AN OPEN LETTER TO THE VICE CHANCELLORS OF AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

from academics, staff and students

31 October 2014

Dear Vice Chancellors,

Following the ongoing investigation of allegations against Professor Barry Spurr at the University of Sydney, we are writing to express our concern about broader issues of implementing anti-discrimination policies in Australian universities, with a particular focus on race and gender.

That there is still a public debate triggered by the reported offensive language used in Professor Spurr’s emails is testament that much more needs to be done about educating and fostering respect for gender equality, multiculturalism, and Australia’s Aboriginal and Indigenous heritage.

There is opportunity now for Australian universities to be proactive and reflect on their anti-discrimination policies to ensure that they promote the values of equality and justice. This means much more than noble sentiments in the guidelines or on the website, but a review process to ensure that procedures and policies are put into practice and outcomes reviewed. It means that engagement with these policies should occur at recruitment, induction, ongoing training, professional development and performance reviews, and should be considered to be a promotion threshold. For example, in university performance and job interviews, there is a tendency to ask if people are aware of the university’s anti-discrimination policies, but what is needed is a question about what people have been doing to advance these policies. With complaints such as bullying and harassment, there should be a parallel procedure set in place, as a safeguard against possible failure by the university to act on complaints. Another area to be addressed is universities’ response towards sexual harassment and assault cases often involving students. There is a culture of treating sexual harassment and assault (for example, that take place within student accommodation) as an internal administrative issue. However, sexual assault is a criminal offence, and those who experience assault must be fully supported to take whatever measures they deem appropriate, including referral to the police.

In the case of racist, sexist, homophobic and other anti-social language and beliefs, it is vital for universities to be proactive and change the culture which facilitates and encourages such beliefs and behaviour. The senior staff have a particular role in showing or providing leadership in modelling ethical practice and taking action when they see bad behaviour. In the case of Professor Spurr, the accusation of repeated sending of emails containing alleged racist, sexist and in some cases classist language and imagery (using a university email account) to a number of recipients over the years, when he is a senior academic whose job is to educate and help students, if true, would seem to demonstrate a failure in both leadership and ethical behaviour. We have no way of knowing whether
complaints were previously made about Professor Spurr in the past and the University failed to take action. We do know, however, that in many Australian universities, complaints of harassment, bullying and vilification have often not been taken seriously, or victims of such behaviour have not spoken up because of fear of retaliation.

We are a group of academics, students, and professional staff in both Australia and overseas universities. Our roles and identities are diverse, but we are writing because we are concerned about the current political climate of increased disregard for matters of diversity and equality, and how this is having a detrimental impact upon tertiary institutions, staff and students across the country. The current investigation of Professor Spurr by the University of Sydney must take its course, but universities more broadly must become more proactive in the future, to address such behaviours not as an individual but as a systemic problem. We would like to see Australian universities – starting with Vice Chancellors – demonstrate greater political will and ethical obligation towards protecting their staff and students.

Yours sincerely,

Signatories (in alphabetical order by first name):

