

REPORT SUMMARY

THE
NEW ZEALAND
INITIATIVE

Unpopular Opinion

Academic Freedom in New Zealand

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Academic freedom is crucial to the success of our universities, allowing ideas to be advanced and contested. A subset of our freedom of expression, it is also protected in the Education and Training Act, where it is defined partly as the freedom to 'state controversial and unpopular opinions.' New Zealand has a proud legacy of protecting academic freedom, serving as a safe haven for Sir Karl Popper while he was writing his famous *The Open Society and its Enemies* during the Second World War.

Despite this, academic freedom is now under threat in New Zealand, as it is across the English-speaking world. This report reveals how serious the problem has become in this country by drawing on three types of evidence:

- 1) 72 anonymous testimonies from academics;
- 2) 5 surveys of students and academics;
- 3) 21 incidents involving academic freedom that have occurred in the last decade.

This evidence showed:

- Across a range of topics, between 20% and 40% of students, and between 20% and 50% of academics, reported feeling uncomfortable or unfree discussing controversial topics;
- Across two different surveys between 45% and 53% of academics reported feeling uncomfortable or unfree questioning received wisdom, raising differing perspectives, or stating controversial or unpopular opinions;

- Many academics are afraid they would be disciplined, overlooked for promotion, or even sacked if they expressed their views;
- A variety of different academic freedom incidents have occurred in recent years including speakers being deplatformed, events being cancelled, and academics being investigated for their views;
- Most of our academic freedom incidents involved mainstream views on topics of widespread public interest, such as Treaty issues and the nature of sex and gender, rather than extreme or fringe opinions;
- Contrary to the idea that free speech has always been under threat at universities, the number of academic freedom incidents seems to have risen sharply in recent years, in New Zealand as in the rest of the English-speaking world.

The evidence points to three main threats to academic freedom in New Zealand:

1. Radical progressivism within universities

- In New Zealand, as in other English-speaking countries, right-wing academics and students are less comfortable expressing their views, discussing controversial topics, and challenging consensus than their left-wing peers.

- In New Zealand, as in other English-speaking countries, this likely reflects a political imbalance on campus, with left-wingers being substantially more numerous than right-wingers.
- The Treaty of Waitangi is the issue that academics are most afraid to discuss, with several saying that a radical progressive interpretation adopted by administrators was not up for discussion.
- The issue that academics were next most uncomfortable discussing was sex and gender, with events organised to discuss the topic at Massey and Auckland University of Technology (AUT) being cancelled after activist pressure.
- Post-modernism, which sees speech as power and emphasises the harm speech can cause, has a strong presence in New Zealand academia, especially the Humanities and Education.
- An excessive focus on safety, even from words and ideas, has played a role in several academic freedom incidents over the past few years.

2. China and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

- International research has raised questions about CCP influence on several Chinese academic programmes that New Zealand universities have engaged with, including the Thousand Talents Plan and Confucius Institutes.
- New Zealand universities are heavily dependent on China financially, with the second highest number of international students per capita in the world, 36% of whom are Chinese.
- Between 2018 and 2020, several incidents occurred which underline the threat that the CCP poses to academic freedom here, including the cancellation of an event at AUT commemorating the Tiananmen Square massacre.

3. Managerialism and the 'neo-liberal' university

- Several academics said they live in fear of students complaining about something they've said, and that universities cared more about protecting their brands than academic freedom.
- Senior administrators have played a key role in several academic freedom incidents in recent years, including in cancelling events.
- Some administrators seem to think that they need to placate student activists and clamp down on internal dissent in order to protect their university's brand.

The report concludes with the following recommendations:

- There should be an annual audit of academic freedom at each university which includes a survey of students (including post-graduates) and academics;
- Universities should continue to collaborate with China, but divest or review CCP-linked programmes;
- University administrators should receive training about their obligations to uphold academic freedom under the Education Act;
- This should include reminders that these obligations trump ideas about ordinary speech producing 'harm' or threatening student 'safety.'

Implementing these recommendations may be challenging. But they also represent an opportunity for New Zealand to once again be a beacon of the open society, providing a safe haven for leading thinkers who dare to express unpopular opinions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr James Kierstead is a Senior Fellow at The New Zealand Initiative, where his work focusses on universities, free speech, and democracy. Born in Canada, he earned a BA in classics at Oxford and a Master's in ancient history in London before moving to Stanford, where he earned another MA in political science and completed his PhD in classics in 2013. That year he also moved to Wellington to take up a position as a Lecturer (later Senior Lecturer) in Classics at Victoria University. In 2022, he began working at The New Zealand Initiative, publishing his first report *Blessing or Bloat? Non-Academic Staffing at New Zealand Universities in Comparative Perspective* (co-authored with Michael Johnston) in August last year, a few months after which his role at Victoria University was disestablished. Besides his academic publications on ancient and modern democracy, he has published pieces in *The Dominion Post*, *The Spinoff*, *The New Zealand Herald*, *The Australian*, *The Spectator Australia*, *Quillette*, *Quadrant*, *Times Higher Education*, *Chronicle of Higher Education* and other outlets. He is also the co-host with Michael Johnston of the Free Kiwis! podcast, which aims to establish liberalism in New Zealand.