

PLENARY – Racism

Speaker 3 – Geoff Capelin, UNSW

Start with a racial stereotype that came from the university bureaucracy when trying to negotiate a fee waiver for an international student: “All people from Asia are always trying to do this. Particularly the Indians.”

Example of good leadership on racism: 1998 Waterfront Dispute
During the picket there were some picketers who sighted scabs and attacked them with racial vilification. Union officials immediately and loudly and publicly explained why this behaviour was inappropriate.

Why?

The Newcastle situation developed because small incidences were not addressed and built up. The federal government has created a conducive environment.

What kind of responses should we be demanding from the Universities and ourselves?

In the University of Newcastle experience, the Student Union reacted but the University did not. There was apparently no understanding of the difference between free speech and racial vilification.

First step

- Demand all Universities commit to anti-racism campaigns addressing stereotyping and myths
- Strong policy is needed
- Other?

Questions and debate

Racism does not only affect international students, but also NESB students and indigenous students.

Discussion about who should lead. There was concern expressed that if the Universities and AVCC ran with it then the message might become “don’t beat up international students, you’ll endanger our market share.” This is political and the student movement should needs to drive it. This was widely agreed upon. Geoff clarified that the universities’ roles would be in consultation with union campaigns. Maybe student unions could present Universities with a log of claims.

Concerns raised about the ‘freedom of speech’ angle that the University of Newcastle took.

Universities do have Equal Opportunity units and so on but it would appear that more needs to be done. Universities can be called on to invest more resources in anti-racism initiatives.

As a flow on from this conference, RESSOs could take this topic back to their organizations and discuss with student representatives.