

Danger zone for unis under siege

AUSTRALIAN academics routinely complain about parking, salaries and increasing workloads.

Elsewhere in the world, there are more pressing concerns, such as censorship and arrest without trial.

In Malawi, for example, all sorts of works have been banned, including Marxist books, plays by prominent African writers and books by authors such as Simone de Beauvoir, George Orwell and Ernest Hemingway.

At the University of Bophuthatswana in South Africa, a 1993 Act of parliament "gave the minister of education the power to change the conditions of staff at the university at will, to implement disciplinary proceedings against staff, and to close the university at his discretion".

In post-revolutionary Iran, anti-government students who wanted readmission to university had to undergo political screening which included providing information about political activities and speaking about the need to protect the Islamic regime, all carried out in a notorious prison.

In Sudan, "Dr Farouq Mohammad Ibrahim was brutally tortured in one of the secret ghost houses in Khartoum simply for teaching the Darwinian theory as part of his biology course in the faculty of science at Khartoum University".

In Peru, academics have been assassinated by the Shining Path and campuses occupied by government troops who have "opened fire at the minimal disturbance".

These examples are from *Academic Freedom 3*, the third volume of studies of education and human rights produced under the auspices of the World University Service, an international non-government organisation which also produces an occasional bulletin on the same theme.

There are chapters on a dozen specific countries around the

Academic Freedom 3, Education and Human Rights

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Reviewed by
BRIAN MARTIN

world, from Haiti to Sri Lanka, plus some more general chapters.

The overall picture is gloomy indeed. Most countries in the world have ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and hence made commitments in regard to education under Article 13. Yet in numerous cases, performance is appallingly short of promise.

One insight from this book is that human rights in higher education in any given country cannot be separated from the state of the education system generally nor from fundamental features of the social and political system. Deep cleavages in ethnicity, gender, religion and class are reflected in the university sector.

MILITARY dictatorships, often imposing rule by a particular ethnic or religious group, are threatened by intellectual independence. Academics and students who are in the wrong group, plus those who dissent in any way, are targeted by opponents.

Techniques used include censorship of teaching and research, dismissals, funding restrictions, police raids, forced closings, imprisonment, torture and murder.

Many of the chapters in *Academic Freedom 3* provide a convenient summary of the local political economy, an understanding of which is necessary to grasp the significance of what is happening to higher education.

A lesser but important theme in the book is the importance of universities in the struggle for human rights. In Burma, China and elsewhere, students have played leading roles in challenging authoritarian governments.

In Kosovo, Palestine and Tibet, the ruling powers have sought to squash student and staff activities that might give support for autonomy. When official institutions are closed down, classes have been run on a voluntary basis in people's homes, and even these activities have been fiercely attacked by the rulers.

The most serious problems in education are found in the most oppressive States, but elsewhere there is no cause for complacency.

The chapter on the United States shows that universal access to higher education is being threatened by budget cuts and that racism on campus seems to be increasing.

One limitation of the book is the unremitting focus on problems, including spectacular cases of assaults on academic freedom, with little insight into strategies for changing the situation. Improvements in the university sector seem to stem from large-scale political changes, such as transition from dictatorship to parliamentary democracy.

The role of dissident academics and students in such changes, though undoubtedly helpful, is not fully clear. Australian academics certainly could do more to help, not only by defending academic freedom at home but by undertaking research and taking action that directly helps overseas universities under siege.

The World University Service is doing a great job in linking concerned scholars. Perhaps it is time that a branch in Australia became a significant force.

Dr Brian Martin teaches in the department of science and technology studies at the University of Wollongong.