

The Senate

Education and Employment
Legislation Committee

Quality of governance at Australian higher
education providers – final report

December 2025

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Contents

Members	iii
Terms of reference	ix
List of recommendations	xi
Chapter 1 – Introduction	1
Referral during the 47th Parliament	1
Conduct of the committee's inquiry	2
Acknowledgements and references	2
Terminology	2
Scope of this report	2
Interim report	3
Expert Council on University Governance	5
Education Ministers Meeting – October 2025	7
Chapter 2 – Corporatisation of Australia's universities	9
Corporatisation and the purpose of Australian universities	12
Higher education policy settings and university corporatisation.....	16
Changes to higher education policy settings	16
Changes in university funding	19
Consultants and the corporatisation of Australian universities.....	26
University expenditure on consultants.....	26
Universities growing reliance on consultants	33
The influence of consultants within university councils.....	35
Suggested actions to address the corporatisation of Australian universities.....	38
Clarify the role and purpose of Australia's public universities	39
The university funding model	41
A national approach to managing student loads and fluctuations in demand for university places	44
Chapter 3 – Academic influence in universities	47
Decline of collegial governance models.....	47
Academic autonomy.....	54
Effects of reduced academic autonomy on workloads.....	56

Academic freedom.....	57
Suggested actions to address the disconnect	60
Chapter 4—University employment practices.....	63
University governance and workplace law compliance	68
Insecure work in Australian universities.....	70
Rates of casual employment at Australian universities	71
High rates of casualisation contribute to non-compliance with workplace laws	74
Some universities are actively working to reduce casualisation.....	76
The treatment of casual employees at Australian universities.....	78
Underpayment of casual staff.....	78
Approaches to casual conversion in the higher education sector.....	84
Impacts of insecure employment on staff wellbeing	87
Suggested actions to improve university employment practices	89
Chapter 5—Education quality and the student experience.....	93
Declining quality standards and reputational risks	95
Factors influencing quality of education at Australian universities.....	98
The impact of increased workforce casualisation	98
The impact of increased class sizes	101
The impact of changing student cohorts	103
The impact of academic misconduct.....	105
Suggested actions to address concerns about the quality of education at Australian universities.....	107
Strengthen TEQSA's basic principles of regulation	107
Establish minimum standards for staff qualifications, staff to student ratios and 'live' contact hours	109
Improve the transparency and oversight of admissions processes	109
Introduce external credentialing to protect academic standards.....	110
Increase support for students.....	111
Chapter 6—Interoperability of regulation across jurisdictions	113
Legislative and regulatory framework	113
Quantity and complexity of current regulatory requirements.....	115
Suggested actions to improve the coordination of regulation.....	118
Harmonising regulatory and reporting arrangements.....	118

Improving information sharing and collaboration	120
Committee view	121
The role and purpose of universities	122
The corporatisation of universities.....	123
University funding model	124
Preservation of the collegial model of governance and academic freedom.....	125
Employment practices.....	125
Education quality.....	128
Coalition Senators' additional comments	131
Australian Greens' additional comments.....	141
Senator David Pocock's additional comments	151
Appendix 1—Public hearings and witnesses	173
Appendix 2—Submissions and additional information	179

Terms of reference

- (1) The adequacy of the powers available to the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency to perform its role in identifying and addressing corporate governance issues at Australian higher education providers, with particular reference to:
 - (a) the composition of providers' governing bodies and the transparency, accountability and effectiveness of their functions and processes, including in relation to expenditure, risk management and conflicts of interest;
 - (b) the standard and accuracy of providers' financial reporting, and the effectiveness of financial safeguards and controls;
 - (c) providers' compliance with legislative requirements, including compliance with workplace laws and regulations;
 - (d) the impact of providers' employment practices, executive remuneration, and the use of external consultants, on staff, students and the quality of higher education offered; and
 - (e) any related matters.

List of recommendations

Recommendation 1

- 6.54 The committee recommends that state and territory governments review the establishing acts of universities to ensure the primacy of public research and education in their objects and functions, and consider the composition of members on governing bodies that ensure this can be achieved.

Recommendation 2

- 6.62 The committee recommends that the duties of council members should reflect the primacy of education for the public good, and assessments of the performance of university councils should reflect their role in ensuring the primacy of public research and education as the core functions of universities.

Recommendation 3

- 6.73 The committee recommends that the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, in addition to the embedding of the Expert Council on University Governance into the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021, update its guidance to universities to support proactive adoption of key compliance, oversight and governance measures (such as the following measures agreed by the University of Melbourne in its Enforceable Undertaking with the Fair Work Ombudsman) including by:

- implementing a comprehensive enterprise resource planning system that includes a human resources and finance system, payroll system, and rostering and time-and-attendance system, and undertaking an audit of the new system following its implementation;
- embedding a worker voice mechanism, such as a standing committee comprised of representatives from the National Tertiary Education Union and university management, and a focus on corporate governance by ensuring there is centralised oversight of and accountability for wage compliance and an effective flow of information in respect of wage compliance issues from employees to executive level, and vice versa;
- establishing subcommittees of the University Council and the University Executive with an explicit focus on workplace relations compliance as well as a new centralised Employment Compliance Directorate committed to supporting a culture of compliance and continuous improvement; and
- commissioning training and education for relevant staff and providing clear internal pathways for employees to raise queries relating to their wages and entitlements.

Recommendation 4

6.82 The committee recommends that the Department of Education prioritise its work related to requirements for universities to provide improved data on the number of casual staff to increase transparency and understanding of workforce patterns and issues (including headcounts, as well as the proportion of teaching hours undertaken by casual staff).

Recommendation 5

6.84 The committee recommends that the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 be amended to require academic boards to conduct an annual review of the academic staffing profile for each course, ensuring there is sufficient academic oversight, teaching capacity and support to maintain high-quality learning and outcomes. This review should also ensure that courses with practicums or work-integrated learning have an adequate number and quality of placements with appropriate supervision. The balance of continuing and casual staff must support consistent teaching quality and reliable access to individual student assistance.

Recommendation 6

6.85 The committee recommends that the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency develop a monitoring and reporting framework for course quality and staffing, and establish an ongoing program of course monitoring to provide continued assurance of quality and appropriate staffing.

Recommendation 7

6.92 The committee recommends that the Australian Government, as part of its commitment to modernise and strengthen the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency's (TEQSA's) powers:

- introduce an explicit requirement for TEQSA to consider matters relevant to the interests of students and the preservation of Australia's reputation for quality higher education as part of its regulatory function; and
- introduce a positive duty on providers to take reasonable and proportionate actions to comply with the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021.

Recommendation 8

6.97 The committee recommends that the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency develop a statement of expectations that sets out the key considerations which academic governance processes should oversee in their internal quality assurance. This should include ratios of continuing vs casual staff, experience of teaching staff including PhD candidates and subject coordinators. It should also set out expectations of regular reporting to the governing body.

Chapter 1

Introduction

- 1.1 On 29 July 2025, under Standing Order 25(2)(a)(v), the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee (committee) agreed to re-adopt its inquiry into the quality of governance at Australian higher education providers, specifically:
- (a) The adequacy of the powers available to the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) to perform its role in identifying and addressing corporate governance issues at Australian higher education providers, with particular reference to:
 - (i) the composition of providers' governing bodies and the transparency, accountability and effectiveness of their functions and processes, including in relation to expenditure, risk management and conflicts of interest;
 - (ii) the standard and accuracy of providers' financial reporting, and the effectiveness of financial safeguards and controls;
 - (iii) providers' compliance with legislative requirements, including compliance with workplace laws and regulations;
 - (iv) the impact of providers' employment practices, executive remuneration, and the use of external consultants, on staff, students and the quality of higher education offered; and
 - (v) any related matters.
- 1.2 The committee agreed to present its report on 4 December 2025.
- 1.3 On 19 September 2025, the committee presented an interim report.

Referral during the 47th Parliament

- 1.4 The inquiry was originally self-referred on 29 January 2025, during the 47th Parliament.
- 1.5 During the 47th Parliament, the committee received 299 submissions, as well as additional information and answers to questions on notice. The committee also held one public hearing in Canberra on 12 March 2025.
- 1.6 The prorogation of the 47th Parliament on 28 March 2025 limited the committee's ability to progress the inquiry, with the inquiry lapsing at the end of the 47th Parliament.
- 1.7 On 14 April 2025, the committee presented an interim report which strongly supported re-referring the inquiry in the 48th Parliament.

Conduct of the committee's inquiry

- 1.8 Following re-adoption of the inquiry in the 48th Parliament, the committee re-advertised the inquiry on its website and invited new submissions by 28 August 2025.
- 1.9 The committee received 49 submissions, which are listed at Appendix 2 of this report. The public submissions are available on the committee's website.
- 1.10 The committee held four public hearings:
- Canberra – Tuesday, 12 August 2025;
 - Sydney – Monday, 8 September 2025;
 - Adelaide – Monday 10 November 2025; and
 - Canberra – Wednesday 12 November 2025.
- 1.11 A list of the witnesses who gave evidence at the hearings is at Appendix 1.
- 1.12 Links to hearing programs, *Hansard* transcripts of evidence, answers to questions on notice, and other additional documents published by the committee are available on the committee [website](#).

Acknowledgements and references

- 1.13 The committee thanks those individuals and organisations who contributed to the inquiry by providing written submissions and giving evidence at public hearings. In particular, the committee would like to acknowledge the individuals who shared their personal experiences, which have helped to shape the findings of this report.

Terminology

- 1.14 The committee notes that university governing bodies are referred to variously as university councils, senates, or boards. For ease of reference, the committee has chosen to use the terms university council or governing body throughout this report.

Scope of this report

- 1.15 This is the committee's final report, which focuses on the corporatisation of universities, compliance with workplace laws, academic autonomy, and the quality of education. It also looks at the interoperability of higher education regulation across Commonwealth, state and territory jurisdictions.
- 1.16 The report comprises six chapters, including this introductory chapter, which includes a summary of the committee's interim report. The remaining chapters are as follows:
- Chapter 2 – corporatisation of Australia's universities;
 - Chapter 3 – academic influence in universities;
 - Chapter 4 – university employment practices;
 - Chapter 5 – education quality and the student experience; and

- Chapter 6 – interoperability of regulation across jurisdictions.

1.17 While the committee's conclusions and recommendations are contained within the Committee View (Chapter 6), each chapter contains a summary of suggested actions to address the issues raised by participants.

Interim report

1.18 The committee's interim report focused on the accountability and transparency of decision making within universities, remuneration of vice-chancellors and other senior executives, and the appropriateness of TEQSA's powers.¹

1.19 The report comprised five chapters that looked at university governance arrangements in Australia, the accountability and transparency of university decision-making, the number of elected staff and student council members and their experiences as council members, universities' management of potential conflicts of interest, and the remuneration of senior university executives. The report also examined opportunities to strengthen TEQSA's powers, and made 12 recommendations, which are set out below.

Interim report recommendations

1.20 The interim report made the following 12 recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1** – the committee recommends that universities improve the transparency and accountability of their governing bodies, including by:
 - publishing all minutes of council meetings in their entirety, on university websites, while ensuring that personal or legally protected information is appropriately withheld;
 - publicly disclosing details of all spending on consultants, including the purpose of each consultancy and the extent to which the capacity exists to perform that function within the institution;
 - maintaining a publicly disclosed conflict-of-interest register for university council members and senior university executives. Where senior executives receive remuneration for external roles, mitigation actions to manage any perceived or real conflicts-of-interest (which could include the offsetting of salaries) should be both agreed and disclosed on the public register;
 - publishing annual remuneration reports in-line with requirements for public companies including role-specific salaries of senior university executives; and
 - publicly reporting on the composition of governing bodies, including the proportion of elected members and those with public and higher

¹ Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee, [Quality of governance at Australian higher education providers – interim report](#), September 2025.

education sector experience, and that there be transparency over the appointment process for non-elected positions.

- **Recommendation 2** – the committee recommends that TEQSA's regulatory mechanisms to enforce these transparency and accountability practices are considered alongside the current process to modernise and strengthen TEQSA's powers.
- **Recommendation 3** – the committee recommends that universities adopt best-practice and meaningful consultation for major change proposals, including involvement from staff and students prior to decisions being made.
- **Recommendation 4** – the committee recommends that the Australian Government work with the Remuneration Tribunal and states and territories to devise a mechanism or framework of classification structures and remuneration ranges to determine vice-chancellors' and senior executives' remuneration. University councils would retain responsibility for setting the vice-chancellors' and senior executives' remuneration, within the appropriate classification and remuneration range.
- **Recommendation 5** – the committee recommends that universities set and implement a minimum proportion of members with public administration and higher education expertise on university governing bodies.
- **Recommendation 6** – the committee recommends that universities set and implement a minimum proportion of elected representatives (staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students) on governing bodies.
- **Recommendation 7** – committee recommends that universities ensure equal and respectful treatment of elected staff and students on governing bodies. While university governing bodies need to retain responsibility for engaging and consulting with members of their community, including students and staff, they should support elected representatives to consult with their communities as needed.
- **Recommendation 8** – the committee recommends that universities adopt a best-practice model for the induction and continuous professional development of nominated and elected council members, and facilitate governance training for these members where appropriate.
- **Recommendation 9** – the committee recommends that the Australian Government, following the current consultation process being undertaken by the Department of Education, introduce legislation to provide TEQSA with the necessary suite of powers to investigate potential breaches of the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 and enforce its compliance directions.
- **Recommendation 10** – the committee recommends that TEQSA take steps to improve governance reporting requirements to enable it to identify and mitigate risk across the university sector, including public reporting on the results of its compliance processes.

- **Recommendation 11** – the committee recommends that TEQSA work with other regulatory bodies, Commonwealth and State, to identify common data requests relating to university governance, and to work across jurisdictions to avoid duplicative reporting requirements, where possible.
- **Recommendation 12** – the committee recommends that universities examine and enhance their complaints processes to ensure they are effective and accessible to all members of the university community.

Expert Council on University Governance

- 1.21 The Expert Council on University Governance (Expert Council) was established on 23 January 2025 to develop university governance principles and recommendations in the context of ten reform priorities agreed by education ministers, as well as Priority Action 5 of the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report.²
- 1.22 On 17 October 2025 the Expert Council presented its final report to education ministers.³ The report contained eight Principles (see Box 1.1) aimed at improving governance at Australia's public universities, as well as 'key findings, commentary and recommendations to give effect to the Principles, and to strengthen governance more broadly'. Importantly, a key finding of the Expert Council is that 'strengthening culture is key to sustainably lifting the governance performance of universities'.⁴
- 1.23 The eight Principles are intended to work with existing regulatory frameworks and to replace the voluntary University Chancellors Council Code of Governance Principles and Practice.⁵
- 1.24 The committee notes that the Principles and recommendations of the Expert Council align strongly with its own views and recommendations in both the interim and final reports.

Box 1.1 Expert Council on University Governance – eight principles⁶

Principle 1 – Accountability: governance structures and accountabilities are well-defined, effective and transparent

The governing body actively oversees the university's strategy, performance, risk management, culture and compliance consistent with its purpose and in the public interest, acting in the best interests of the

² Expert Council on University Governance, *Final Report and Principles*, p. 2.

³ Department of Education, [The Expert Council on University Governance](#) (accessed 22 October 2025).

⁴ Expert Council on University Governance, *Final Report and Principles*, p. 2.

⁵ Expert Council on University Governance, *Final Report and Principles*, p. 40.

⁶ Expert Council on University Governance, *Final Report and Principles*, pp. 41, 43, 46, 47, 64, 65 and 66.

university. The distinct roles and responsibilities of the governing body, academic body and senior management are clearly delineated, understood and respected.

Principle 2 – *Diversity of perspectives*: Composition of the governing body enables purpose and performance

The governing body collectively has the skills, knowledge, capabilities, independence of mind and diversity of perspectives to perform its role and discharge its responsibilities consistent with the university's purpose and in the public interest. The governing body is inclusive and seek continuous improvement.

Principle 3 – *Independence*: Academic standards and freedom are respected and protected

Educational and research standards are upheld and the ability of faculty and students to pursue knowledge, conduct research and express ideas without undue pressure from external political or commercial pressures is ensured.

Principle 4 – *Transparency*: Purpose, strategy and performance are clear and openly communicated

The university's purpose, strategic and short-term objectives are explicit and aligned. Governance of, and performance against, the university's purpose and objectives are transparent to stakeholders.

