



Senate Inquiry into Academic Freedom in school and higher education

Submission by the Independent Schools Council of Australia

About ISCA

The Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) is the peak national body representing the independent school sector. It comprises the State and Territory Associations of Independent Schools. Through these Associations it represents a sector with 1,100 schools and over 510,000 students, accounting for nearly 15 per cent of Australian school enrolments.

Independent schools serve a range of different communities. Many provide a religious or values-based education, while others promote a particular educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education. Independent schools include:

- Schools affiliated with Christian denominations, such as Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Seventh Day Adventist and Uniting Church schools
- Non-denominational Christian schools
- Islamic schools
- Jewish schools
- Montessori schools
- Rudolf Steiner schools
- Schools constituted under specific Acts of Parliament, such as Grammar schools in some states
- Community schools
- Indigenous community schools
- Schools that specialise in meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

Some independent schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, for example the Lutheran systems. Systemic schools account for 18 per cent of schools in the independent sector.

Independent Catholic schools are a significant part of the sector, accounting for 10 per cent of the independent sector's enrolments. Although ABS data does not categorise them as independent, these schools have been included in ISCA's figures.



Introduction

1. The Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) is pleased to have this opportunity to address the Terms of Reference in relation to academic freedom in independent schools. Academic freedom is central to the reason parents choose an independent school education.
2. The independent sector strongly supports choice in school education and the right of parents to choose the type of education that best suits the needs of their child. This includes the right to choose faith based schools, schools underpinned by particular educational philosophies or schools that provide services to students with special needs.
3. ISCA bases its response to the Terms of Reference of the inquiry into Academic Freedom on the following principles:
 - that choice is enshrined and not diminished;
 - that choice in educational options is essential to Australia's high quality education system;
 - that the rights of parents to choose the education that best meets the needs of their child should not be inhibited;
 - that the needs of students are central;
 - that high standards in the content of the curriculum, the conduct of teaching professionals and student assessments are maintained;
 - that flexible provision at all levels of education should be a priority, with minimal legislative constraints on the curriculum or on the strategies to deliver it; and
 - that curriculum and delivery is based on intellectual rigour and an enquiry methodology.

Terms of Reference

Level of diversity and the impact of ideological, political and cultural prejudices

4. Curricula, course materials, student assessments and professional standards currently do allow for intellectual diversity, free of ideological, political and cultural prejudices. The independent sector values the freedom this gives schools to develop materials, select appropriate pedagogy and devise assessments which best meet the needs of each child.
5. The sector is not aware that these prejudices exist to any large extent in programs that are offered currently. However, the sector would be concerned if this situation was to change, particularly as these may affect the ability of schools to provide for their students.
6. Similarly, the sector is not aware that these prejudices exist in relation to individual teachers. Rather we argue strongly that intellectual prejudice and intolerance is antithetical to the values of independent schools and that diversity is central to its success.
7. The very nature of the sector ensures its commitment to intellectual diversity with member schools including the larger and smaller Christian denominations; non Christian religious schools; secular schools; schools with varying interpretations of mainstream school education; schools which promote a particular philosophy of education such as Montessori or Steiner schools; and other schools such as Indigenous community schools, schools that cater for students with disability or co-operative schools, catering for particular community groups.

8. This diversity is only able to exist because of the current academic freedom allowed *to* school education and the freedom *from* ideological, political and cultural prejudice. In a dynamic democracy such freedoms should be the right of all citizens, provided, of course, they exist in the context of high standards in the content of the curriculum, the conduct of teaching professionals and student assessments.
9. The Independent sector views with concern two recent directions in education which mitigate academic freedom. The first of these is the trend in school education to link funding to outcomes and testing.
10. Current and persuasive research (Leithwood et al, 2002)¹ strongly warns of the unintended consequences for students of such regulation, which may include, ‘minimising their individual differences, narrowing curriculum to which they are exposed, diverting enormous amounts from instruction to test preparation, and negatively influencing schools’ willingness to accept students with weak academic records.’ Leithwood also points out ‘there is a risk that honest self-evaluation essential to improvement can create problems for bodies that are publicly accountable and cannot admit to failure’. The temptation then, as has happened in the USA, is to push low-scoring students into special education, hold them back a grade or encourage them to drop-out of school altogether (Darling-Hammond, 2003)².
11. The second concern relates to the impact of the increasing focus in education on preparation for employment. It is the sector’s contention that employment readiness is only one purpose of education, albeit an important one.
12. The current educational environment is leading to innovation in education however excessive bureaucratic or government interference could stifle this innovation. While education providers of course need to comply with legislative requirements, outside of this there should generally be freedom from political intervention.

The need for teaching to be pluralistic, accurate, fair, balanced and contextual

13. Pluralism, accuracy, fairness, balance and context in teaching are supported and practiced in Independent schools. It is important in developing informed citizens that young people are challenged by the presentation of information which may oppose their own view of the world and that they are given the opportunity, on the basis of well-researched, factual data, to make up their own minds about an issue. Most effective educators subscribe to this view. In particular, teacher professionalism demands that teaching meets all of these criteria.
14. The Independent sector supports high standards in the content of the curricula and course materials, and the conduct of teaching professionals and student assessments; however legislative restraints which impose an overly-prescriptive curriculum, pedagogy or assessment regime are seen as counter productive. To a large extent what is taught and how it is taught should be the province of highly trained, professional teachers who are best placed to determine the needs of individual students and to act in their interests.

¹ Leithwood, K., Jantzi, D., & Steinbach, R. (2002), *School Leadership and the New Right*, in K. Leithwood, P. Hallinger, G. Furman, P. Gronn, J. MacBeath, B. Mulford, & K Riley, (eds), Second International Handbook of Educational Leadership and Administration, Norwell, MA: Kluwer

² Darling-Hammond, L., (2003), *Standards and Assessments: Where we are and What we Need*, Stanford University, Teachers College Record, ID No. 11109, www.tcrecord.org

Ways of protecting intellectual diversity and freedom

15. It is a basic tenet of the independent sector that schools be free to develop their own curricula, course materials, assessments, teacher appraisal programs and codes of conduct to meet the diverse needs of their students and communities.
16. In order to do this, ISCA recommends that:
 - i. State and Territory Education Acts should legislatively protect the right of schools to determine the above, provided they meet pre-determined and published standards which are neither prescriptive or exclusive;
 - ii. curriculum boards at national and state/territory levels should ensure that there is flexible provision at all levels of education to allow schools to make decisions about what is best for their students;
 - iii. the regulation of education and care services should establish minimum, aspirational standards that all schools can work towards, but which do not lead to standardisation.

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