyond simply vocational training.

The mission of a university, or at least a western university, is actually to prepare students for citizenship in a democracy. If you think about it, democracy makes huge demands on its citizens. You can't just defer to authority as you can in a dictatorship. You've got to actually think. What do I feel about social issues? Gather the information.

Weigh the pros and cons, analyze it, come up with some conclusion for yourself that you will then use when you go to vote in an election or in a poll or on a jury. All those things are required of people living in a democracy. How do you do that? Well, you'll never be able to do it unless you're exposed to ideas that are different from yours.

Now if you're not exposed to ideas that are different from yours you never get to weigh the argument, you never get to hear the other side. And one of the great benefits of studying in an Australian university is you get to study with people from all over the world from different backgrounds and different groups and different ideas on social issues.

It's such a widely diverse group of students, you're likely to get every position available or conceivable on many issues. And debating these things, debating these topics using logic, using evidence, actually educates students, but it does something more than that.

It also enhances their mutual respect and their understanding because when you're involved in civil and logical debate with other people, you can eventually learn that people may have different views from yours without being necessarily stupid or evil. For the health of

this society, for the health of our society, for the health of the future of our society, that kind of mutual respect and understanding might be the most important thing that students actually learn at the university.

Remember, today's university students will grow up to be tomorrow's lawyers, teachers, politicians, judges. If they believe that controversial speakers and issues are too dangerous to discuss, that view might colour their decision when they move into positions of authority later in their careers, and then we must all watch out.

We can't afford, therefore, to allow students to opt out. One solution is to try to balance controversial speakers with those who hold different views, and this is normally good advice. In fact that was the offer I made to my irate correspondent, come and talk yourself or send one of your friends who is an expert. But, and here's where I might be a bit different from others, I don't believe that balance is always possible. Sometimes it's even undesirable.

And the reason for that is all ideas cannot be considered equal in a university, otherwise scientists would have to be teaching creationism and philosophers would have to teach the kabala. And medical deans, as I once was, would have to allow anti-vaccine people to have time in the medical course.

Now don't get me wrong, out there in the civil society in the world in which we live, I believe in complete freedom of speech. I believe that you should be free to say whatever you like. You can say the earth is flat. Nobody can stop you. It's a free country, still. But that does not entitle you to lecture in geography at the university. There is no moral, ethical, or philosophical principle that requires a university to provide a forum for every weird and divergent idea.

In a university, expertise is always a prerequisite. Universities are entitled to require that academic opinions derive from the work of competent scholars. They're entitled to insist that lecturers are fair and accurate, that they assess evidence using the accepted norms and procedures and methods of their profession.

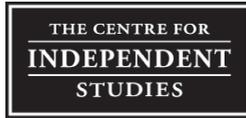
So where does that leave me? I believe that making a climate, creating a climate for the civilized debate of controversial ideas is essential if the university is going to meet its mission of preparing students for democratic citizenship. However, that does not require that every conceivable viewpoint be accommodated on campus.

What's happened to the University?

Universities are and should remain places of learning in which respect is given to expertise, to scholarship, to skill, to accuracy, to competence, to truthfulness, and of course to civility.

And for the good of our democracy, for the good of our country, we need to do a much better job of convincing students that the best way to respond to controversial speakers and difficult ideas and challenging notions is with informed debate and not, as it seems, with censorship and violence.





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## What's happened to the University?

Trigger warnings, cultural appropriation and safe spaces. Who decided to bestow guardian status to Australian universities? And why should we let this proliferation of politically correct ideals become the norm, prescribing, censoring or outright banning texts, gagging speech and curbing the exchange of ideas?

*"The radical transformation that universities are undergoing today is no less far-reaching than the upheavals that they experienced in the 1960s in the US and UK. Today, when almost 50 per cent of young people participate in higher education, what occurs in universities impacts directly on the whole of society." — Frank Furedi*

Although we haven't experienced a transformation as radical as our counterparts in the US and UK, these notions of restricting free speech all in the name of not causing offence will grab hold and cripple our universities.

This is an engaging, informed and robust look at how we got here, where we are headed and what the alternative is to this new status quo.



**Professor Frank Furedi:** Sociologist, commentator and author of 'What's happened to the University' and many other books on intellectual culture, the politics of fear, parenting, and education. He is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Kent, UK.



**Professor Marguerite Johnson:** Author, researcher and Associate Professor of Ancient History and Classical Languages at the University of Newcastle, Professor Johnson is particularly interested in the ongoing dialogues between antiquity and modernity and holds a keen interest in various facets of the Humanities. Earlier this year Professor Johnson discussed Monash University's introduction of a more formalised implementation of trigger warnings and holds concerns for what's next.



**Professor Steven Schwartz:** Senior Fellow at the CIS and Board Director at several companies including ACARA and Teach for Australia. Professor Schwartz is the author of 13 books and has served as Vice-Chancellor and president of three universities (Macquarie and Murdoch Universities in Australia, and Brunel University in the UK). He has served as National Chairman of the Fulbright Commission and is also a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, Royal Society Exchange and NATO.

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