Principle 5 – *Trustworthy*: The university operates lawfully, ethically, responsibly, and consistent with its public purpose

The university instils and consistently reinforces a culture of acting lawfully, ethically and responsibly, and consistent with its values and purpose.

Principle 6 – *Inclusive and Responsive*: Expectations of the university's community and stakeholders are understood, respected and responded to

The university actively seeks to understand the legitimate needs and expectations of key stakeholders through structured and ongoing engagement that demonstrates respect and responsiveness to those needs and expectations.

Principle 7 – *Sustainable*: Risks are understood and managed effectively

The governing body proactively and effectively oversees risks to the achievement of the university's purpose and objectives, consistent with the university's strategy and risk appetite.

Principle 8 – *Responsible*: Workforce and remuneration are structured fairly and responsibly

The governing body ensures all staff are properly remunerated, that senior management remuneration is aligned with public expectations and sector benchmarks, and that the university has a clear and sustainable workforce strategy.

1.25 The following recommendations were made by the Expert Council to give effect to the Principles:

- **Recommendation 1:** The Principles are implemented through annual reporting monitored by TEQSA (including annual public reporting against the principles on an 'if not, why not' basis).
- **Recommendation 2:** TEQSA is appropriately resourced for monitoring and evaluation of the Principles.
- **Recommendation 3:** Education Ministers communicate expectations and consider reviewing their legislation and alignment with the Principles as applicable.
- **Recommendation 4:** The Expert Council on University Governance be tasked with ongoing review and assessment of the Principles.
- **Recommendation 5:** That Education Ministers consult on appointments to university governing bodies.
- **Recommendation 6:** That the sector evolves and promotes best practice in university governance.
- **Recommendation 7:** Examine existing support for student and staff elected representatives on governing bodies and their capacity for consultation with the student body.
- **Recommendation 8:** Education Ministers may give further consideration to remuneration benchmarking.⁷

1.26 The Expert Council also identified five 'priorities for trust rebuilding for universities and university governance', including leadership and culture, accountability, inclusion and engagement, transparency, and remuneration.

Education Ministers Meeting – October 2025

1.27 On 17 October 2025, Education Ministers were briefed on the Expert Council Principles and recommendations by the Expert Council Chair, Ms Melinda Cilento. Ministers also considered recommendations of the committee's interim report and 'agreed the importance of strengthening transparency, accountability and diversity in university governance'.⁸

⁷ Expert Council on University Governance, *Final Report and Principles*, pp. 35–37.

⁸ Department of Education, [Education Ministers Meeting Communiqué – October 2025](#) (accessed 4 December 2025).

1.28 Further, Education Ministers noted that:

- the Australian Government will begin embedding the Expert Council Principles into the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021; and
- the Australian Government, with the Commonwealth Remuneration Tribunal, will establish a framework of remuneration classification ranges for Vice-Chancellor remuneration.⁹

1.29 Embedding the Expert Council Principles into the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 means that, among other actions, university councils will be required to publish:

- outcomes of meetings and decisions taken;
- consultancy spending, its purpose, value and justification;
- vice-chancellors' external roles;
- annual remuneration reports in line with requirements for public companies; and
- composition of governing bodies.¹⁰

1.30 Universities will be required to report to TEQSA each year on their compliance with the Expert Council Principles on an 'if not, why not' basis. TEQSA will be able to take compliance action against universities that repeatedly fail to meet the Expert Council Principles.¹¹

1.31 University skills matrices will also be reviewed to ensure they include higher education sector expertise and student and staff voices.¹²

1.32 Education Ministers also agreed that the Australian Government, in consultation with states and territories, would bring back an implementation plan to the next Education Ministers Meeting.¹³

⁹ Department of Education, [Education Ministers Meeting Communiqué – October 2025](#) (accessed 4 December 2025).

¹⁰ The Hon Jason Clare MP, 'Improving the governance of our universities', *Media release*, 18 October 2025.

¹¹ The Hon Jason Clare MP, 'Improving the governance of our universities', *Media release*, 18 October 2025.

¹² The Hon Jason Clare MP, 'Improving the governance of our universities', *Media release*, 18 October 2025.

¹³ Department of Education, [Education Ministers Meeting Communiqué – October 2025](#) (accessed 4 December 2025).

Chapter 2

Corporatisation of Australia's universities

2.1 The growing corporatisation of Australia's universities—and its impact on corporate and academic governance, employment practices, and the quality of education provided to students—was the subject of multiple submissions to the inquiry.¹ For example the University of Queensland Branch of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU UQ) stated that over the last 20 years, 'universities have come to increasingly resemble corporations', with an 'increasing emphasis on degrees as commodities to be sold to students as consumers, research oriented towards industry needs etc'.²

2.2 Similar views were expressed by Professor James Guthrie and Dr Adam Lucas, who observed that public universities in Australia 'are managed like big commercial businesses' with impacts on staff and students alike:

As vice-chancellors earn millions and students are herded through their degrees like cash cows, casualisation, job insecurity and wage theft for academic and professional staff are both rampant and pervasive. Increasingly expensive degrees leave local and international students with decades of debt.³

2.3 The flow-on effects of corporatisation were also described by the Australia Institute, which highlighted the detrimental impact of a focus on profit motives:

The corporatisation of universities has led to overreliance on international student fees, the rise of casual employment and short-term contracts for university workers, widespread wage theft, neglect of less 'lucrative' disciplines (such as visual arts and subjects in the humanities), and eroding accessibility to education for students. But more than this, the focus on university administrators on their institutions' 'profitability' has

¹ See, for example, National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), *Submission 15* (47th Parliament), p. 23; Curtin Student Guild, *Submission 80*, p. 3; Stretton Health Equity, *Submission 30* (47th Parliament), [pp. 1–2]; Dr Tim Moore, *Submission 104* (47th Parliament), p. 1; Associate Professor John Kenny, *Submission 24* (47th Parliament), [p. 1]; Dr Robert Czernkowski, *Submission 5* (47th Parliament), [p. 1]; Name Withheld, *Submission 141* (47th Parliament), [p. 1]; Name Withheld, *Submission 289* (47th Parliament), p. 1; Name Withheld, *Submission 173*, p. 1; Name Withheld, *Submission 222*, p. 1; Name Withheld, *Submission 145* (47th Parliament), [p. 1]; Name Withheld, *Submission 298* (47th Parliament), p. 1; Name Withheld, *Submission 228*, [p. 1].

² University of Queensland Branch of the NTEU (NTEU UQ), *Submission 102* (47th Parliament), [p. 6].

³ Professor James Guthrie and Dr Adam Lucas, *Submission 188* (47th Parliament), Attachment A (*How we got here: The transformation of Australian public universities into for-profit corporations*), p. 26.

subordinated the public service of providing quality higher education to a very commercial vision.⁴

- 2.4 The subordination of the public good to commercial ends was also reflected in evidence from the University of Melbourne Student Union:

As the neo-liberal agenda took root in Australia, the idea of the university as a public good gave way to the position that education is merely a private benefit which can be measured by its impact on personal financial attainment and social position. Students became consumers of a commodity and the university a 'knowledge factory' characterised by a growing financial reliance on international students to subsidise research and business operations.⁵

- 2.5 Likewise, the School of Public Health and Social Work within the Queensland University of Technology said there has been a radical transformation of universities 'into places of business, profit-making and serving the capitalist market, rather than institutions that provide education and research for the public good'.⁶

- 2.6 This transformation was also recognised by the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (CAPA and NATSIPA), who described the impact of structural changes—known as New Public Management reforms—resulting from higher education policy shifts. According to CAPA and NATSIPA, these changes led to 'a more market-oriented approach and commercialisation of higher education' that 'created tension between traditional values in the higher education sector and commercial imperatives'.⁷

- 2.7 The tension inherent in these competing motivations was emphasised by Dr Bede Harris, who drew attention to the treatment of universities compared with other organisations that provide a public good:

The object of commercial corporations is the making of profit. The purpose of a university is pursuit of the truth—which it does through teaching and research—for the public benefit. In this regard, universities are like any other organisation serving a public good, be it a primary or secondary education system, a health service or organisations charged with the defence of the country, none of which are treated as profit-making entities.⁸

⁴ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*Public Attitudes on Issues in Higher Education*), p. 7.

⁵ University of Melbourne Student Union, *Submission 50* (47th Parliament), p. 5.

⁶ School of Public Health and Social Work, Queensland University of Technology, *Submission 41* (47th Parliament), [p. 3].

⁷ Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (CAPA and NATSIPA), *Submission 60* (47th Parliament), [p. 9].

⁸ Dr Bede Harris, *Submission 10* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

2.8 According to Professor Guthrie and Dr Lucas, the adoption of commercial business models has resulted in universities becoming 'dysfunctional public-private hybrids' that have shifted away from their core purpose:

Australian public universities are no longer serving public interest criteria. Nor are they focused any longer on their core teaching and research activities. They have become dysfunctional public-private hybrids that have pretensions to be for-profit corporations but lack all the checks and balances on executive power that ensure their leadership is accountable.⁹

2.9 The suitability of corporate governance models was also challenged by Dr Marija Taflaga, Dr Francis Markham and Distinguished Professor Keith Dowding, who argued that while they are 'not "bad" per se', they are 'ill-suited' to the primary purpose of universities—teaching, research and knowledge translation—and have 'contributed significantly to the policy failures plaguing our sector'.¹⁰

2.10 According to Dr Taflaga and her colleagues, the misapplication of corporate governance models has resulted in executives who do not understand the work of universities and instead focus narrowly, albeit unsuccessfully, on corporate principles relating to financial goals. At the same time, principles relating to transparency, accountability, and effective oversight are neglected:

University executives place an excessive emphasis on a narrow version of corporate principles, defined almost exclusively in terms of 'financial goals and sustainability'. Yet they have failed to create financially secure and sustainable universities, largely because they misunderstand the work of the university. Furthermore, the stream of scandals across the sector shows how other core principles of corporate governance—incentive alignment, ethical conduct, transparent and accountable decision-making, and the maintenance of effective oversight—have been neglected or sidelined.¹¹

2.11 The remainder of this chapter focuses on evidence received in relation to:

- corporatisation and the role and purpose of Australian universities;
- the influence of higher education policy settings on Australian university corporatisation;
- consultants and the corporatisation of Australian universities; and
- participant suggestions to address the corporatisation of Australian universities.

⁹ Professor James Guthrie and Dr Adam Lucas, *Submission 188 (47th Parliament), Attachment A (How we got here: The transformation of Australian public universities into for-profit corporations)*, p. 32.

¹⁰ Dr Marija Taflaga, Dr Francis Markham and Distinguished Professor Keith Dowding, *Submission 6*, [pp. 11 and 12].

¹¹ Dr Marija Taflaga, Dr Francis Markham and Distinguished Professor Keith Dowding, *Submission 6*, [p. 11].

2.12 Later chapters address university employment practices—including high levels of insecure work and increased workloads—as well as declining academic autonomy, reduced course quality and the detrimental impact these have on student experiences.

Corporatisation and the purpose of Australian universities

2.13 For many participants, the primary function of the university sector is the provision of education, research and community engagement as a public good.¹² For example, the NTEU UQ described universities as 'public good institutions' whose purpose is to:

... provide training and education to support the next generation of change makers; to lead research that can attend to contemporary and future social and environmental challenges, and attend to the debates and challenges of society at large.¹³

2.14 This appeared to be reflected in polling undertaken by the Australia Institute in 2023, which concluded that 'Australians want their universities to focus on education':

... two in three Australians (66%) think that improving education for students should be the primary concern of university councils. This echoes earlier polling ... which found that 83% of Australians were concerned about universities focusing on profit at the expense of education.¹⁴

2.15 A focus on the public good was also reflected in submissions from some universities. For example, the University of Queensland described its 'mission and core purpose' as delivering 'for the public good through excellence in education, research and engagement with our communities and partners'.¹⁵

2.16 Western Sydney University (WSU) stated that 'universities are public sector institutions, funded by the federal government, with a role to deliver public good'.¹⁶

¹² See, for example, NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament), pp. 3 and 8; Ms Ashlyn Horton, National President, National Union of Students, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, p. 19; Australian Council of Heads of Social Work Education, *Submission 58* (47th Parliament), [p. 2]; Stretton Health Equity, *Submission 30* (47th Parliament), [p. 3]; University of Western Australia Academic Staff Association, *Submission 38* (47th Parliament), p. 1; University of Sydney Association of Professors, *Submission 113* (47th Parliament), p. 20; Professor Hans Zoellner, *Submission 296* (47th Parliament), p. 37; Name Withheld, *Submission 222* (47th Parliament), p. 1; Dr Raffaele Ciriello, *Submission 4* (47th Parliament), [p. 2]; Emeritus Professor Grahame Dowling, *Submission 27* (47th Parliament), p. 5.

¹³ NTEU UQ, *Submission 102* (47th Parliament), [p. 6].

¹⁴ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), p. 31 (citations omitted).

¹⁵ University of Queensland, *Submission 43* (47th Parliament), p. 1.

¹⁶ Western Sydney University, *Submission 29* (47th Parliament), p. 2.

2.17 The committee is aware that the purpose of public universities was addressed in the final report of the Expert Council on University Governance, which stated:

Generally, the central purpose and function of universities can be summarised as the pursuit of knowledge through research, and its transference through teaching and scholarship. Consistent with their role to serve the public good, Australian public universities benefit from the financial support of the Australian public, notably through various forms of Commonwealth funding. Their performance has a significant bearing on areas of national importance. These areas of importance include, the public good of education as an enabler of individual opportunity and social mobility, inclusion, participation and creativity, the generation of skills, knowledge, research, innovation and productivity, and the strengthening of ties within the Australian community and, increasingly with international communities.¹⁷

2.18 The committee also notes that the role universities play in Australia's civic, economic and social life through education and research was highlighted by the Australian Government in its announcement that the Expert Council on University Governance Principles would be written into the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021.¹⁸ This commitment was noted at the Education Ministers Meeting in October 2025.¹⁹

2.19 However, a range of participants told the committee that corporatisation has eroded this understanding of the public good as central to the mission of universities. For example, Dr James Kite argued that while 'Australian universities are vital public institutions that should serve the interests of students, staff, and society at large ... increasing corporatisation of our universities is undermining these core purposes'.²⁰

2.20 In a similar vein, Dr Erika Gonzalez Garcia, Associate Professor Miranda Lai, Ms Olga Garcia-Caro, and Dr Caroline Norma noted:

Australian universities were historically public institutions dedicated to advancing knowledge for societal benefit. However, the corporate model has gradually eroded this purpose, pushing universities to function as competitive business entities.²¹

¹⁷ Expert Council on University Governance, *Final Report and Principles*, pp. 9–10.

¹⁸ The Hon Jason Clare MP, 'Improving the governance of our universities', *Media release*, 18 October 2025.

¹⁹ Department of Education, *Education Ministers Meeting Communiqué – October 2025* (accessed 4 December 2025).

²⁰ Dr James Kite, *Submission 252* (47th Parliament), p. 1. See also, NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament), p. 13; Dr Molly Dragiewicz, *Submission 91* (47th Parliament), p. 2; University of Melbourne Student Union, *Submission 50* (47th Parliament), p. 5.

²¹ Dr Erika Gonzalez Garcia, Associate Professor Miranda Lai, Ms Olga Garcia-Caro, and Dr Caroline Norma, *Submission 70* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

2.21 Further, the Curtin Student Guild submitted that 'the increasingly corporate bent of university governing bodies is at odds with the notion that public universities are public assets that benefit the community'.²²

2.22 A similar point was made by the Australia Institute, which reflected that:

... a corporate-like focus on institutional profitability overlooks the public service mandate that should guide the activities of universities—generating broad-reaching benefits from knowledge creation, education, and participation reaped by the whole of society.²³

2.23 According to CAPA and NATSIPA, corporatisation has led to 'conflicting goals and expectations' resulting from a 'tension between traditional values in the higher education sector and commercial imperatives'. They contended that 'this duality has led to debates around universities' mission and operations, particularly as they balance public responsibilities with financial sustainability'.²⁴

2.24 For submitters such as Professor Peter Tregear OAM, this inherent conflict—arising from 'fundamental differences, if not incompatibilities, between private corporations and the role of a university as a public institution'—meant that the succession of 'well-meant initiatives' to corporatise the governance of universities was always likely to fail:

Not only is there no equivalent for shareholder value as a benchmark of success, our universities also operate in very different legal and accountability settings to a fully commercial entity.

