

香港浸會大學教職員工會  
**Hong Kong Baptist University Faculty and Staff Union**

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Newsletter (120)

**HKBU Policy Undermines the Foundation of Academic Freedom**

January 5, 2006

Dear Colleagues

HKBU has undermined academic freedom, the highest principle of university education, by threatening to terminate faculty members who have refused to “consent” to the New Pay and Reward Structure (“NPRS”), a scheme that decreases employee benefits and changes the way employee evaluations are conducted in the future.

On 18 May 2005, Mrs. Karen Chan, Director of Personnel at HKBU, wrote to staff members asking them to consent to the NPRS. The majority signed the consent form, but a small number exercised their contractual right not to change over to the new scheme. Many, if not all, of these teachers refused to sign the consent form because they believed the whole exercise could significantly weaken academic freedom at HKBU.

Academic freedom is the principle distinguishing universities from businesses, private clubs and all other government organizations. The foundation of academic freedom is the “tenure” system, whereby university teachers and researchers who have reached a basic level of accomplishment can feel free to say or publish anything they believe is consistent with their observations, without having to worry about job security. This freedom includes the ability to speak out against one’s own university administration.

HKBU’s tenure system, known as “superannuation,” is a permanent contract that protects teachers from being terminated merely for not “joining the crowd,” as long as they continue to fulfill their duties in a responsible manner. Clause 18.3 of such contracts states that no proposed change in a teacher’s benefits “shall come into effect unless and until the appointee has given his consent thereto in writing.” This is the heart of academic freedom: HKBU cannot change the contract terms without the appointee’s consent.

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On 30 December 2005, with no prior warning from the University, the staff members who had not yet “consented” to the NPRS were sent letters informing them that, if they do not sign the consent form by 7 January 2006, they will have their contracts terminated. Although a new contract would be offered, this contract will not only force them to join the NPRS, but will also take away several other benefits they currently enjoy.

The University’s tactics in attempting to obtain 100% compliance with the NPRS have been deceptive, and may be illegal as well. More importantly, they undermine the very basis of university education: academic freedom. Do we as an academic community wish to tolerate such tactics? Although the “non-consenters” are few, they include a chair professor and their collective service to HKBU amounts to over 100 years. These teachers are not disgruntled trouble-makers but are some of HKBU’s finest educators, yet they now face the threat of being fired and offered a new contract with far inferior terms.

The Union publicizes these facts out of deep concern for the implications this threat has on the institution of academic freedom. Is it right for tenured staff members to be given a “choice,” only to be told later that those who did not make the right “choice” would be fired? If those who signed the consent form had known that this was, in fact, a forced choice from the very beginning, and therefore not a real choice at all, would they still have submitted with their signatures to such blatant coercion?

The University has determined to fire non-consenters at all costs. The only question now is whether the majority will stand up and let their voices be heard in defending the frontline of academic freedom.

Yours sincerely,

The Executive Committee  
HKBU Faculty & Staff Union