- Adele Turnbull, Student, University of Sydney
- Alexander Brown, PhD Candidate/Tutor, University of Wollongong
- Professor Alison Bartlett, University of Western Australia
- Antoinette Abboud, University of Sydney
- Dr. Asmi Wood, Australian National University
- Athisia Muir
- Barbara Karpinski, PhD Candidate, University of Technology
- Barbary Cotton Clarke, Monash University
- Dr. Barry Hodges, University of Newcastle
- Bethany Phillips-Peddlesden, University of Melbourne
- Brenda Moon, PhD Candidate, Australian National University
- Honorary Associate Professor Brian McInnes, University of Sydney
- Bryan Gaensler
- Briony Lipton, Australian National University
- Associate Professor Bronwyn Winter, University of Sydney
- Dr. Camille Nurka
- Professor Carole Ferrier, University of Queensland
- Dr. Caroline Norma, RMIT University
• Dr Caroline Webb, University of Newcastle
• Dr. Cecilia Leong-Salobir, University of Wollongong
• Dr. Celeste Rodriguez Louro, University of Western Australia
• Professor Emerita Chilla Bulbeck, University of Adelaide; Co-secretary Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan
• Corinne Walsh, National Centre for Indigenous Studies, Australian National University
• Dr. David Bray, University of Sydney
• Dr. Davide Burlon, University of Sydney
• Dr. Davinia Thornley, University of Otago
• Ed Wensing, PhD Candidate, Australian National University
• Elena Jeffreys, Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland
• Emily Bullock, University of Tasmania
• Dr. Erica Millar, University of Melbourne
• Dr. Eriita Jones
• Eromanga Adermann, PhD Candidate, School of Physics, University of Sydney
• Dr. Fiona Jenkins, Australian National University
• Dr. Fleur Adcock, Australian National University
• Professor Francesca Merlan, Australian National University
• Dr. George Shan, University of Sydney
• Dr. Gillian Hewitson, University of Sydney
• Hannah McCann, PhD Candidate, Australian National University
• Helen King, PhD Candidate, Australian National University
• Dr. Henk Huijser, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education
• Dr. Janet Hunt, Australian National University
• Dr. Jess Drake, Monash University
• Jessica Rogers, PhD Candidate, PARSA Equity Officer, Australian National University
• Jessie Czaban, Associate lecturer, University of Sydney
• Dr. James Allen, University of Sydney
• James Stevenson
• Jarrad Cogle, PhD Candidate, University of Sydney
• Jasmine Symons, PhD Candidate, University of South Australia
• Dr. Jie-Lian Beh
• Jill Martin, Student, La Trobe University
• Associate Professor John Evans, University of Sydney
• Associate Professor John O’Bryne, University of Sydney
• Joyce Noronha-Barrett
• Joyce Wu, PhD Candidate, Australian National University
• Kate Proud, Student, Australian National University
• Dr. Katerina Teaiwa, Australian National University
• Dr. Katherine Lepani Australian National University
• Dr. Katrina Lee-Koo, Australian National University
• Kelsie Prabawa-Sear, PhD Candidate, University of Western Australia
• Kristine McIntyre, PhD Candidate, University of the Sunshine Coast
• Associate Professor Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, Australian National University
• Kirsty McLaren, Australian National University
• Dr. Laura Beth Bugg, University of Sydney
• Dr. Laura Dales, University of Western Australia
• Dr. Leticia Anderson, University of Sydney
• Dr. Lindy Orthia, Australian National University
• Dr. Lisa Fogarty, University of Sydney
• Liz Mackinlay
• Dr. Lola Hill, PhD Candidate, University of Melbourne
• Dr. Lorene Gottschalk, Federation University
• Louis Bizin
• Lydia Saleh Rofail, PhD Candidate (English), University of Sydney
• Lyn Dickens, PhD Candidate and Staff, University of Sydney
• Professor Lyn Parker, University of Western Australia
• Professor Lyndall Ryan, University of Newcastle
• Professor Emerita Margaret Allen, University of Adelaide
• Professor Margaret Jolly, Australian National University
• Dr. Margaret Mayhew
• Professor Margaret Thornton, Australian National University
• Dr. Maria Cunningham, University of New South Wales
• Maria Davidenko, PhD Candidate, La Trobe University
• Dr. Maria Giannacopoulos, Flinders University
• Dr. Maria Elena Indelicato, Department of Gender and Cultural Studies, University of Sydney
• Marita Bullock
• Dr. Maryanne Large
• Associate Professor Maryrose Casey, Monash University
• Dr. Megan Mackenzie, University of Sydney
• Dr. Melissa Lovell, National Centre for Indigenous Studies (NCIS) Australian National University
• Dr. Michael J. I. Brown, Monash University
• Dr Michelle Burgis-Kasthala, Australian National University
• Michelle Rooney, Australian National University
• Professor Mick Dodson, AM, Australian National University
• Dr Natalie Kon-yu, Victoria University
• Natasha Shahidullah, University of Canberra
• Dr. Nick Cheesman, Australian National University
• Dr. Pam Papadelos, University of Adelaide
• Dr. Patrick Kilby, Australian National University
• Dr. Penelope Marshall, Australian National University
• Professor Peter Jackson, Australian National University
• Dr. Rachel Morgain, Australian National University
• Dr. Rebecca Monson, Australian National University
• Associate Professor Renate Klein (retired), Deakin University, Melbourne
• Professor Richard Hunstead, University of Sydney
• Dr. Robert O’Donoghue, WEHI and University of Melbourne
• Dr Robin Tennant-Wood, University of Canberra
• Dr. Rosemary Mardling, Monash University
• Dr. Rosemary Overell, University of Otago
• Dr. Ruth Barraclough, Australian National University
• Dr. Sally Sargeson, Australian National University
• Dr. Sally White, Australian National University
• Dr. Sango Mahanty, Australian National University
• Dr. Shakira Hussein, University of Melbourne
• Dr. Shameem Black, Australia National University
• Sophie Robinson, PhD Candidate, University of New South Wales
• Professor Dr. Shirley Randell, AO
• Siobhan McDonnell
• Dr. Stephen Kerry, Charles Darwin University
• Adjunct Professor Susan Hawthorne, James Cook University
• Professor Suzanne D. Rutland, OAM, Department of Hebrew, Biblical & Jewish Studies, University of Sydney
• Tamai Heaton, National Centre for Indigenous Studies, Australian National University
• Dr. Tamara Jacka, Australian National University
• Tamika Sharrad, University of South Australia
• Theo Hughes, Monash University
• Timothy Kazuo Steains, PhD Candidate, Gender and Cultural Studies Department, University of Sydney
• Tom Gordon, School of Physics, University of Sydney
• Dr. Will J. Grant, Australian National University
• Yvonne Clarke, PhD Candidate, lecturer and Indigenous psychologist, University of Adelaide
• Associate Professor Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes, Flinders University

Please forward responses and queries to: openlettervcs@gmail.com