We should not be surprised, then, to find that a swag of reputational and integrity issues have subsequently come to beset Australia's universities, along with an inevitable decline in their broader standing in the Australian community, their 'social licence' no-less.

2.25 A similar view was expressed by the Social Work Policy and Advocacy Action Group at RMIT University:

The current crises can be directly linked to the ideological and economic push to run universities as businesses rather than as institutions of public good. Universities should not be managed like private corporations. They require sustained investment, infrastructure, and long-term commitment to knowledge creation, needs that are fundamentally incompatible with short-term, profit-driven orthodoxies.²⁵

²² Curtin Student Guild, *Submission 80* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

²³ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*At the Crossroads: What is the post-COVID future of Australia's Public Universities?*), p. 58.

²⁴ CAPA and NATSIPA, *Submission 60* (47th Parliament), [p. 9].

²⁵ Social Work Policy and Advocacy Action Group at RMIT University, *Submission 19*, p. 2.

- 2.26 Professor Katie Barclay put plainly that the lack of understanding around the role of universities as public institutions is one of the main reasons there is no clear vision for the sector:

Are we public or private? ... This sense of the university as 'private' also informs what Councils think matter and what they don't. They worry a lot about 'brand'; they want staff to be well-behaved; they don't like student protests. They respond obsequiously to political pressure and pressure from interest groups. This has detracted from universities as public institutions and institutions that have a shared interest in a public good. It has undermined the reputation of our institutions as stalwarts of Australian democracy. University leaders have to be prepared to stand up for principle and to encourage a robust criticism of themselves, of the state, and of others in the pursuit of a better world. If they cannot do that, they have failed the concept of the university, and they are failing the Australian nation.²⁶

- 2.27 However, Charles Sturt University (CSU) defended universities in relation to their ability to deliver on their public mission, which encompasses a broad range of expectations:

Universities are expected and required to teach and carry out research in a range of disciplines, engage with industry and the community, help their students and staff achieve their education and career goals, maintain and upgrade essential facilities, build new ones to meet evolving education and research needs, and serve as major centres of cultural, social and economic activity.²⁷

- 2.28 Further, CSU cited 'decades of underfunding' which had left universities 'struggling to perform the core functions to the standard required of them'. It argued that much of the criticism levelled at universities has ignored the underlying drivers of their actions:

None of these public good activities are fully funded by government. Nor does funding from the private sector and other sources completely cover the costs of the activities it is intended to support. Yet the steps universities have been compelled to take to cope with the inadequate funding environment—reducing costs, casualising the workforce, increasing class sizes, recruiting fee-paying international students—have become the basis of criticism of the universities, ignoring the root problem. Other issues, like executive remuneration, internal policies and practices, what and how universities teach and research, and how they are governed attract more attention than the 'big question' of how to ensure the financial viability and sustainability of this vital sector.²⁸

²⁶ Professor Katie Barclay, *Submission 77* (47th Parliament), pp. 3–4.

²⁷ Charles Sturt University (CSU), *Submission 52* (47th Parliament), [p. 4].

²⁸ CSU, *Submission 52* (47th Parliament), [p. 4].

Higher education policy settings and university corporatisation

2.29 Multiple submitters argued that the corporatisation of Australian universities has been underpinned by successive reforms to higher education policy and funding arrangements.²⁹ The perceived impact of these changes was summarised by Professor Page:

The combined effect of these reforms and financial dependencies has been likened to the two blades of a pair of scissors, jointly cutting into the academic fabric of universities. The restructuring under the Dawkins Reforms curtailed academic control over governance, while the surge in student-derived revenue enabled the growth of a managerial class that prioritizes financial and operational considerations over academic excellence. This dual development has led to concerns about the erosion of the traditional academic ethos in Australian higher education institutions.³⁰

2.30 The remainder of this section addresses changes to higher education policy settings, as well as changes in university funding over time—including the impact of increased competition for students on university advertising expenditure and course offerings.

Changes to higher education policy settings

2.31 According to CAPA and NATSIPA, 'the transformational policies of the Whitlam and later Hawke/Keating governments to introduce quality higher education to the average Australian, simultaneously transformed [universities'] culture and governance models'.³¹

2.32 CAPA and NATSIPA noted that 'this era ... was succeeded with policies that prioritised the commercialisation and corporatisation of higher education'. In this context, CAPA and NATSIPA highlighted changes arising from the Dawkins review of the higher education system in the late 1980s, including:

- introduction of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS);
- the Relative Funding Model which funded universities at the same amount per student but with weighting for different disciplines;
- an increased emphasis on national competitive grants for research;
- measures designed to encourage universities to earn income from other sources, including commercialising research results and charging fees for international students; and

²⁹ See, for example, The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), pp. 8–17, Associate Professor John Kenny, *Submission 24*, pp. 1–2; Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103*, pp. 1–3; Public Universities Australia, *Submission 71*, pp. 10–11; Dr Adam Lucas, *Submission 182*, p. 3; School of Public Health and Social Work, Queensland University of Technology, *Submission 41* (47th Parliament), [p. 3].

³⁰ Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

³¹ CAPA and NATSIPA, *Submission 60* (47th Parliament), [p. 8].

- a reduction of the number of elected staff and student members on university governing bodies.³²
- 2.33 Dr John Quiggan noted that the Dawkins reforms also saw Colleges of Advanced Education and Institutes of Technology converted to universities, as well as the encouragement of mergers 'to achieve perceived scale economies and absorb small institutions such as schools of art and music'.³³
- 2.34 In addition, Dr Quiggan pointed out that the Dawkins reforms occurred in parallel with 'a sustained, but almost entirely unsuccessful, push for privatisation'. He argued that this reflected 'the resurgence of free-market thinking commonly described as "neoliberalism"' and involved 'a series of ventures including Bond University, U21Global and Melbourne University Private' which either 'failed outright or were absorbed into the publicly funded system'.³⁴
- 2.35 Dr Quiggan reflected that the push for privatisation was succeeded by managerialism, which suggests that 'the performance of all organisations can be optimised by the application of generic management skills'. Dr Quiggan went on to describe the main features of managerialism as:
- ... incessant organisational restructuring, sharpening of incentives, and expansion in the number, power and remuneration of senior managers, with a corresponding downgrading of the role of skilled workers, and particularly of professionals.³⁵
- 2.36 This was reflected in evidence from other contributors, such as Professor Lionel Page, who submitted that the rise of managerialism had resulted in a 'decline of academic-led governance' as vice-chancellors and other university executives 'gained greater decision-making authority at the expense of academic senates and faculty boards'. This, in turn, 'led to a growing disconnection between university management and academic staff'.³⁶
- 2.37 According to Dr Adam Lucas, arguments for corporate-style management were repeated in the context of the Hoare Report commissioned by the Commonwealth Government in 1995, and by then Minister for Education, Dr Brendan Nelson MP, who 'further advanced the notion that universities are corporations' in a 2003 report, in which he stated that:

³² CAPA and NATSIPA, *Submission 60* (47th Parliament), [pp. 8–9].

³³ Dr John Quiggan, *Submission 11* (47th Parliament), [p. 3].

³⁴ Dr John Quiggan, *Submission 11* (47th Parliament), [p. 3].

³⁵ Dr John Quiggan, *Submission 11* (47th Parliament), [pp. 4 and 7].

³⁶ Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), p. 2.

Universities are not businesses but nevertheless manage multi-million-dollar budgets. As such they need to be run in a business-like fashion.³⁷

- 2.38 According to the Australia Institute, funding levers were used by the Howard Government 'to pressure universities to embrace commercialisation' through the introduction of the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* (HESA Act) and associated Commonwealth Grant Scheme Guidelines (including National Governance Protocols), which required 'a focus on commercial undertakings'. This included changes to the composition of university councils:

The Guidelines stated that governing bodies could not exceed 22 members, that they must include at least two members with 'financial management expertise at a senior level', and at least one member with 'senior level' commercial expertise. They required 'a majority of external independent members who are neither enrolled as a student nor employed by the higher education provider'. As a result of these changes, all public universities were required to have a minimum of three council members with either commercial or financial expertise, and councils were made responsible for 'approving significant commercial activities of the higher education provider'.³⁸

- 2.39 According to the Australia Institute, these changes were designed to make universities 'more autonomous from government and to give them "increased scope to raise revenue from diverse sources"'.³⁹
- 2.40 Dr Lucas explained that with the passage of the HESA Act, state and territory governments were required to incorporate the National Governance Protocols into their existing university legislation.⁴⁰
- 2.41 While the National Governance Protocols were repealed in 2008 by the then Labor Government, Dr Harris observed that they remain in state and territory legislation and continue to impact university governance:

Even though HESA was amended in 2008 so as to remove the requirement that universities comply with the protocols in order to receive Commonwealth funding, the protocols had by then become embedded in State and Territory legislation governing universities—and remain to this day. Thus, the protocols, as reflected in legislation, continue to determine the way universities are governed.⁴¹

³⁷ Dr Adam Lucas, *Submission 182* (47th Parliament), p. 5.

³⁸ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), p. 8. See also, NTEU UQ, *Submission 102* (47th Parliament), [pp. 1–2] and CAPA and NATSIPA, *Submission 60* (47th Parliament), [p. 12].

³⁹ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), p. 8.

⁴⁰ Dr Adam Lucas, *Submission 182* (47th Parliament), p. 7.

⁴¹ Dr Bede Harris, *Submission 10* (47th Parliament), p. 2.

2.42 A similar point was made by the Australia Institute, which pointed out that, despite no longer being a condition of funding, 'all state governments have retained the 2003 changes to the composition and function of councils, which were updated in the form of a Voluntary Code in 2010–11'.⁴²

Changes in university funding

2.43 Various participants argued that a reduction in public funding for universities has contributed significantly to the corporatisation of Australian universities by increasing their reliance on student fees, investments, and commercial contracts.⁴³ Submitters also described how a reliance on student fees has led to a significant proportion of university budgets being allocated to advertising and marketing as universities compete for the same student enrolments.⁴⁴

2.44 According to the Australia Institute, Commonwealth funding for higher education has been declining since tertiary education was made free for students in the 1970s, with inflation-adjusted spending per student in 2022 'the lowest since records started in 1964' (see Figure 2.1). The 'two brief exceptions to the downward trend' since the 1970s were a funding boost between 2007–2011 in response to the 2008 Bradley review, and a later investment in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁵

2.45 Further, the Australia Institute noted that between 1995–2021, Commonwealth funding as a proportion of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (excluding Higher Education Loan Program funding) fell from 0.9 per cent to 0.6 per cent. It contended that if spending had kept pace with the growth of the economy, funding in 2021 would have been \$6.5 billion higher — 'equal to nearly half ... of higher education funding'.⁴⁶

⁴² The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), p. 9. The voluntary code referred to is the *Voluntary Code of Best Practice for the Governance of Australian Public Universities*, first introduced in 2010.

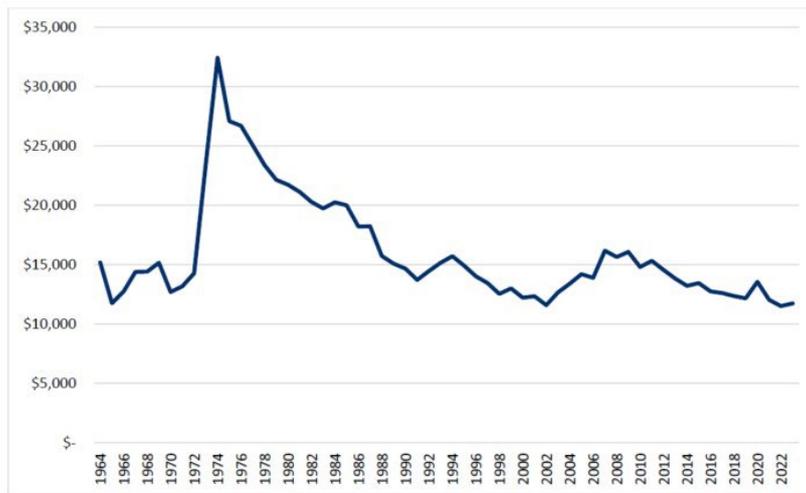
⁴³ See, for example, The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), p. 1; Public Universities Australia, *Submission 71* (47th Parliament), p. 43; Name Withheld, *Submission 222* (47th Parliament), p. 1; Name Withheld, *Submission 251* (47th Parliament), [p. 4].

⁴⁴ See, for example, Name Withheld, *Submission 186* (47th Parliament), pp. [2–3]; Dr John Doland Nichols, *Submission 13*, [p. 2]; The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*At the Crossroads: What is the post-COVID future of Australia's Public Universities?*), p. 44.

⁴⁵ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), pp. 10–11.

⁴⁶ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), p. 11.

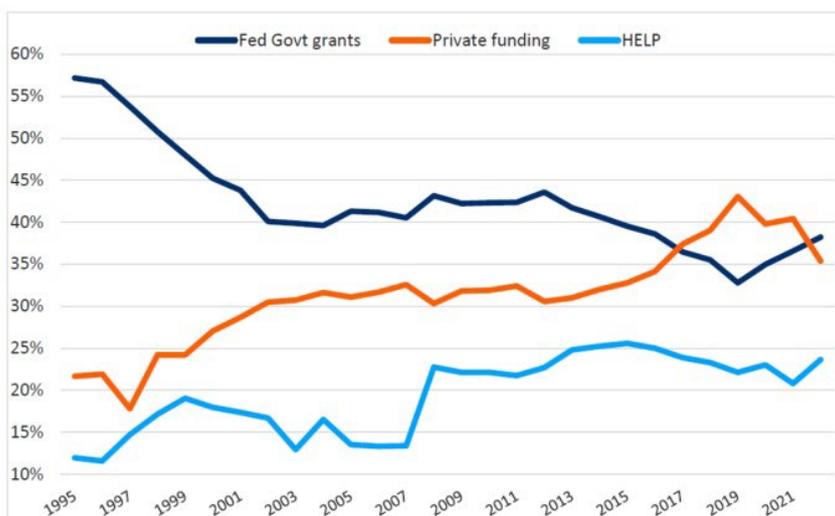
Figure 2.1 Commonwealth spending on higher education per domestic student 1964–2023 (2024 dollars)



Source: *The Australia Institute, Submission 105 (47th Parliament)*, p. 10. Based on data from the Parliamentary Budget Office, the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Department of Education.

2.46 A number of submitters contended that reductions in public funding have led to universities being increasingly reliant on non-government funding sources. For example, the Australia Institute stated that the proportion of university funding derived from Commonwealth grant funding fell from over 55 per cent in 1995 to under 40 per cent in 2015. Conversely, between 1995 and 2019, non-government funding sources doubled as a share of university revenue—rising from 21.7 per cent to 43 per cent (see Figure 2.2).⁴⁷

Figure 2.2 Sources of funding as a percentage of total revenue 1995-2022



Source: *The Australia Institute, Submission 105 (47th Parliament)*, p. 13. Based on data from the Department of Education's Financial Reports of Higher Education Providers.

⁴⁷ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105 (47th Parliament)*, p. 12. See also, NTEU, *Submission 15 (47th Parliament)*, p. 13 and Dr Adam Lucas, *Submission 182 (47th Parliament)*, p. 3.

2.47 The Australia Institute compared this to public funding of universities internationally. It noted that about 50 per cent of the money spent on tertiary education in Australia comes from government funding. This compares to an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average of 73 per cent, and even higher percentages in Nordic countries, with government funding accounting for 84 per cent of tertiary education expenditure in Sweden and 95 per cent of expenditure in Norway.⁴⁸

2.48 In terms of GDP, Professor Page reported that among OECD countries, Australian universities have one of the lowest levels of public investment and one of the highest levels of private investment:

Australian universities now have one of the lowest levels of public investment among OECD countries—ranked 26 out of 37 countries with public investment at 0.73% of GDP compared to the OECD average of 0.99%. Conversely, Australia's private investment in tertiary education is among the highest, ranked fourth out of 37 OECD countries at 1.28% of GDP compared to the OECD average of 0.43%.⁴⁹

2.49 A number of submitters highlighted universities' increased reliance on international student revenue, including Professor Page, who stated that international student fees (as a percentage of total university revenue) increased from 14.7 per cent in 2004 to 26.4 per cent in 2018. In 2022, this represented over \$8.6 billion in revenue.⁵⁰

2.50 However, CSU suggested that universities had been unfairly pilloried for their reliance on international student revenue and argued that they 'did not choose this policy'. Rather, CSU contended that it was effectively a response to a lack of funding:

Universities did not choose this policy. We have effectively responded to it. We are equally willing to pivot away from it if this no longer suits the migration policies of government, but politicians and policy-makers must accept that governments will then have to either fill the funding gap or accept a major reduction in the quantity and quality of both education and research.⁵¹

⁴⁸ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), p. 13.

