

Professor Gerd Schröder-Turk, School of Mathematics, Statistics, Chemistry and Physics
Professor Jürgen Bröhmer, School of Law
Murdoch University
90 South St, 6150 Murdoch, Western Australia

Open Letter¹

to:

Professor Mark Scott AO, President and Vice-Chancellor Sydney University
Ms Belinda Hutchinson AC, Chancellor, Sydney University

cc:

The Hon John Hatzistergos AM, Chief Commissioner, NSW ICAC
Prof Manuel Graeber, Sydney
Dr Alison Barnes, President National Tertiary Education Union

22 November 2023

Dear Ms Hutchinson and Prof Scott,

Public interest concerning the reported termination of Prof Manuel Graeber

We express our concern about the lack of publicly available information concerning the termination of Professor Manuel Graeber's employment at the University of Sydney.

Any disputed involuntary termination of a senior academic for code of conduct infringements carries with it at least a risk of a perception of a miscarriage of process or practice if it is not communicated to the stakeholders and interested public why such an extreme course of action is warranted. We are not aware of any such communication regarding Professor Graeber's termination.

Codes of conduct and related policies are essential instruments that ensure appropriate professional conduct and behaviour. No university community members – including professors or whistleblowers – are beyond these rules. University management has the right, if not the duty, to take proportionate measures when a transparent and sound process has substantiated that staff have violated these codes in profound or malicious ways.

Statements published by Prof Graeber or his supporters express a view that his termination was victimisation for his whistleblowing and “seeming retribution by management for him fulfilling his ... public responsibilities via his public disclosures”².

The public comments by the spokesperson for Sydney University suggest that, indeed, a violation of the code of conduct has been a reason for Prof Graeber's termination. Referencing Sydney University's "privacy obligations", the statement neither refutes nor confirms Prof Graeber's version

1 This version of the letter is for publication, with email addresses and signatures removed. Please refer to Murdoch University's staff directory for our contact details.

2 Quote extracted from The Australian, Sacked Sydney Uni professor Manuel Graeber vows to fight, by Tim Dodd, 7 Nov 2023.

of events. It does not substantiate its assurance that the University would not act against a staff member for expressing their opinions.³

Hiding behind privacy considerations is not good enough to dispel plausible suspicions of abuse of power.

In our view, there is a substantial public interest case for establishing the facts of the matter. Professor Graeber's public interest disclosures, the corrosive effect that even a perception of victimisation has on public confidence in Australia's university sector and the chilling effect this course of action will have on the willingness and ability of University members to speak up require that the necessity of such a drastic step must be established publicly and in a convincing fashion.

We call on Professor Graeber and the Sydney University Senior Leadership to either jointly publish a mutually agreed description of the events and reasons that led to Professor Graeber's reported termination or, for example by releasing each other from any privacy or confidentiality obligation, to enable both parties to publish their view of the events and reasons in full.

Finally, noting the imbalance in financial means of a multi-billion-dollar institution and an individual, we call on Sydney University and the National Tertiary Education Union to provide Prof Graeber with the financial means to secure legal advice and adequate representation to ensure that his lawful rights were not violated by Sydney University's termination action.

As stated above, no member of the University is beyond the applicable laws and rules. That is also true for university management. Given management's power, the onus of removing any doubt about potential abuse lies with management. We call on Sydney University's management and Senate to provide convincing evidence for taking this drastic action against Professor Graeber.

In closing, we declare our membership of the Australian Association of University Professors. This letter was written in our roles as academics within the Australian university sector. We are not suggesting that the views expressed here are those held by Murdoch University, its Senate, or any other group or institution that we are members of.

We thank you for your consideration and look forward to your response.

Kind Regards,

Gerd E Schröder-Turk and Jürgen Bröhmer

3 <https://honisoit.com/2023/11/usyd-professor-terminated-for-whistleblowing/>