

Education Quality and Conservation Biology

IN a recent public address at Murdoch University in Perth, Western Australia, Professor Geoffrey Bolton argued that the quality of Australian university education was at risk because of an increased reliance on fee income from overseas students. He felt that faculties could be pressured to relax standards in order to maximize the pass rates of fee-paying students and thereby gain greater income for universities at the cost of cheapening the academic value of degrees. Of course, this argument was not meant to belittle the educational value of a diversity of cultural backgrounds within classes nor to imply any lack of application on the part of fee-paying students. Rather, it raised the very legitimate concern that the declining financial fortunes of Australian universities were encouraging many institutions to seek actively for fee-paying students and that growing reliance on fee income could compromise academic independence. Correspondents to the local newspaper echoed his concerns, which appear to be widespread in the university system.

The increasing proportion of research in Australian universities that is funded by industry is a parallel matter of concern. The recent report of the Australian Government's Chief Scientist highlighted the critical state of research funding in Australian science and urged substantial increases in public support. Given the inadequate level of government funding, scientists in universities are turning increasingly to industry grants to fill the gap. This trend has government blessing, as indicated by initiatives such as the SPIRT (Strategic Partnerships in Industry, Research and Training) grants, which encourage close links between university researchers and industry. Clearly, there are many positive points in such linkages. Industry support spreads the burden of research funding beyond the public purse, alerts university researchers to the problems and needs of industry and directs research effort to immediate problems. Research students working on such collaborative projects benefit through the contacts they make and their introduction to industry issues and problems. However, there is also the real risk that increasing reliance on industry funding could compromise the results of research that may run counter to the interests of industry, just as reliance on fee income may be a threat to academic standards in education. Researchers working on environmental or conservation issues may feel a special sensitivity about the growing reliance on industry funding

because of the many well-known cases in which commercial interests have attempted to suppress environmental research unfavourable to their concerns (see examples in Martin 1981, 1992, 1993; Calver and King 2000; Letnic 2000, see also the debate between Jennings 1993 and Armstrong 1993).

In the past, tenured university academics were probably more able than industry scientists to resist such pressures, because universities protected their lecturers' academic freedom to speak out on issues within their areas of expertise. Academics could express controversial opinions free of threats to their livelihood such as dismissal. With this privilege came a responsibility to speak out on controversial issues and, when necessary, to be the conscience of the community. This does not imply that an outspoken academic will always be right, or that disagreements over the interpretation of issues or research data will not arise. Rather, the issue is that academics are a privileged section of the scientific community with greater independence and therefore they have a greater responsibility to challenge and debate. Martin (1981) argued that outspoken academics have, in general, fared better in the face of attempted suppression than scientists employed in other sectors. The few cases in which suppression appeared successful arose when a scientist did not have united support within the university and colleagues furthered their self-interest by supporting suppression.

Division within a university in the face of external pressure is one potential consequence of growing reliance on industry funding and could lead to more effective suppression of dissident opinion. Speaking out on issues with commercial implications could lead not only to external pressures, such as withdrawal of grants, but also internal pressures from university administrations anxious not to lose key research income or deter potential donors. Environmental impact and biological conservation are often contentious and politically sensitive issues which interested parties may prefer to shield from public attention. Hence, the more universities rely on industry research money, the harder academics will find it to comment on the environment and the less likely there is to be money for research on contentious, but not necessarily profitable, environmental/conservation projects. The increasing prominence of external grant income relative to publications in assessing the research profile of universities

makes this scenario even more likely in the future.

Averting this threat by disallowing industry funding would be as silly and impractical as banning Australian universities from accepting fee-paying students from overseas. A more sensible response is to argue for greater public funding of research in Australian universities to prevent situations in which research in public institutions is beholden greatly to private funds. This would reduce the likelihood of a researcher being silenced by withdrawal of grant income, or university administrations suppressing opinions they felt would jeopardize external funding. Another very effective move would be to reduce the heavy reliance on grant income in assessing the research profile of universities in favour of increasing the weighting on publications. Active researchers who continued to publish would be of benefit to universities and worth protecting, even if their opinions reduced the chance of earning some grant income.

American essayist H. L. Mencken claimed:

The iconoclast proves enough when he proves by his blasphemy that this or that idol is defectively convincing — that at least *one* visitor to the shrine is left full of doubts. The liberation of the human mind has been furthered by gay fellows who heaved dead cats into sanctuaries and then went roistering down the highways of the world, proving to all men that doubt, after all, was safe — that the god in the sanctuary was a fraud. One horse-laugh is worth ten thousand syllogisms. (Quoted in Stevens 1973, p. 189)

The other extreme is described in the words of Galileo in Brecht's great play:

They showered us with threats and bribes which weak souls cannot resist. But can we

turn our backs on the people and still remain scientists? ... As things stand now, the most we can hope for is a generation of inventive dwarfs who can be hired for any purpose. (Brecht 1972, p. 94)

Conservation biology and society at large will be served better by a system that does not penalize university academics who throw the odd dead cat.

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