⁴⁹ Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), p. 2 (citations omitted).

⁵⁰ Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), p. 2. See also, The Australia Institute *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), p. 12 and Dr Adam Lucas, *Submission 182* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

⁵¹ CSU, *Submission 52* (47th Parliament), [p. 3].

2.51 A similar point was made by Professor John Pollaers, Convenor of the University Chancellors Council (UCC), who stated that 'policy change and instability ... have led to this situation where dependency on other revenue funds has made this a very difficult thing to manage'.⁵²

2.52 In addition to evidence about a general downward trend in Commonwealth funding for universities, various contributors commented on the more recent impact of the Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) package, which reduced Commonwealth funding to universities by 15 percent.⁵³ For example, Mr Luke Sheehy of Universities Australia highlighted the importance of the funding environment for universities and told the committee about the impact of the JRG package on a sector that is 'increasingly asked to do more with less':

... our main source of funding under Commonwealth legislation, the Higher Education Support Act, is student teaching and learning funding. The Job-ready Graduates funding arrangements were put in place by the previous Coalition government, and they still continue to this day under the Labor government. That gives us \$1 billion less, on average, each year to teach more and more students.⁵⁴

2.53 Similarly, CSU noted that the JRG package had worsened the gap between the cost of delivering courses and public funding for universities—particularly those in regional areas who face higher costs and lack economies of scale:

The gap between public funding and delivery costs for these courses has grown steadily due to rising costs and decades of underfunding by almost any metric, especially funding per student. The situation was exacerbated by the ill-conceived and inequitable Job-Ready Graduates funding model, which also makes it increasingly difficult to provide the level of academic and pastoral support that our students need and deserve.⁵⁵

⁵² Professor John Pollaers, Convenor, University Chancellors Council, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 10 November 2025, p. 39.

⁵³ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*At the Crossroads: What is the post-COVID future of Australia's Public Universities?*), p. 5. See also, University of Technology Sydney, *Submission 14* (47th Parliament), p. 14; Professor James Guthrie and Dr Adam Lucas, *Submission 188* (47th Parliament), Attachment A (*How we got here: The transformation of Australian public universities into for-profit corporations*), p. 28; NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament) Attachment 1, p. 2; Professor Andrew Parfitt, Vice-Chancellor and President, University of Technology Sydney, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, p. 27.

⁵⁴ Mr Luke Sheehy, Chief Executive Officer, Universities Australia, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, p. 13.

⁵⁵ CSU, *Submission 52* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

University expenditure on advertising and marketing

- 2.54 Some participants suggested that intensified competition for students—resulting at least in part from successive policy and funding changes—has led to increased spending on advertising and marketing, as well as a reduction in the range of courses on offer at Australian universities.
- 2.55 Indeed, 'a focus on marketing and student attraction' was recognised by the UCC as a response to 'the recent phase of the sector's development' which 'has explicitly embraced competition between institutions as a spur to innovation and responsiveness'.⁵⁶
- 2.56 The Australia Institute argued that Australia's public universities 'spend millions on advertising, marketing and promotional expenses that could help pay for teaching and learning costs'. It also noted that while some promotional campaigns are designed to attract philanthropic funding, most are 'aimed at prospective new enrolments'.⁵⁷
- 2.57 This view was reflected by a former academic, who observed that Australian universities engage in 'high cost marketing' to compete for enrolments from the same pool of domestic students:
- Universities spending money to effectively lure students away from each other. All of these campaigns combined are in the hundreds of millions of dollars; and effectively paid for by the Commonwealth.
- ...
- This gets worse for campaigns to get enrolment in specialist post graduate degrees where, to meet 'successful enrolment' targets, there are cases where 40 per cent of the income generated for the degree was expended on marketing. This is more than it costs to develop and teach the degree.⁵⁸
- 2.58 According to the Australia Institute, in 2023, universities spent around \$363 million on 'advertising, marketing and promotional expenses' (see Table 2.1). It also noted that in August 2024, Nielsen 'reported that universities spent more than \$175 million solely on advertisements in the previous twelve months'.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ University Chancellors Council, *Submission 23* (47th Parliament), Attachment A (*University Chancellors Council Response to Australian Higher Education Accord Panel further questions*), p. 6.

⁵⁷ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*Elective spending at Australian universities: Millions splashed on consultancies, travel and advertising*), p. 11.

⁵⁸ Name Withheld, *Submission 186* (47th Parliament), pp. [2–3].

⁵⁹ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*Elective spending at Australian universities: Millions splashed on consultancies, travel and advertising*), p. 11.

Table 2.1 University expenditure on advertising, marketing and promotion in 2023

Universities	Expenditure
University of New South Wales	\$24 million
Griffith University	\$19 million
Queensland University of Technology, Monash University, University of Melbourne	\$17 million
University of Tasmania	\$16 million
University of Queensland	\$15 million
Charles Darwin University	\$14 million
RMIT University, La Trobe University, Macquarie University	\$13 million
University of Sydney, University of South Australia	\$12 million
University of New England, Flinders University	\$11 million
Western Sydney University, Australian Catholic University, Swinburne University of Technology	\$10 million
University of Technology Sydney	\$9 million
Federation University	\$8 million
University of Newcastle, University of Notre Dame, Edith Cowan University, Curtin University	\$7 million
Victoria University, Murdoch University, Deakin University	\$6 million
University of Southern Queensland, Australian National University, Central Queensland University, Charles Sturt University, University of the Sunshine Coast, Southern Cross University, University of Wollongong	\$5 million
University of Western Australia, James Cook University	\$4 million
University of Canberra	\$3 million

Source: The Australia Institute, Submission 105 (47th Parliament), Appendix A (Elective spending at Australian universities: Millions splashed on consultancies, travel and advertising), p. 12. Data sourced from annual reports.

2.59 Despite this increased expenditure, evidence provided by the Australia Institute suggested mixed results. For example, between 2021–2023, the Australian Catholic University spent over \$26 million on advertising, marketing and promotional expenses with 'muted effects on new commencements and university revenue':

- In 2021, ACU grew its new commencements from the previous year by 98 students (0.8%).

- It spent \$6 million on advertising that year only for new commencements in 2022 to decline by 76 students (-0.6%).
- Another \$9.7 million of advertisement expenditure for 2022 netted an increase of 303 students, or a 2.6% gain, in 2023. This amounts to \$800 in advertising costs per commencing student in 2023, or \$32,155 in advertising costs per new commencement above 2022 figures.⁶⁰

2.60 Further examples provided by the Australia Institute included:

- the University of New South Wales UNSW spending just over \$17 million on advertising in 2022 and increasing new commencements in 2023 by 14 per cent (3550 students);
- Monash University spending almost \$22 million on advertising and marketing in 2022 and increasing new commencements in 2023 by 14.7 per cent (3845 students);
- Griffith University spending more than \$18.4 million on advertising and marketing in 2022 and increasing new commencements by 3.9 per cent (651 students) in 2023—that is, \$23 000 for each new commencement above the 2022 figure; and
- the University of Tasmania spending \$16.5 million on advertising and marketing in 2023 and increasing its new commencements by 3.8 per cent the following year.⁶¹

2.61 Other participants highlighted the impact of this competition for students—both within and between universities—on the breadth of courses and research undertaken at Australian universities. The Australian Historical Association observed:

Academic staff are forced to compete with their colleagues in other disciplines for student enrolments, yet they have no control over the ways their subjects are promoted and discovered by students both within and outside the university. While scholarship and research is intrinsically collaborative, current modes of governance focus on competition, including competition for scarce research resources and student load. Viewing the teaching and research tasks of the university as best decided by market forces leads to a narrow focus on crassly utilitarian areas of research (arguably best suited to the private sector) at the expense of broader fields of research that have longer term, often intangible community benefits.⁶²

⁶⁰ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*Elective spending at Australian universities: Millions splashed on consultancies, travel and advertising*), p. 16.

⁶¹ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*Elective spending at Australian universities: Millions splashed on consultancies, travel and advertising*), p. 13.

⁶² Australian Historical Association, *Submission 36* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

2.62 The importance of maintaining a broad range of course offerings across the sector was noted by Mr Sheehy, who stressed role adequate funding plays in course availability:

I'd add that personally, as a graduate of a music degree—when I was doing that many decades ago, there were lots of music degrees around; there are fewer and fewer—I think it is important that we have a funding and regulatory system that allows universities to continue delivering courses that potentially are less popular in terms of student demand into the future. Some of those courses are expensive to deliver, so we need to make sure that there's adequate funding and support for them.⁶³

2.63 This view was reinforced by Ms Vicki Thomson of the Group of Eight (Go8):

I would add that this is cause and effect, as Luke has just articulated, in terms of the funding environment ... I don't think any vice-chancellor wakes up and relishes the fact that they have to make some very difficult decisions because of the funding environment that they are operating in.⁶⁴

Consultants and the corporatisation of Australian universities

2.64 The committee heard a significant volume of evidence about the growing influence of consultants within the university sector. This evidence related to both universities' expenditure on consultants, as well as the increased reliance on consultants, and their growing influence within university councils.

University expenditure on consultants

2.65 Various participants raised concerns about consultancy spending at Australian universities.⁶⁵ However, as noted in the committee's interim report, it was difficult to ascertain the specifics of universities' consultancy expenditure given inconsistent requirements for public reporting.⁶⁶

2.66 This difficulty was reflected in evidence from submitters. For example, the NTEU found that in 2023, 'universities spent up to a whopping \$734 million' on "'consulting" and professional advice or services'. However, it noted that:

All figures are from 2023 annual reports, figures for Vic and QLD are from consultancy spending disclosure reports. Amounts from annual reports

⁶³ Mr Luke Sheehy, Chief Executive Officer, Universities Australia, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, p. 18.

⁶⁴ Ms Vicki, Chief Executive, Group of Eight, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, p. 18.

⁶⁵ See, for example, NTEU Monash University Branch (NTEU Monash), *Submission 117* (47th Parliament), [p. 10]; Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS), *Submission 48* (47th Parliament), p. 4; Australian Historical Association, *Submission 36* (47th Parliament), [p. 2]; Dr Tim Moore, *Submission 104* (47th Parliament), p. 4; Dr Shumi Akhtar, *Submission 288* (47th Parliament), p. 9; Name Withheld, *Submission 251* (47th Parliament), [p. 4]; Name Withheld, *Submission 161* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

⁶⁶ Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee, *Interim report*, September 2025, p. 39.

may combine consulting and professional services spending, which may include non-consultant related spending.⁶⁷

2.67 Difficulties were also highlighted by Professor Corinne Cortese, who observed that an investigative journalist had estimated that, in 2022, 'ten of Australia's largest universities paid \$249 million to consulting firms'.⁶⁸

2.68 The Australia Institute cited its previous research showing that 'public universities in Victoria and Queensland spent \$209 million on consultants in 2023'. It noted that the disclosure laws in these states 'require public universities to publish their consultancy spending, and in the case of Victoria, individually for contracts above \$10 000', which means:

... we can see the project categories and costs of specific consulting contracts. For example, the University of Melbourne, spent 64% of its consultancy budget on services from three of the 'Big Four' consultants: KPMG (for 'IT consultancy services'), Deloitte and PwC (both for 'business advisory services').⁶⁹

2.69 In recognition of the difficulties in accurately identifying consultancy expenditure outside Victoria, the Australia Institute's broader comparison of consultancy spending compared 'the 27 universities with the most directly comparable annual reports' in 2023. This found these universities had spent 'nearly \$410 million on consultants', which equated to 'an average expenditure of over \$15 million each' (see Figure 2.3).⁷⁰

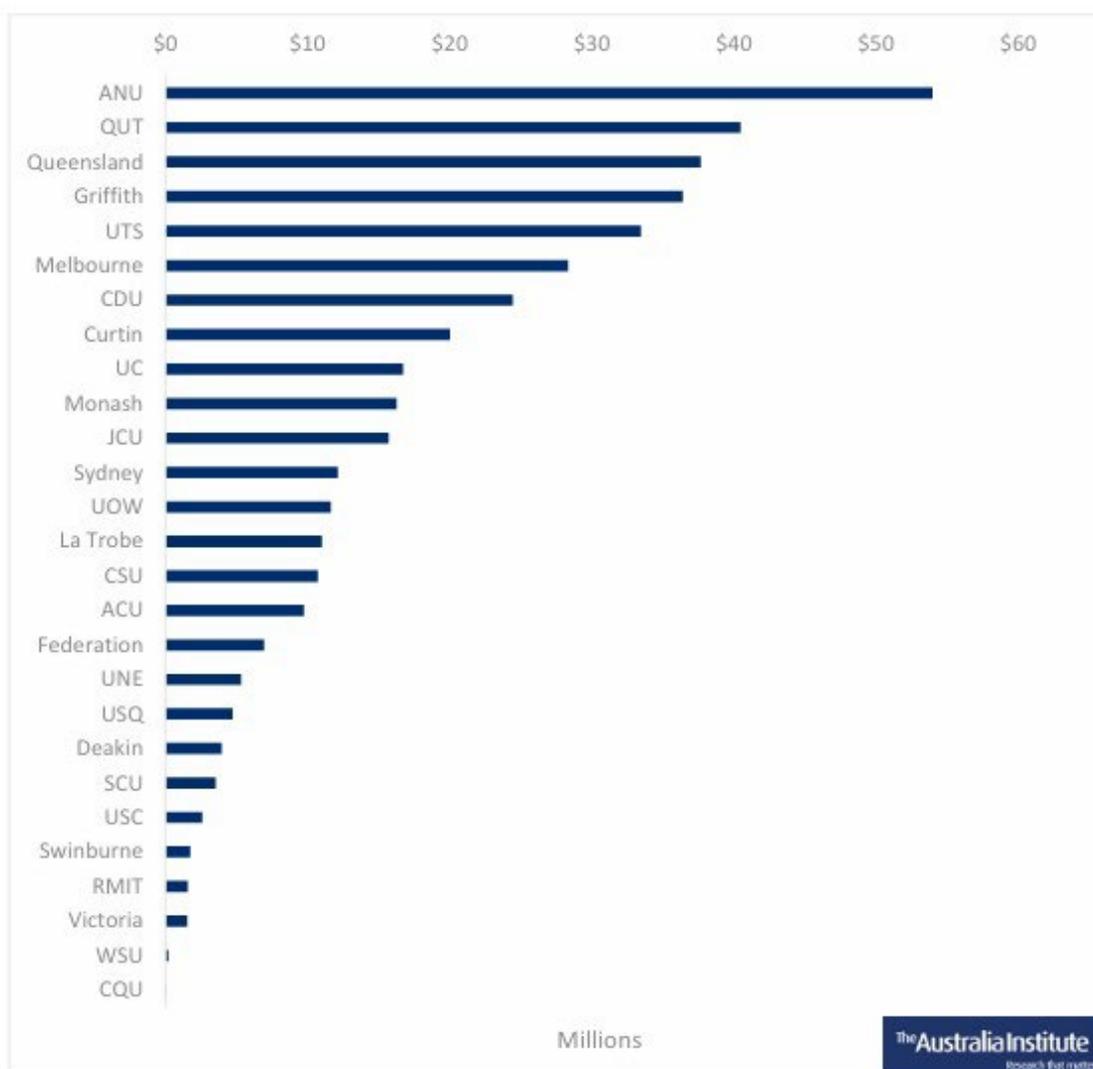
⁶⁷ NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament) Attachment 1, pp. 14 and 15. See also, Dr Tim Moore, *Submission 104* (47th Parliament), p. 4.

⁶⁸ Professor Corinne Cortese, *Submission 75* (47th Parliament), p. 6.

⁶⁹ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*Elective spending at Australian universities: Millions splashed on consultancies, travel and advertising*), p. 8.

⁷⁰ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*Elective spending at Australian universities: Millions splashed on consultancies, travel and advertising*), p. 6.

