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Opinion: Free speech is not under threat at universities

OPINION: Paul Moon's open letter calling for the defence of freedom of speech on university campuses appears, in part, to take a jab at the Auckland University Students' Association (AUSA). After all, we did end up centre stage, representing the myriad of student concerns during the recent incident involving the Auckland University European Students Association (AUESA).

Reading Professor Moon's letter it is clear this issue needs to be revisited calmly and needs to go beyond five-second soundbites.

In my six years as a student at the University of Auckland, I have never experienced an impingement of free speech. Social and moral conflicts, such as our recent debate on white supremacy vs. 'European pride', arise regularly at the university.

However, the student community self regulates. AUSA maintains a constitutional structure that facilitates discussion, and rejects violence.

An issue arises, we debate it, and we settle on an outcome. Whatever happens, students have always rejected hatred and discrimination, and they have always rejected those who resort to violence.

The case of the European Students Association was no different. Why did this attract such significant media attention where other situations didn't? Because of who is in the White House. The threat of white supremacy and the alt-right is the dominant narrative around the world at the moment, meaning attention instantly fixed on a possible eruption of it in New Zealand.

This in turn led to a distortion of what was actually taking place on our campus.

Let's revisit the facts for a moment. Students approached AUSA with concerns about a club that exhibited iconography and rhetoric suggestive of an ultra-nationalist, white supremacist or white pride movement. AUSA voiced concerns to the university that this club was being legitimised during Orientation Week, despite not passing through the student-run affiliation processes.

At this point various news organisations picked up on it and the entire thing blew up. Throughout this, AUSA was repeatedly stressing two key messages: that students would not accept or affiliate a white supremacist group, and that if the European Students Association felt that they had been misrepresented then they should come forward and engage in open discussion about their aims and values with the student body.

This is key. At no point did AUSA or the student community attempt to repress the group's right to free speech. As a healthy and academic debate on the issues was raging, the European Students Association retained their full constitutional right to appear at the AUSA Student Forum to affiliate into the student community.

AUESA have said that their reason for disbanding was because the group's president received threats of physical violence. This is appalling, and I sympathise because ever since that day I have also received similar threats and abuse through text, phone calls, emails, Facebook messages, and approaches on the street.

Anyone who considers physical violence and aggression as a way to solve an academic discussion is not welcome in our student community.

However, threats towards AUESA were not sanctioned by the university, by AUSA or by the vast majority of students. They came from a small and hateful minority. I assume that Professor Moon does not think that AUSA should be policing the voices of all 43,000 students at this university, and therefore pose the question – how is the University of Auckland repressing free speech when the silencing of the group was caused by a select few hateful students?

The media attention to this complex issue created a narrative of AUSA and the university forcefully pressuring AUESA to stand down. This is simply not true. All democratic and constitutional processes remained (and remain) open to AUESA, while at the same time the student community made it clear that if their concerns were confirmed, then the group would not be welcomed. In this, the student body exercised the same right to free speech that AUESA was entitled to.

Professor Moon is correct when he says that there is no inalienable right to not be offended. However, when we are offended we do have the right to speak out against what has offended us. That is how democracy works.

There is a difference between vigorous opposition to an issue and repression of free speech. The right to free speech is alive and well and in full use at our universities. I hope that Professor Moon and the signatories of his letter can understand this.

Will Matthews is president of the Auckland University Students' Association.

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