



Inquiry into annual and financial reports 2024–2025

Answer to question on notice

Asked by: Ms Chiaka Barry MLA

Addressed to: Vice Chancellor - Bill Shorten

Redirected to: N/A

Reference: University of Canberra

Hearing: 13 November 2025

In relation to: Free Academic debate

Question received: 19 November 2025

Answer Due: 02 December 2025

There has been a lot of change affecting students and staff at UC over the last few years, we have heard concerns about one of the consequences has been fear for the freedom of academic debate.

(1) Are you aware of these concerns, if so how do you respond to them?

(2) What proactive measures are you putting in place to ensure a culture of fear does not continue to impact the quality of debate at UC?

(3) Are there any circumstances in which a staff member or a student could face adverse consequences from expressing disapproval of your policies or management of the University?

Vice Chancellor - Bill Shorten: The answer to the Member's question is as follows:

Thank you for raising these important matters. The University of Canberra is committed to fostering an environment where academic freedom of expression and respectful debate are fundamental principles.

(1) No, I am not aware of specific concerns that have been raised in respect to fear for the freedom of academic debate. Universities should be a safe space for disagreement; I want the University of Canberra and all universities in Australia to be places of academic debate where evidence is respected, and I have made that clear in the way I lead the organisation.

(2) I dispute the assertion that there is a culture of fear at the University of Canberra. The University of Canberra has the following proactive measures in place to ensure academic freedom of expression:

- Outlining staff rights to Academic Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Speech in the University of Canberra Enterprise Agreement 2023-2026. This explicitly protects the right to express lawful opinions and engage in robust academic debates.
- Regular staff engagement through all-staff town halls and staff forums. The University of Canberra had 6 all-staff town halls in 2025.
- Commitment by the University executive leadership, to supporting the right to academic freedom of expression and freedom of speech. Vice-Chancellor & President, Professor the Hon. Bill Shorten has publicly committed to this.
- [‘People are not stupid or bogans ... it’s us, Shorten tells unis’](#) – Australian Financial Review
- [‘University ‘echo chambers’ condemned by vice-chancellor Bill Shorten’](#) – The Australian

(3) No. Staff and students will not face adverse consequences for expressing lawful, respectful disagreement with University policies or management decisions. Constructive criticism is essential to a healthy academic environment. The only limitations apply where conduct breaches legal obligations, University codes of conduct, or creates harm to others.

Approved for circulation to the Standing Committee on Social Policy

Signature:



Date: 5 March 2026

By the Vice Chancellor – Professor the Honourable Bill Shorten, University of Canberra