Figure 2.3 Expenditure on 'consultants' in 2023 (27 universities)



Source: *The Australia Institute, Submission 105 (47th Parliament), Appendix A (Elective spending at Australian universities: Millions splashed on consultancies, travel and advertising), p 6. Data sourced from university annual reports.*

2.70 In undertaking its comparison, the Australia Institute noted the apparently 'arbitrary, even evasive distinctions' in universities annual reporting. These included:

- the University of Sydney spent \$12.1 million on consultants but also spent \$153.2 million on unspecified 'externally sourced services';
- Central Queensland University reported consultancy spending separately, but also reported close to \$2 million for 'management and consultant fees';
- the University of Tasmania, Edith Cowan University, University of Newcastle (UoN) and the University of Western Australia spent \$159.9 million on 'professional services' (with the UoN spending \$76.2 million);
- UNSW and Macquarie University grouped 'consultants' and 'contractors', with UNSW spending \$316 million in this category and Macquarie University spending \$58 million;

- the University of Notre Dame spent \$5.8 million on 'consultancy, audit fees, bank charges, legal costs and insurance expenses; and
- the University of Adelaide spent \$35.5 million on 'consultants and specialist services', while the University of South Australia spent \$83 million on 'external services'.⁷¹

2.71 A lack of public clarity about the nature of consultancy expenditure was apparent in other evidence provided to the committee. For example, when asked about consultancy expenditure at WSU, Professor George Williams AO told the committee that the university had spent \$36 million in 2024. However, he noted that most of this spending was related to forensic IT work in the wake of several cyber-attacks:

The figure for 2024 was \$36 million; that came from the audited reports. In our case, this year that has predominantly been spent on cybersecurity. The university has been badly impacted by a number of attacks. I can't say too much because the threat actor is currently before the courts and has been arrested by the police, but we needed to engage high levels of consultant support for forensic cyber work worth many millions of dollars. As that has tailed off, I'm pleased to say that the year-to-date figure so far this year is \$17 million. We're coming towards the end of the year, but it's still a very significant figure. Cyber has been the key reason for the high amount.⁷²

2.72 To this end, the Australia Institute noted that university executives 'would likely protest that [legal and IT services] make up a large portion of the generic "consultancy" figures in their annual reports'. While the Australia Institute considered there would be few arguments about universities needing to procure IT or legal services, it argued that this illustrated the need for 'more transparency, not less'.⁷³

2.73 In response to a question about whether all universities should have similar disclosure requirements to those in Victoria, Professor Williams indicated his support for such a measure.⁷⁴

⁷¹ The Australia Institute, Submission 105 (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*Elective spending at Australian universities: Millions splashed on consultancies, travel and advertising*), p. 7.

⁷² Professor George Williams AO, Vice-Chancellor and President, Western Sydney University, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, p. 8.

⁷³ The Australia Institute, Submission 105 (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*Elective spending at Australian universities: Millions splashed on consultancies, travel and advertising*), p. 6.

⁷⁴ Professor George Williams AO, Vice-Chancellor and President, Western Sydney University, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, p. 8.

- 2.74 Similarly, Professor Andrew Parfitt, the Vice-Chancellor and President of UTS, said that while UTS already discloses consultancies over \$50 000 in its annual report, 'all consultants could well be listed as an appendix'.⁷⁵
- 2.75 Support for stronger transparency requirements around consultancies was also received from a range of other participants, including the Australia Institute, Professor Cortese, Mr Simon Walker, Dr Tim Moore,⁷⁶ and the NTEU, which called for 'full transparency' on consultancy relationships.⁷⁷

Nous Group and UniForum

- 2.76 While participants raised concerns about specific consulting firms, including the 'Big Four'⁷⁸ and KordaMentha, the committee was made aware of particular concerns in relation to Nous Group and its proprietary UniForum system.
- 2.77 Dr Tim McLellan suggested that a 'significant portion' of university consultancy work in 2023 was tied to UniForum, which he described as:
- ... a 'benchmarking service' that Nous provides to universities globally. It operates on a membership system through which more than 60 universities across the world share their data with Nous and one another. At least thirteen Australian universities are currently UniForum members.⁷⁹
- 2.78 Mr Tim Orton, Managing Principal and Chief Executive Officer of Nous Group, elaborated on the business model:
- ... universities have all agreed to be part of a forum called UniForum. In that forum, they have agreed that they will provide information to a third-party provider—in our case, Nous Data Insights—which assembles that information and is paid a fee for the work done in assembling the information. It provides the information to the university so the university can see its particular information on all sorts of dimensions against 30 other universities from around the globe. So, yes, we receive a fee for the work that we do.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Professor Andrew Parfitt, Vice-Chancellor and President, UTS, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, p. 26.

⁷⁶ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), p. 27; Professor Corinne Cortese, *Submission 9* (47th Parliament), p. 9; Mr Simon Walker, *Submission 112* (47th Parliament), [p. 17]; Dr Tim Moore, *Submission 104* (47th Parliament), p. 5.

⁷⁷ Dr Alison Barnes, National President, NTEU, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, p. 2.

⁷⁸ Deloitte, EY, KPMG, and PwC.

⁷⁹ Dr Tim McLellan, *Submission 16*, p. 2.

⁸⁰ Mr Tim Orton, Managing Principal and Chief Executive Officer, Nous Group, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2025, p. 15.

2.79 Mr Orton told the committee that the aggregate amounts it had received from Australian universities over the past five financial years were:

- 2021 – \$4 762 381;
- 2022 – \$4 647 255;
- 2023 – \$10 833 190;
- 2024 – \$9 090 873; and
- 2025 – \$11 377 960.⁸¹

2.80 However, it was not clear to the committee how much of this income was derived from projects that accessed UniForum data. Mr Orton also declined to publicly state how much Nous Group charged universities for access to UniForum data.⁸²

2.81 According to Dr McLellan, universities 'frequently use UniForum to justify structural changes and redundancies' and as the basis for designing and evaluating 'radical restructuring processes'. Despite this, Dr McLellan noted that there is a lack of transparency about UniForum's underlying data and methodology. He elaborated:

A significant body of academic work has raised concerns about the over-reliance – in universities and elsewhere – on quantitative metrics and scores. What makes UniForum exceptional, however, is that universities are internalizing a benchmarking methodology that is not only privately owned but deliberately kept from public view.⁸³

2.82 The lack of transparency in relation to UniForum data appeared to flow through to reports produced using those data.⁸⁴ For example, the Monash University Branch of the NTEU (NTEU Monash) described a 'wide-ranging restructure that led to the redundancy of 270 staff', which was underpinned by a Nous Group report. According to NTEU Monash, that report 'was not made available to staff, ... on the grounds that it was commercial-in-confidence'.⁸⁵

2.83 Similarly, Mr Will Burfoot told the committee he had requested access to reports generated by Nous for the Australian National University (ANU). While Mr Burfoot noted that 'as a council member, it's within my powers to access those reports', he advised that he had 'not been given them as yet'. Mr Burfoot indicated the lack of transparency generated broader concerns about the involvement of Nous in university decision-making processes:

⁸¹ Mr Tim Orton, Nous Group, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2025, p. 12.

⁸² Mr Tim Orton, Nous Group, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2025, p. 13.

⁸³ Dr Tim McLellan, *Submission 16*, pp. 2 and 6.

⁸⁴ Dr Tim McLellan, *Submission 16*, p. 6.

⁸⁵ NTEU Monash, *Submission 117* (47th Parliament), [p. 10].

That causes me a great deal of concern—why these specific reports that were created and commissioned by the ANU are not being shared with council members. So I think there's a great deal of concern around the use of consultants in this and what part they're actually playing, because we don't know that. We know that the university talks about the UniForum data that they provide and all of these things, but we don't know to what extent the consultants are actually involved in the decision-making regarding changes in schools, changes in colleges, job cuts ...⁸⁶

2.84 In addition to a perceived lack of transparency, Dr McLellan pointed to concerns about 'poor quality data' generated via 'questionable survey methods', 'selective and inconsistent data analysis', and a potential for unintended consequences and perverse incentives.⁸⁷

2.85 More broadly, Dr McLellan raised concerns about:

- a lack of independence given that 'one wing of Nous Group provides UniForum analysis that often makes "the case for change", then a second wing of the same company swoops in to offer solutions: to design and deliver that change';
- the role of UniForum data in underpinning 'cookie-cutter restructures';
- the need for appropriate safeguards for the handling of confidential information; and
- the role of Nous Group in undertaking work for the Department of Education as part of the Universities Accord process.⁸⁸

2.86 He argued that the weight given to UniForum data by university executives means there is 'a strong case for greater public scrutiny of both the system and the consultancy advice tied to it'.⁸⁹

2.87 When presented with some of these concerns by the committee, Mr Orton denied providing universities with 'cookie-cutter' models and argued that 'it would be silly—to provide a single model for any particular university, because their circumstances ... and what they're trying to achieve from a teaching and research perspective is very different'.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Mr William Burfoot, President, Australian National University Students Association, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, p. 25.

⁸⁷ Dr Tim McLellan, *Submission 16*, pp. 5 and 6.

⁸⁸ Dr Tim McLellan, *Submission 16*, pp. 8 and 9.

⁸⁹ Dr Tim McLellan, *Submission 16*, p. 3.

⁹⁰ Mr Tim Orton, Nous Group, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2025, p. 13.

- 2.88 Mr Orton also emphasised the separation between Nous Data Insights (which provides the UniForum data to universities) and Nous Consulting, which only sees the data if approved by a university.⁹¹
- 2.89 In relation to transparency, Mr Orton advised that—without providing details of its formulas—Nous Group does explain the philosophy behind UniForum data to universities. He also stated that universities 'go into the program with their eyes wide open' and that there had 'never been a question about the rigour and integrity of the data that is provided by UniForum'.⁹²

Universities growing reliance on consultants

- 2.90 In addition to perceptions of excessive consultancy spending, a range of participants highlighted universities' growing reliance on consultants. For example, NTEU UQ described the changing role of consultants over the past two decades:

Over the last twenty years, the role of consultants has changed from providing occasional specialist financial assistance on an ad-hoc, as-needed basis, to one in which the big four consultancy firms have sought ever closer ties with the sector, including representation on governing bodies, and they have marketed an expanding range of activities to universities.⁹³

- 2.91 In a similar vein, some submitters contended that consultants operate not only to generate immediate revenue but also to create an ongoing demand for their services. For example, the NTEU commented that 'the consultants' never-ending advice is laced with self-interest' and cited comments by an academic suggesting that consultants re-engineer universities in ways that ensure their ongoing employment.⁹⁴
- 2.92 Another submitter described how a reliance on consultants was 'draining millions from universities while providing generic corporate strategies that do little to improve financial sustainability'. Instead, they argued, 'the consulting industry profits from perpetual restructuring, ensuring ongoing demand for their services while contributing to instability within the university sector'.⁹⁵
- 2.93 To this end, some participants questioned why universities did not make use of the expertise within their own institutions, particularly given the high cost and

⁹¹ Mr Tim Orton, Nous Group, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2025, pp. 15–16.

⁹² Mr Tim Orton, Nous Group, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2025, p. 17.

⁹³ NTEU UQ, *Submission 102* (47th Parliament), [p. 7].

⁹⁴ NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament) Attachment 1, p. 14.

⁹⁵ Name Withheld, *Submission 278* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

inconsistent quality of consultants' work.⁹⁶ The NTEU University of Technology Sydney Branch explained:

Our members often report that work delivered via external consultants is of such a poor quality that they could have produced it themselves in a fraction of the time, and often end up having to redo themselves anyway. While use of external consultants is not necessarily wrong in and of itself, where such duties could be performed by existing staff, at a fraction of the cost, and in doing so deliver higher quality outputs, it is wrong to engage external consultants, especially as a first port of call.⁹⁷

2.94 A similar sentiment was expressed by the Australia Institute, which noted that 'universities ostensibly use consultants because they claim to lack sufficient expertise'. According to the Australia Institute this claim is 'either a concerning admission of the lack of knowledge held in our higher education institutions, or a faulty justification for spending millions on private contracts'.⁹⁸

2.95 This view was reinforced by the ANU Governance Project, which told the committee that the ANU community had a strong appetite to participate in building solutions for the sector:

To address the key problems of the university, within two and half weeks in mid 2025, over 600 members of the community came forward to offer their help to design better governance for our university.⁹⁹

2.96 To this end, the ANU Governance Project put forward a proposal for teaching relief costed at just under \$500 000 to enable it to continue its work. Professor Rupert Grafton told the committee that the ANU rejected the proposal due to a lack financial capacity to fund additional projects. He contrasted this with the university's continued expenditure on external consultants:

... it's worth highlighting that that's not additional salary that's going to the people requesting it. It was support for them to do the job. It wasn't them getting a top-up salary. It's kind of amazing that a \$1.6 billion organisation can't afford \$400,000 or so with all the free labour, expertise and experience built into it, yet they can spend millions of dollars on consultants, and they have done that in 2025 and 2024. It's shocking, quite frankly.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ See, for example, Dr Tim Moore, *Submission 104* (47th Parliament), p. 4; Australian Historical Association, *Submission 36* (47th Parliament), [p. 2]; Dr Robert Czernkowski, *Submission 5*, [p. 4]; NTEU UQ, *Submission 102* (47th Parliament), [p. 7]; Name Withheld, *Submission 251* (47th Parliament), [p. 4].

⁹⁷ NTEU University of Technology Sydney Branch, *Submission 92* (47th Parliament), [p. 8].

⁹⁸ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), p. 25.

⁹⁹ ANU Governance Project opening statement, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2025, p. 25.

¹⁰⁰ Professor Rupert Quentin Grafon, Private capacity, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2025, p. 29.

2.97 The lack of higher education expertise among external consultants, and the corporate worldview they bring to change management processes, was highlighted by another academic:

These consultants are not experts in public university management, and approach the change management process with a lean corporate mindset that is at odds with delivering services which are in the public interest. And we pay these people millions of dollars per year to restructure and restructure the institutions endlessly, despite having academic experts within the university itself who are far better equipped to undertake organisational reviews and make decisions around potential changes.¹⁰¹

2.98 A disconnect between the corporate worldview of consultants and the public mission of universities was also observed by Professor Cortese:

The consulting advice provided, and directions suggested, is typically not technical nor neutral. The advice is not framed within the context of higher education as a public good underwritten by principles of collegiality, intellectual endeavour, and academic excellence. Rather, the advice framed within a business-based worldview — that bigger is better, that doing more with less is the way to go, and a fundamental belief in sanctity of the bottom line, however created.¹⁰²

2.99 However, according to Professor Cortese, consultants can provide university management with useful cover for decisions that are likely to be unpopular:

Consultants produce reviews that are often the basis for unpopular or unpleasant decisions in universities. They provide a complete transfer of blame from university management to the consultants and their recommendations, while also facilitating assistance with offensive and defensive manoeuvres as decisions are implemented.¹⁰³

2.100 A similar view was expressed by Dr David Cooper, who stated that the use of external consultants served 'primarily to circumvent the distant and implicitly adversarial relationship between executives and those whose expertise and judgement they could be relying on'.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Name Withheld, *Submission 251* (47th Parliament), [p. 4].

¹⁰² Professor Corinne Cortese, *Submission 75* (47th Parliament), p. 7.

¹⁰³ Professor Corinne Cortese, *Submission 75* (47th Parliament), p. 7.

¹⁰⁴ Dr David Cooper, *Submission 116* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

The influence of consultants within university councils

- 2.101 For multiple contributors, concerns about the influence of consultants extended beyond the provision of strategic advice and into the influence of corporations and consultants over university governing bodies. For example, Professor Guthrie and Dr Lucas pointed to research that 'empirically establish[es] the dominance of business leaders and consultants' in the governance of Australia's public universities.¹⁰⁵
- 2.102 Similarly, evidence provided by the NTEU showed that of the 366 appointed university council members in 2024, 143 were corporate executives or consultants (compared with 137 members elected from university staff, students and alumni).¹⁰⁶
- 2.103 A summary of council composition at a sample of universities was provided by Professor Cortese, who also highlighted the strong representation of consulting firms on university councils (see Figures 2.4 and 2.5).¹⁰⁷
- 2.104 In doing so, Professor Cortese emphasised the interwoven nature of relationships between university council members, major consulting firms and large corporations, which adds 'to the intricacy of the networks of interest that can permeate university councils' and 'brings an orientation of 'big business' at the highest level'.¹⁰⁸
- 2.105 To this end, the Curtin Student Guild considered it 'worrying that corporate experience in the largest companies and multinationals is an increasingly potent pathway into a position on a university governing body'.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Professor James Guthrie and Dr Adam Lucas, *Submission 188* (47th Parliament), [p. 18]. See also, Dr Tim Moore, *Submission 104* (47th Parliament), p. 4; Ms Kate Stotskaia, *Submission 221* (47th Parliament), [p. 1]; Professor Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, Union Member, NTEU, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 March 2025, p. 2; Name Withheld, *Submission 175* (47th Parliament), p. 1.

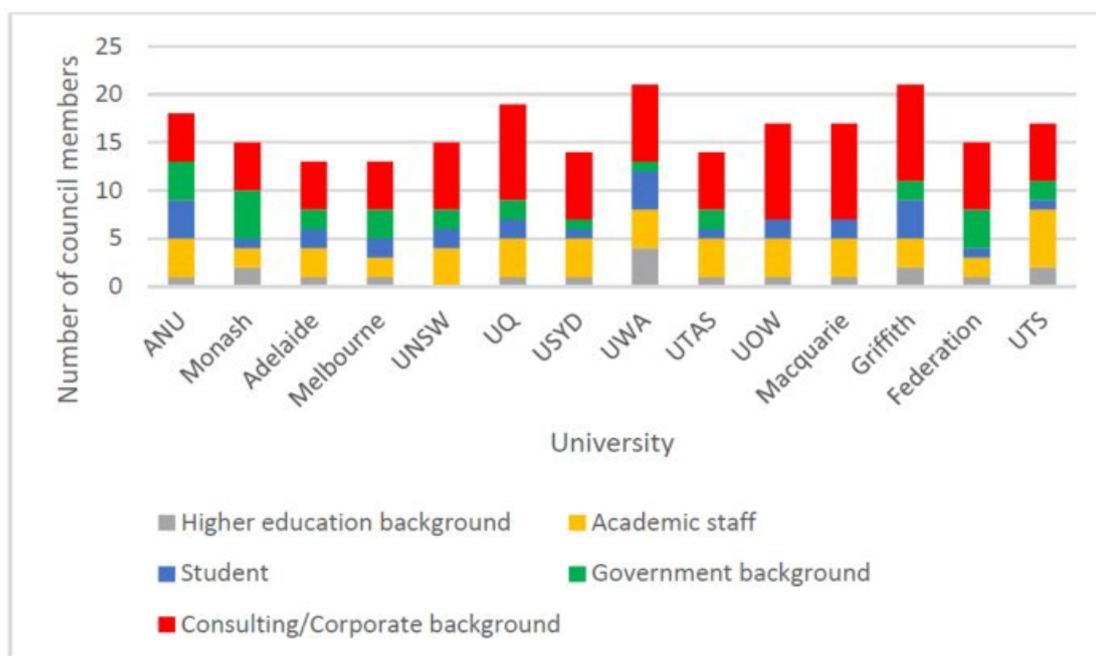
¹⁰⁶ NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament) Attachment 1, p. 24.

¹⁰⁷ Professor Corinne Cortese, *Submission 75* (47th Parliament), pp. 3–5. The sample of 14 university councils includes seven sandstone universities (established 1900s), two 'redbrick' universities (established 1940s–1960s), three 'gumtree' universities (established 1960s–1970s), one 'new' university (established from 1980s), and one Institute of Technology (University of Technology Sydney).

¹⁰⁸ Professor Corinne Cortese, *Submission 75* (47th Parliament), p. 8.

¹⁰⁹ Curtin Student Guild, *Submission 80* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

Figure 2.4 Composition of university councils for sample universities



Source: Professor Corinne Cortese, Submission 75 (47th Parliament), p. 4.

2.106 For Dr Taflaga and colleagues, the dominance of corporate appointments to university councils means they have become detached from the core purpose of universities:

University councils ... are self-perpetuating bodies dominated by external appointees, and in recent decades they are typically from corporate backgrounds. As neither producers nor consumers of universities' core product—knowledge creation and dissemination—they have minimal intrinsic stake in academic outcomes leaving councils detached from the university's core mission.

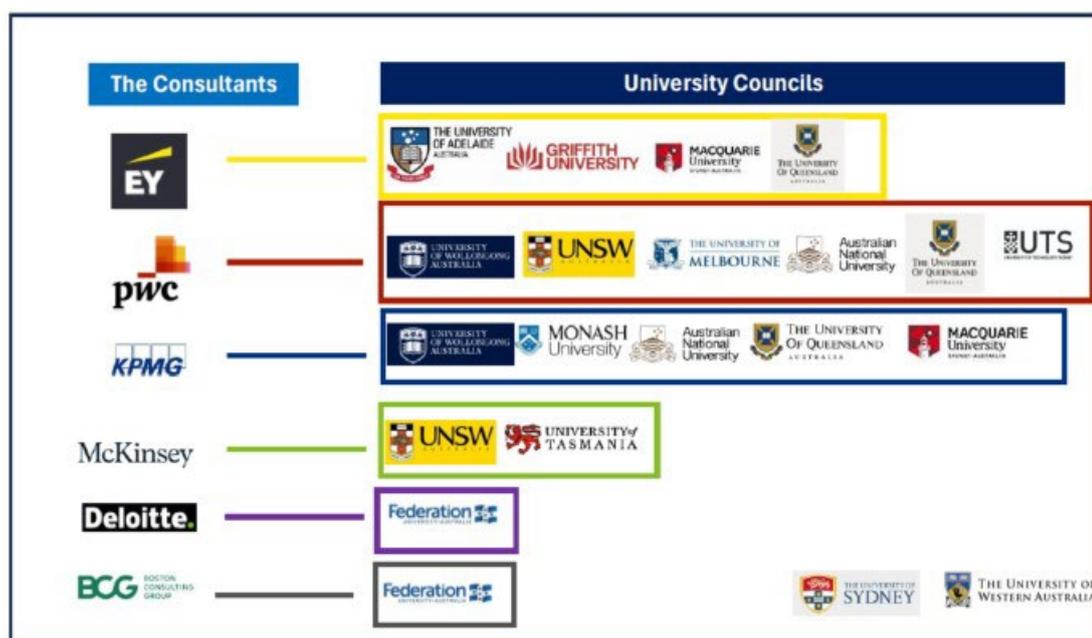
This misalignment fosters mission drift, weakens oversight, and contributes to repeated scandals.¹¹⁰

2.107 Similarly, the Curtin Student Guild considered the 'increasingly corporate bent of university governing bodies' to be 'at odds with the notion that public universities are public assets that benefit the community'.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Dr Marija Taflaga, Dr Francis Markham and Distinguished Professor Keith Dowding, *Submission 6*, [p. 3].

¹¹¹ Curtin Student Guild, *Submission 80* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

Figure 2.5 Consulting firm affiliation with sample university councils



Source: Professor Corinne Cortese, Submission 75 (47th Parliament), p. 8.

2.108 Another submitter asserted that 'a misaligned representation of business interests in universities' top governance bodies may bias universities' priorities and strategies away from their core mission and towards business interests'.¹¹²

2.109 Further, Professor Cortese stressed the need for alertness to the conflicts of interest inherent in these close these ties:

Consultancies and their interests are represented on all sides of the higher education 'table'. They are on university councils, they are advising on the direction of universities, they are engaged to conduct the reviews that lead to the advice provided, they provide the assurance for the contents of these reviews, and they are intricately tied to the business networks that make up the majority of the remaining council members. It is critical that others at, near, or even close to the metaphorical table are aware of the very real conflicts of interest that exist.¹¹³

Suggested actions to address the corporatisation of Australian universities

2.110 In response to the issues outlined above, inquiry participants proposed a range of actions to address perceived over-corporatisation of the university sector. These included:

- clarifying the role and purpose of Australia's public universities;
- reviewing and resetting the university funding model; and

¹¹² Name Withheld, *Submission 207* (47th Parliament), [p. 4]. See also, NTEU UQ, *Submission 102* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

¹¹³ Professor Corinne Cortese, *Submission 75* (47th Parliament), p. 8.

- introducing a national approach to managing student loads and fluctuations in demand for university places.

2.111 A range of actions were also suggested to improve reporting of consultancy expenditure, and to rebalance corporate and higher education expertise within the governance of universities (which related primarily to the composition of university councils and the restoration of collegiate governance models). Actions relating to reporting of consultancy expenditure and university council membership were addressed in the committee's interim report and are not repeated here. Proposed actions relating to the involvement of academics in university management are addressed in Chapter 3.

Clarify the role and purpose of Australia's public universities

2.112 A range of participants advocated for action to clarify the role and purpose of Australia's public universities. For example, the Australia Institute declared that it was 'time Australia proclaimed a national vision for higher education that reconfirms the public service mission of the sector, and prioritises the needs of students, staff, and society'.¹¹⁴

2.113 Similarly, Professor Page proposed that the public mission of universities be reaffirmed and stated that universities 'must prioritise education, research, and public service rather than operating primarily as revenue-driven entities'.¹¹⁵

2.114 Miss Jasmine Toronis recommended 'restor[ing] the public purpose of universities as public institutions with civic missions, not profit-making enterprises'. She argued that:

Australian universities must return to their purpose: to educate, to support research and to serve the public good. Right now, that mission is being lost to a model that treats students as customers and staff as disposable.¹¹⁶

2.115 Likewise, Stretton Health Equity urged the committee to 'consider how university governance can be oriented to reflect public good values ahead of corporate values'. It also argued that the governance of universities 'needs to reflect a vision for universities that sees them as engaging with a wide range of social and planetary issues rather than purely as a place to gain narrow job skills or to accrue profit to a corporate entity'.¹¹⁷

2.116 Another submitter, who served on the governing body of one of Australia's 'sandstone' universities, contended that university councils 'have become pre-occupied with corporate-style management—and largess—rather than

¹¹⁴ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*At the Crossroads: What is the post-COVID future of Australia's Public Universities?*), p. 47.

¹¹⁵ Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), p. 14.

¹¹⁶ Ms Jasmine Toronis, *Submission 8*, [p. 4].

¹¹⁷ Stretton Health Equity, *Submission 30*, 47th Parliament) [p. 3].

nurturing a culture of enquiry'. They argued that 'universities should operate for the benefit of three groups':

- students, who pay considerable fees to gain qualifications and knowledge that are vital not only to themselves but potential employers and their community;
- their academic instructors and support staff, who work hard to impart both intellectual and practical skills, and to undertake research that is critical to the common good;
- and the Australian public, who underwrite these institutions, with the legitimate expectation that graduates and staff will contribute to the health, prosperity, administration and collective wisdom of the nation.¹¹⁸

2.117 Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt AO, Interim First Nations Commissioner with the interim Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) and member of the former Australian Universities Accord Panel, also underscored the importance of recognising the public function of universities:

I don't want to underplay the importance of us starting to think about universities as a public good, which has been lost with the period of corporatisation ... It was one of the reasons why we recommended an objective for the higher education sector so that we can refocus on that ...¹¹⁹

2.118 To this end, Dr Harris suggested that the legislation governing universities be amended to provide that 'the purpose of a university is to engage in truth-seeking through teaching, research and the public dissemination of ideas'. The amendments should also require that 'in the discharge of their duties, council members must act in furtherance of the purpose of a university'.¹²⁰

2.119 Likewise, the Australia Institute proposed action to 'amend the establishing acts of universities to clarify that their central purpose is public research and education, not commercial or corporate performance'.¹²¹

2.120 Further to this, Professor Page advocated for the development of a legally-binding National Charter for Universities, which would 'define the principles under which universities operate, ensuring that their governance, priorities, and decision-making processes remain focused on their academic and public responsibilities'.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Name Withheld, *Submission 181* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

¹¹⁹ Professor Larissa Behrendt, Interim First Nations Commissioner, Department of Education, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, p. 19.

¹²⁰ Dr Bede Harris, *Submission 10* (47th Parliament), p. 4.

¹²¹ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), p. 2.

¹²² Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), p. 14.

2.121 The committee is aware that the importance of purpose has been recognised in the Expert Council on University Governance's Principle 4 (Transparency), which states that 'public universities should be accountable to the communities they support, and their purpose, objectives and performance should be transparent to those communities'. It further noted that:

Purpose should be a powerful driver of decision-making and activity, aligning effort and decisions throughout the university in furtherance of its contribution to society and reflecting its contribution to the public good.¹²³

The university funding model

2.122 The committee also heard calls for university funding arrangements to be reviewed and reset—particularly in the context of refocusing universities on their core functions as public institutions and reducing their reliance on non-government funding sources. For example, the Australian Historical Association saw 'a return of government investment in higher education as a way to reduce or reverse the ill effects of managerialism'.¹²⁴

2.123 Another participant argued that universities should be redefined and funded as a service, 'using government funding to provide outcomes to users, rather than businesses to make money of their own accord in anything other than a supplemental manner'.¹²⁵

2.124 In the context of a broader proposal for funding reform, based on development of a bi-partisan strategic agenda, Emeritus Professor Grahame Dowling suggested limits be placed on the use of government funding by universities:

Targeted funding will deliver this strategic agenda. The government pays the full costs of what a university contributes to the national strategy. If a university wants to step outside these bounds, it is free to do so. But it must raise its own funding for these endeavours. This creates a market-based test for their value. Will somebody fund them?¹²⁶

2.125 The Australia Institute argued that better university governance will require 'a fundamental refocus away from a commercial and corporate orientation' and a 'renewed emphasis on education and research, which are the central purposes of these public institutions'. This would necessitate 'regulatory change to legally embed these purposes, and a shift in the funding model of the sector to ensure these purposes are not undermined by commercial pressures'.¹²⁷ According to the Australia Institute:

¹²³ Expert Council on University Governance, [Final Report and Principles](#), p. 61.

¹²⁴ Australian Historical Association, *Submission 36* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

¹²⁵ Name Withheld, *Submission 269* (47th Parliament), p. 4.

¹²⁶ Emeritus Professor Grahame Dowling, *Submission 27* (47th Parliament), p. 7.

¹²⁷ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), p. 7.

... relieving the financial constraints on universities and curbing their reliance on private and corporate funding will help to address many of the sector's problems.¹²⁸

2.126 To this end, the Australia Institute recommended that ATEC, in the first 12 months of its operation, 'develop, in consultation with university stakeholders, a new sector-wide funding model as recommended by the Australian Universities Accord'.¹²⁹

2.127 An ATEC review was also supported by Mr Sheehy, who told the committee that the university financing model 'no longer works' and 'needs to be fixed':

We are hopeful that the incoming Australian Tertiary Education Commission gets on with the preliminary work that's needed to redraw the architecture of our funding system and makes that a priority.¹³⁰

2.128 A review was also supported by the Go8, which argued for current settings to be examined 'so they can support sector growth while addressing the very real and ongoing structural issues represented in our distorted funding model'. The Go8 stressed that, rather than asking for additional funding, it was 'highlighting the opportunity for a governance review to focus on how the current model could be improved to enable better use of current resources'.¹³¹

2.129 In addition to a review of funding arrangements more broadly, the committee also heard specific calls for the repeal of the JRG package. For example, Mr Paul Harris, Executive Director of Innovative Research Universities, described reform of the JRG package as 'an urgent priority'.¹³²

2.130 Professor Williams described the JRG package as 'one of the top five worst public policy mistakes made in the last 20 years in this country' and noted that its failure had been recognised by both the Universities Accord process and the Productivity Commission. In addition, while Professor Williams AO noted the government's commitment to reversing the policy, he stressed that WSU would 'just like to see it happen as soon as possible, because every day the students pay higher fees is, I think, another day of unfairness'.¹³³

¹²⁸ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*At the Crossroads: What is the post-COVID future of Australia's Public Universities?*), p. 47.

¹²⁹ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), p. 2.

¹³⁰ Mr Luke Sheehy, Chief Executive Officer, Universities Australia, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, p. 16.

¹³¹ Group of Eight, *Submission 49*, p. 2.

¹³² Mr Paul Harris, Executive Director, Innovative Research Universities, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, p. 50.

¹³³ Professor George Williams AO, Vice-Chancellor and President, Western Sydney University, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, pp. 9–10.

2.131 Mr Sheehy put plainly that the JRG package was something Universities Australia wanted 'to see dead, buried, cremated and replaced with something fair, equitable and sustainable for our sector'.¹³⁴

2.132 In response to questions about whether ATEC was looking into the JRG package, Professor Mary O'Kane, Interim Chief Commissioner of the interim ATEC, told the committee that it had been charged with 'looking at costing and pricing' more broadly, which 'is going to be a very vital piece of work'. Professor O'Kane continued:

The whole issue of costing and pricing, in some ways, has been dealt with briefly over the years, but probably the last megareview was in '88, in the Dawkins process. When the relative funding model was put in, in one year all universities were adjusted. This costing and pricing review will then go to government. But this is a very important piece of work to underpin the future of things like Job-ready Graduates and funding for universities.¹³⁵

2.133 Ms Jessica Mohr of the Department of Education likewise referred to the work of ATEC in better understanding teaching and learning costs so that it 'can provide advice on overall higher education funding levels per student'. Further, Ms Mohr reflected that 'any changes to [JRG] would require a change in legislation, which obviously has quite a lag to it'.¹³⁶

2.134 Challenges in unwinding the JRG package were also noted by Professor Annamarie Jagose, Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor and Provost at the University of Sydney, who told the committee that while it was an 'urgent matter', a speedy resolution may not be possible. However, Professor Jagose conveyed the university's willingness to assist with consideration of the issues:

Job-ready graduates, we feel, needs to be replaced with a fairer system ... We appreciate that it is hard for government to unpack, because legislation is required, and there will be budgetary consequences for government and they could be significant. We note that the government has referred this problem to the interim ATEC for advice. We are very keen to assist with its consideration of the issues.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Mr Luke Sheehy, Chief Executive Officer, Universities Australia, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, p. 18.

¹³⁵ Professor Mary O'Kane, Interim Chief Commissioner, Interim Australian Tertiary Education Commission, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, p. 18.

¹³⁶ Ms Jessica Mohr, First Assistant Secretary, Policy, Payments and Data Division, Department of Education, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2025, p. 34.

¹³⁷ Professor Annamarie Jagose, Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor and Provost, University of Sydney, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2025, p. 8.

A national approach to managing student loads and fluctuations in demand for university places

2.135 In conjunction with funding reform, some participants saw value in a national approach to managing university places, student profiles and fluctuations in demand, among other things. For example, Professor Andrew Deeks suggested that ATEC could:

... provide a mechanism for Federal Government control of university places, courses offered, the distribution and application of federal funding and the student profiles of each university. The ATEC could also exercise oversight of how this money is spent.¹³⁸

2.136 Similarly, the Australia Institute proposed that ATEC play 'a leading role in managing student loads and demand fluctuations so that the sector does not need to spend \$363 million on advertising to compete for new enrolments'.¹³⁹

2.137 To this end, Dr Quiggan urged an end to 'the corporate model' and argued that universities should be 'treated as public services', which cooperate to 'provide the best education possible for Australians' rather compete against each other. Dr Quiggan considered that a cooperative approach would 'yield substantial benefits', both in terms of course offerings and reduced marketing expenditure:

It would avoid a situation where some programs, seen as profit centres, are offered at nearly all institutions (MBA programs are a notable example) while other courses are unavailable except for students willing to move interstate.

Co-operation would permit substantial reductions in the expensive marketing and branding exercises characteristic of the managerialist university. A trivial example is the regular introduction, and equally regular replacement of vapid, and interchangeable, slogans and logos. An institution aspiring to a lifetime measured in centuries should not need a new slogan every ten years.¹⁴⁰

2.138 A similar view was expressed by Emeritus Professor Dowling, who proposed the development of 'a bi-partisan strategy for all the Australian publicly funded universities'. Rather than encouraging competition, this could instead establish strategic partnerships between universities—based on their individual strengths—in order to target national priorities:

This would mean specifying the business model (sources and uses of funds) of Australian higher education. It would also require articulating the structure of, and relationships amongst universities. For example, should they retain their conglomerate structure and gentle competitive nature, or

¹³⁸ Professor Andrew Deeks, *Submission 96* (47th Parliament), [p. 3].

¹³⁹ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*Elective spending at Australian universities: Millions splashed on consultancies, travel and advertising*), p. 2.

¹⁴⁰ Dr John Quiggan, *Submission 11* (47th Parliament), [p. 16].

should they be asked to form formal strategic partnerships with other universities and our major research institutions like the CSIRO?

Next, each university would be asked to prepare a strategy that formally recognised its strategic partners and its role in delivering Australia's key priorities. For example, some universities would be tasked with examining big issues like climate change, pandemics, defence, food security, the built environment, and public health. Some universities would focus on workforce training. Some would be designated as research centres of excellence.¹⁴¹

2.139 According to Emeritus Professor Dowling, this would allow funding to be directed toward key priorities while also providing 'economies of scale and scope'. It would also 'reduce duplication, especially when it involves teaching and research that are of second-level quality':

For example, Sydney does not need four universities each offering multiple versions of an MBA degree. Two institutions with deep capabilities would serve the city well.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Emeritus Professor Grahame Dowling, *Submission 27* (47th Parliament), pp. 6–7.

¹⁴² Emeritus Professor Grahame Dowling, *Submission 27* (47th Parliament), p. 7.

Chapter 3

Academic influence in universities

- 3.1 How universities are governed has a profound impact on the operation, culture and experience of university communities. A key element of a university community are the academic staff who have the responsibility for educating students and conducting research—the defining mission of a university.
- 3.2 As was evident in the committee's interim report, and equally in the issues covered in this final report, academic staff are impacted significantly when poor governance practices are applied in universities.
- 3.3 The committee received evidence from a substantial cohort of academic staff and students outlining their experience that centralised decision making, driven by commercial priorities, has had a detrimental effect on academic influence within universities.
- 3.4 The remainder of this chapter addresses the decline of collegial governance models, academic autonomy, academic freedom, and participants' suggested actions to address the disconnect between university management and the broader university community.

Decline of collegial governance models

- 3.5 The corporatisation of universities, and the consequent impact on academic freedom and autonomy, is not a new debate. Indeed, a predecessor to the Senate Education and Employment Committees, the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee, highlighted very similar themes in its report of 2001, *Universities in crisis: report into the capacity of public universities to meet Australia's higher education needs*:

[The] committee found commercial incentives were having a detrimental effect on the capacity of public universities to meet Australia's higher education needs:

The changing administrative culture of universities has seen governance and management shift from one based on a collegial model to one based on an enterprise or corporate model. An attitudinal change which has accompanied the new managerial culture appears to be a declining respect for the ideal of academic freedom.

The Committee concluded:

...universities cannot be relied on to maintain their own internal inquiries when serious issues arise which go to the core of academic freedom. As the Committee has noted elsewhere, the new managerial culture is now so entrenched that universities have an instinct to stifle uncomfortable opinions of a kind usually associated with academic institutions. They have an understandable tendency to place the value of

the university's reputation before their obligation to protect the rights of its faculty members to free expression.¹

- 3.6 The Australia Institute submitted a 1996 quote from the Vice-Chancellor of Lincoln University in New Zealand, who also described the impact of increasingly relying on alternative sources in the face of reducing government support:

Changes in sources of funds for ... universities could ... have implications for academic freedom. If we accept that he who pays the piper can at least suggest a tune, then a number of possibilities become apparent. With government funding an ever-diminishing share of the total expenditure of universities, the pressure is on to find alternative sources. It is not difficult to imagine situations in which a totally commercially focused council or board might exert at least subtle pressures to ensure that the university staff or students did not in some way offend major donors. Having already seen some major potential donors walk away from the university after failing to prevent the publication of some research work, I do not make this suggestion merely as a piece of idle speculation.²

- 3.7 As described in Chapter 2, multiple participants in this inquiry described how a series of reforms beginning in the late 1980s drove a shift in university governance from collegial to corporate models.

- 3.8 Professor Lionel Page, a professor of economics at the University of Queensland, argued that the 'Dawkins Reforms' of the late 1980s fundamentally altered the 'governance dynamics within universities' resulting in 'a reduction of academic influence in decision-making processes'.³

- 3.9 Public Universities Australia (PUA) similarly pointed to the 'Dawkins Reforms' as being responsible for the shift away from collegial governance models within universities, to what they term top-down managerialism:

In part motivated by [...] cultural shifts, but ostensibly with the ambitions of: expanding accessibility by institutional mergers of universities and colleges of advanced education; achieving economic sustainability by introducing HECS, enrolling international students and adopting a more 'business-like' approach to governance; and implementing performance monitoring for universities to justify their course and research profiles towards utility and job-readiness; the Dawkins reforms profoundly changed the basis upon which universities were funded, and set the stage for the transformation of university governance from a system of collegial academic agreement, to one of top-down managerialism.⁴

¹ Dr Hazel Ferguson, Higher Education Support Amendment (Freedom of Speech) Bill 2020, *Bills Digest No. 28, 2020-21*, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2020, p. 7.

² The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), p. 7.

³ Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), p. 2.

⁴ Public Universities Australia, *Submission 71* (47th Parliament), p. 10.

3.10 The Australian National University (ANU) Governance Project Working Group submitted the results of its consultation and research project which supported Professor Page's conclusions. Staff and students across the university expressed their deep concern at the level of disconnect between the university community and executive management. Many of the comments focussed on the contrast between the managerial approach to governance, and the collegial approach:

Participants described a deep cultural divide between the corporate style of governance increasingly adopted at ANU and the academic values of scholarship, teaching, and service to the public good. They argued that managerial priorities (participants cited profit, rankings, and consultancy frameworks in particular) were displacing the collegial and scholarly ethos expected of a national university.⁵

3.11 The disconnect between the university community and management was also evident in the NTEU report, *The 'Bell Curve' of University Governance*, which detailed the experiences of staff representatives on university councils. Dr Alison Barnes of the NTEU told the committee that it was a 'particularly damning report into what's happening across our governing bodies':

... the report is very clear in demonstrating the depth of the crisis that universities are in and the way ... our governing bodies are failing to perform their core functions of governing our public universities in ways that are transparent, where not only staff but students and the broader communities in which our universities are located have a clear sense of what is going on.

...

... to make good decisions you have to hear dissenting positions. You have to know what staff and students are feeling and thinking and what their experience is of what is happening on their campuses. We find that those dissenting voices are silenced, excluded and not welcome on subcommittees, and their contributions are essentially meaningless because deals are done behind closed doors where I think there is no transparency or accountability.⁶

3.12 According to the ANU Governance Project Working Group report, collegial governance is considered vital for a healthy university community:

Broader participation in university decision making was described as vital for fostering collective ownership, strengthening collegiality, and reinforcing the idea of ANU as a community rather than a corporation. Respondents highlighted that collegial governance nurtures cooperation, mutual respect, and shared responsibility for the university's direction, as

⁵ Australian National University (ANU) Governance Project Working Group, *Submission 18*, Attachment 1, p. 23.

⁶ Dr Alison Barnes, National President, NTEU, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, p. 3.

well as helping to ensure that decisions reflect the realities of teaching, research, and student life.⁷

3.13 The move away from collegial decision making has, according to Professor Hans Zoellner, meant that decision making that 'previously ensured universities provided the best possible service to students and the public, is now suppressed, together with suppression of free speech and robust open discussion'.⁸

3.14 Professor Page argued that diminishing academic influence in decision-making has resulted in situations where programs and course are terminated 'with minimal consultation from the academic community'.⁹ Professor Page argued that the underlying motivation for these decisions is not academic achievement, or investment in future research, but rather economic outcomes:

[T]his profit-centric approach has led to challenges in establishing (and retaining when these exist) doctoral programs, which, despite being esteemed as the pinnacle of academic instruction and essential for cultivating future scholars, are often viewed as financial liabilities due to their inherently small cohorts and limited revenue generation. Consequently, institutions appear to have shifted away from their foundational academic missions, prioritizing economic outcomes over the contribution to training the next generation of researchers.¹⁰

3.15 The University of Sydney Association of Professors (USAP) explained the benefits of a collegial governance model, and the consequences of a model that relies on a top-down managerial approach to govern universities:

Collegial and democratic processes are essential for effective university governance, because it takes full advantage of the discipline specific operational and academic expertise of the academic body, and so makes decisions that are not only academically sound, but also practical to implement. In contrast, when university management abandons collegiality, transparency and integrity, decisions become impractical and undermine the quality of academic work.

This top-down managerial approach is natural for managers who lack experience working as academics and who do not understanding academic values, to the detriment of the University's mission.¹¹

⁷ ANU Governance Project Working Group, *Submission 18*, Attachment 1, p. 36.

⁸ Professor Hans Zoellner, *Submission 296* (47th Parliament), p. 8.

⁹ Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), p. 8.

¹⁰ Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), p. 8.

¹¹ University of Sydney Association of Professors (USAP), *Submission 113* (47th Parliament), p. 9.

3.16 The top-down approach was heavily criticised by the University of Queensland Branch of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which was concerned with what it saw as a lack of accountability for executive management decisions:

There is little or no accountability for poor decision making in matters relating to resourcing for infrastructure, staffing, and the appointment of people into leadership roles. When School Executive decisions have been made that in time have been demonstrated to have been bad decisions, there is no attempt to learn from these errors and improve accountability. In place of collegial processes of debate and problem-solving, school leaders resort to denial and minimisation which compromise accountability and transparency.¹²

3.17 Stretton Health Equity, a research unit at the University of Adelaide, conducted research on the 'changing governance of universities, and how this is affecting the wellbeing of staff, and influencing the value of universities to society'. Some of the concerns raised in the research were around the impacts of the decline of the collegial governance model of governance on staff:

- increasingly fewer members of university councils with tertiary experience, and dilution of academic staff and student voices on councils;
- adoption of new public management approaches that have led to growing staff casualisation and short-term contracts;
- continual restructuring of universities that are stressful, opaque, result in extensive job loss and insecurity, undermine collegiality, and disrupt quality research;
- increasing precarity of academic freedom due to fear of these restructures or reprisals from corporatised management ...¹³

3.18 Professor Gavin Nicholson linked the move away from a collegial model (to a more hierarchical system) to changes in 2003 that limited the size of university governance bodies to 22 members:

The last 30-40 years have seen a clear change in the structure (or composition) of university senates and councils, starting with the 2003 federal government funding requirements that limited university governing bodies to a maximum size of 22 (refer to the Higher Education Support Act 2003 (Cth)) ...¹⁴

¹² University of Queensland NTEU Branch, *Submission 102* (47th Parliament), [p. 4].

¹³ Stretton Health Equity, University of Adelaide, *Submission 30* (47th Parliament), pp. 1–2.

¹⁴ Professor Gavin Nicholson, *Submission 21* (47th Parliament), p. 2–3.

3.19 According to Professor Nicholson, this is turn created a 'board dominant' model that has led to:

... a hierarchical, corporatised governance structure where resources are concentrated in an increasingly narrow set of decision-makers who share a similar worldview.¹⁵

3.20 The PUA argued that increased managerialism was not confined to executive levels in a university, but extended much deeper, resulting in significant culture change within a university:

The issue of university governance is not limited to the council and other top managerial positions. Even at lower levels, top-down managerial structures do not stop at the level of the dean or associate dean but extend further, turning almost all academics into managers ...

Academics who take on such roles are no longer in open, collegial, and horizontal relationships with their colleagues. Instead, these relationships become hierarchical, enforcing productivity through constant performance management.¹⁶

3.21 The committee also received evidence that one of the structural problems with universities being increasingly governed by non-academic executive managers is that those managers are much less likely to stay in their posts for a significant length of time. This leads to a short-term approach to decision-making and change management, which contrasts sharply with the traditional collegial model which sees decisions made by long-term academics who have a vested interest in the impacts of decisions and strategic direction. Dr John Quiggin, a Professor from the University of Queensland, discussed the issue and the consequences of the move away from collegial governance:

A central part of the drive to managerialism has been the replacement of collegial governance of academic matters with a system of executive deans, and an array of associate deans, with control over course design, assessment and other issues previously decided by academic staff ... Most senior managers from Vice-Chancellors to Executive Deans, and, increasingly Heads of School are appointed on five year contracts, with the possibility of a single renewal.

...

The institutional memory of a university resides in its long-serving staff, and particularly academic staff. The replacement of collegial governance by executive managerialism has imposed substantial costs but has not yielded improvements in the academic standards of universities.¹⁷

¹⁵ Professor Gavin Nicholson, *Submission 21* (47th Parliament), p. 2–3; See also Dr Tim Moore, *Submission 104* (47th Parliament), p. 1.

¹⁶ Public Universities Australia, *Submission 71* (47th Parliament), p. 20.

¹⁷ Dr John Quiggin, *Submission 11* (47th Parliament), [pp. 8–10].

- 3.22 A lack of attachment to the institutions, and by extension to the consequences of the decisions made at a council level, was also highlighted by Dr Bede Harris. Dr Harris suggested that appointed members from outside the university have a very different perspective to those subject to election from within the university community:

Since a majority of council members are no longer chosen by, or responsible to, the university community, but are chosen by and responsible to councils dominated by government appointees and those drawn from the corporate world, it was inevitable that university governance would be transformed.

Council members who are drawn from outside a university will have a different attitude to those who are members of the university community and who owe their position on the council to election by that community.

...

There is an obvious difference between oversight by a collegial and democratic body elected by the community it regulates and one where a majority of members are appointed and have no attachment to that community.¹⁸

- 3.23 In response to the Australian Universities Accord consultation process, the University Chancellors Council (UCC) rejected the binary proposal that one can have 'corporate' or 'collegiate' approaches to governing a university. UCC argued that while governing bodies are required to 'discharge their statutory and fiduciary duties' responsibly, this requires participation by staff and students:

The University Chancellors Council therefore does not accept that there is a 'tension' between two available alternative approaches that somehow plays out differently from one institution to another. Rather, the basic corporate responsibility for management is assigned by legislation and the Higher Education Standards. That responsibility itself requires participation by staff and students ...¹⁹

- 3.24 UCC also made the point that how this participation is ensured will be different across institutions:

We do not doubt that there are practical differences between institutions in the way that the views of the academic community are taken into account. Due to the diverse nature of Australian universities: old and new, small and large, multi-campus, metro or regional focus; there can be no one-size-fits-all approach to how collegial views are gathered and considered.²⁰

¹⁸ Dr Bede Harris, *Submission 10* (47th Parliament), [p. 3].

¹⁹ University Chancellors Council (UCC), *Submission 23* (47th Parliament), Attachment A (2023 UCC submission to the Universities Accord on Governance), p. 3.

²⁰ University Chancellors Council (UCC), *Submission 23* (47th Parliament), Attachment A (2023 UCC submission to the Universities Accord on Governance), p. 3.

3.25 Professor Pollaers, the Convener of the UCC continued this theme of broader participation in university governance when giving evidence to the committee in its hearing in Adelaide. Professor Pollaers urged everyone in the university community to actively take responsibility for governance, and not leave it to university management:

So the kind of cultural shift that needs to take place here and address the crisis really does mean that universities have to be listening and have to be engaging. People right across the university have to understand that they may not have responsibility for the governance but that it is not going to work if they don't own it as much as those who are charged with overseeing it.²¹

Academic autonomy

3.26 According to submitters, the evolution of the university sector away from a collegial governance model has had a profound impact on academic autonomy, with implications for academic freedom.

3.27 In terms of academic autonomy, many submitters were concerned that academics had lost the 'ability to determine the content of their teaching and research'.²²

3.28 PUA agreed with the view that academic autonomy is being eroded, and emphasised how important it is to the delivery of high-quality education and research:

Each academic discipline has its unique set of skills and orientation, and experts in these areas are best equipped to determine how to conduct research and teaching.

...

The significance of the discrete skills unique for each discipline is that academic freedom is essential for universities to deliver high-quality education and research. This concept encompasses the autonomy and trust that academics need to teach and conduct research without undue interference, as they best know how.²³

3.29 Professor Page argued that the shift in the balance of power in universities away from academics to managers has resulted in institutions being steered 'away from their core academic missions, orienting them towards a business-centric and managerial model'.²⁴

²¹ Professor John Pollaers, Convener, UCC, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 10 November 2025, p. 39.

²² Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), p. 1.

²³ Public Universities Australia, *Submission 71* (47th Parliament), p. 14.

²⁴ Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

3.30 Professor Page cited research that argued that the experiences of similar reforms in the UK had shown significant detriment to the concept of traditional academic autonomy:

These reforms led to significant issues:

- **Erosion of Academic Self-Governance:** University executives replaced traditional faculty-led governance structures.
- **Centralisation of Research Control:** Universities dictated strategic research themes based on funding imperatives, reducing the ability of academics to set their own research priorities.
- **Marketisation and Performance Metrics:** Academic output was increasingly measured through rigid research assessment exercises, incentivizing quantity over quality.
- **Weakening of Faculty Representation:** University councils and faculty boards lost power, with decision-making concentrated among managerial executives.²⁵

3.31 Associate Professor Kenny supported this view that government policies of the last 40 years had transformed the sector:

For over 40 years, neoliberal policies, especially in the Anglosphere, have resulted in governments implementing systemic reforms in higher education (HE) intended to make universities more efficient, accountable and responsive to the needs of Society, typically as reflected on their own political and economic agendas. Increasingly, within universities across the OECD, performance measures have been imposed which favoured economic and commercial outcomes over social and cultural outcomes and led to limits on autonomy and academic freedom.²⁶

3.32 As well as having less control over the content of teaching and research, the Australian Council of Heads of Social Work Education (ACHSWE) submitted that there is little autonomy around the delivery of a curriculum, which has in turn reduced options for tailoring courses to the needs of students. IT systems further 'lock in' the loss of control by academics:

The learning designers are involved in reviewing unit outlines, our course design, our curriculum systems. It used to be that you could put a unit outline out a week before teaching started, and you could consult with a colleague about that if you wanted. And if you wanted to make a change to an assignment; you could negotiate that with students and make that change to be responsive to the cohort. Now you're completely locked in. Unit outlines have to be done 12 months in advance and any changes have to go through a heap of different committees ... There's a loss of academic autonomy and discretion over the curriculum.

²⁵ Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), p. 13.

²⁶ Associate Professor John Kenny, *Submission 24* (47th Parliament), [p. 1] (citations omitted).

There's also the imposition of particular teaching technologies. Like you have to use this online platform, or this latest thing [is imposed], and then students end up having an impoverished educational experience.²⁷

- 3.33 The NTEU submission linked the erosion of academic freedom to casualisation of the academic workforce. In the NTEU's view a key aspect of academic freedom is having the security required to challenge management decisions:

The insecure workforce model of universities fundamentally contradicts the centrality of job security to academic mission of universities: not only is such security necessary for academic freedom but also more generally for the quality of teaching and research.²⁸

Effects of reduced academic autonomy on workloads

- 3.34 In terms of the practical effect of the changing makeup of staff in a university, Professor Page explained in his submission that despite more managerial and professional staff being employed, proportionate to academic staff, the administration burden for academic staff has actually increased:

... this transformation has not resulted in reduced administrative burdens for academics. Instead, academics frequently report an increase in bureaucratic tasks due to the proliferation of performance monitoring systems, compliance requirements, and internal reporting mechanisms. The additional layers of administration have paradoxically led to a situation where academics must navigate multiple levels of managerial approval to conduct research, implement curriculum changes, and undertake grant applications. Rather than supporting academic functions, managerial growth has introduced additional barriers that complicate research and teaching activities.²⁹

- 3.35 ACHSWE submitted that academics are being asked to take on more of the administrative burden than ever before:

Under corporate managerial governance, academics are spending increasing amounts of time on tasks formerly undertaken by administrative support staff. This increasing allocation of administrative responsibilities to academics encroaches on their paid work time, directing their energy away from the intellectual production for which they are employed.³⁰

- 3.36 One submitter described the situation at the Queensland University of Technology from their perspective:

The Executive have engaged in extreme cost cutting measures whilst building a costly management monolith. It is known that many receive weightings and bonuses, but this is not transparent. At the same time, administrative support staff have been drastically reduced in favour of a

²⁷ Australian Council of Heads of Social Work Education, *Submission 58* (47th Parliament), [p. 6].

²⁸ National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), *Submission 15* (47th Parliament), p. 4.

²⁹ Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), p. 5 (citation removed).

³⁰ Australian Council of Heads of Social Work Education, *Submission 58* (47th Parliament), [p. 5].

self-service environment through multiple IT systems that are not joined up and often do not work, or require specialist training to use them. This has pushed a higher and unacknowledged workload onto academic and administrative staff.³¹

3.37 The use of IT systems and the burden they place on academics was also cited by Dr James Humberstone, an academic from the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, at the University of Sydney. Dr Humberstone submitted that the responsibility for operating these systems lay with academics without the proper support or training:

This period also included a huge number of new systems with little planning or implementation support (including any reflection in workload) that were designed to make professional staff redundant, and to pass the workload on to academic staff – which is indeed what happened. These systems included Unibuy, WorkDay, Sydney Timetable, Zoom, Resource Booker, Services Portal, Akari, Okta, Leganto, Campus Assist, Researcher Dashboard, RECS, PowerBI, and Concur. The sheer dizzying amount of administration that is lumped upon academics to this day is extremely difficult to deal with.³²

Academic freedom

3.38 Academic Freedom is defined in the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Freedom of Speech) Act 2021* as meaning the following:

- (a) the freedom of academic staff to teach, discuss, and research and to disseminate and publish the results of their research;
- (b) the freedom of academic staff and students to engage in intellectual inquiry, to express their opinions and beliefs, and to contribute to public debate, in relation to their subjects of study and research;
- (c) the freedom of academic staff and students to express their opinions in relation to the higher education provider in which they work or are enrolled;
- (d) the freedom of academic staff to participate in professional or representative academic bodies;
- (e) the freedom of students to participate in student societies and associations;
- (f) the autonomy of the higher education provider in relation to the choice of academic courses and offerings, the ways in which they are taught and the choices of research activities and the ways in which they are conducted.³³

³¹ Name Withheld, *Submission 277* (47th Parliament), p. 1.

³² Dr James Humberstone, *Submission 273*, (47th Parliament), p. 2.

³³ *Higher Education Support Amendment (Freedom of Speech) Act 2021*, Schedule 1(1).

- 3.39 The definition was inserted into the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* (HESA) to repeal and replace the two references to 'free intellectual inquiry' with references to 'freedom of speech and academic freedom'.³⁴
- 3.40 The definition is based on that proposed by Robert French AC in his *Report of the Independent Review of Freedom of Speech in Australian Higher Education Providers*. The HESA also requires universities to have a policy on academic freedom and freedom of speech, which can be based upon the Model Code proposed by French.³⁵
- 3.41 In the Bills Digest for the Higher Education Support Amendment (Freedom of Speech) Bill 2020, the parliamentary library cite numerous Australian and international sources in their description of academic freedom:
- Academic freedom is generally considered fundamental to the effective functioning of universities. Although there are some areas of debate, it is widely understood to comprise the freedom of members of an academic community to undertake scholarly work in accordance with standards and ethics determined by that community without outside pressure, and is intended to safeguard the rigor and accuracy of scholarship and research.³⁶
- 3.42 In Australia, these rights and responsibilities are 'provided through state and Commonwealth legislation, as well as in internal university policies, and (in some cases) enterprise agreements'.³⁷
- 3.43 According to the NTEU, academic freedom is absolute critical to the operation of a university, and for the protection of all staff and students. These freedoms encompass the following rights and obligations:

Academic freedom entails the rights of members of a university community, without administrative constraints or fear of retribution, to freely:

- Discuss, teach, assess, develop curricula, and engage in community service;
- Research and publish;
- Publish and speak in public debate constrained by a responsibility to reflect scholarly standards;
- Express opinions about the institutions in which they work or are enrolled;
- Participate in representative bodies such as the NTEU; and
- Participate in decision-making structures and processes within the institution.

³⁴ Dr Hazel Ferguson, Higher Education Support Amendment (Freedom of Speech) Bill 2020, *Bills Digest No. 28*, 2020-21, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2020, p. 2.

³⁵ NTEU, [Intellectual and Academic Freedom](#), (accessed 14 November 2025).

³⁶ Dr Hazel Ferguson, *Bills Digest No. 28*, 2020-21, p. 2.

³⁷ Dr Hazel Ferguson, *Bills Digest No. 28*, 2020-21, p. 2.

At the institutional level, commitment to academic freedom requires the university to:

- Assert institutional autonomy, and in particular the right to determine for itself, on academic grounds, its research and teaching practices and priorities;
- Protect and support staff participation in university governance and representative bodies such as the NTEU;
- Protect academic integrity above the private or corporate interests of third parties. In receiving support from corporations or other private interests, higher education institutions must not compromise their autonomy and independence, or that of their staff; and
- Support its staff and students in advancing knowledge, ideas, theories and technology, and in serving society at large.

Academic freedom does not include the right to engage in unlawful discrimination, vilification or harassment.³⁸

3.44 Despite the adoption of the model rules for academic freedom in some form across almost all universities operation in Australia, the committee received many concerns from submitters that the principles are not upheld either by the universities themselves, or by regulators.

3.45 In a consultation run by the ANU Governance Project, staff and students at ANU considered academic freedom as a 'non-negotiable principle of good governance', which was 'linked not only to individual rights but also to the collective independence of the academic community, safeguarding research and teaching from undue influence by political, commercial, or managerial pressures'.³⁹

3.46 Professor Tregear claimed that the ability to criticise or comment on decisions made by university management on how the university is run and resourced to provide teaching and support research is fundamental to the principle of academic freedom.⁴⁰

3.47 The use of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs), or non-disparagement or 'gag' clauses was raised by several submitters. PUA raised the issue as an example of academic freedom not being protected, which in turn allows managers or the university executive to act with impunity:

[T]here is appreciable abuse of academics by university managers, who are unaccountable for their actions. Any academic who objects to improbity amongst managers, or questions a determination by a manager, or perhaps refuses to participate in an improper act demanded by a manager, can be targeted.

³⁸ NTEU, [Intellectual and Academic Freedom](#), (accessed 14 November 2025).

³⁹ ANU Governance Project Working Group, *Submission 18*, Attachment 1, p. 36.

⁴⁰ Professor Peter Tregear OAM, *Submission 191* (47th Parliament), p. 4.

The use of NDAs is now standardised business practice in all areas of our community, and they are often imposed even when there is no justification for doing so other than to prevent transparency and accountability ...⁴¹

- 3.48 Professor Tregear also commented on the use of gag clauses to silence dissent over decisions made by university management:

Here I wish to draw the Committee's attention to the commonplace use in the sector of so called 'gagging' clauses to silence internal criticism of senior management as they also have a significant negative impact on the ability and capacity of University governing bodies to do their work.⁴²

- 3.49 Dr Piers Larcombe supported the claim that such clauses are used to silence dissent, and 'cover up bad institutional behaviour'. Dr Larcombe contends that their use in universities is antithetical in 'institutions whose purpose is to elicit truth'.⁴³

- 3.50 Professor Melissa Castan, a professor of law who has worked in higher education for over 30 years, submitted an example of when she claims academic freedom was explicitly constrained in the case of the treatment of the Dean of the Thomas More School at the Australian Catholic University (ACU). According to Professor Castan's submission, the Dean's appointment was terminated after ACU 'discovered that the professor had, in 2018, published a law reform submission, and article in the *Alternative Law Journal* concerning the decriminalisation of abortion in Queensland'.⁴⁴

Suggested actions to address the disconnect

- 3.51 Many submitters suggested actions that could help resolve the perceived disconnect between the broader university community and university management.

- 3.52 Dr Erika Gonzalez Garcia and colleagues, from RMIT University, proposed that Australian universities adopt a more European model of university governance which is 'primarily accountable to the academic community':

In European universities, where Vice-Chancellors are elected by faculty, staff, and sometimes even students and professional staff as well, leadership is accountable primarily to the academic community rather than corporate-style boards ... This model fosters:

- **Academic Freedom:** Leaders are more likely to prioritise knowledge creation and dissemination over commercial interests ...
- **Collegial Decision-Making:** Faculty and students would have a greater say in institutional direction, reducing the risk of managerialism that

⁴¹ Public Universities Australia, *Submission 71* (47th Parliament), p. 51.

⁴² Professor Peter Tregear OAM, *Submission 191*, (47th Parliament), p. 9.

⁴³ Dr Piers Larcombe, *Submission 299* (47th Parliament), p. 5.

⁴⁴ Professor Melissa Castan, *Submission 156* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

sidelines academic priorities, and which has seen Australian universities allocate such disproportionate resources to executive salaries ...

- **Transparency and Accountability:** Elected leaders are more likely to maintain trust and open communication with the university community, ensuring governance decisions reflect academic rather than purely financial goals ...⁴⁵

3.53 There were also calls for academics to be responsible for some of the decisions which shape the culture of the university. These could include decisions on the appointments of some key academic personnel such as Deans and Heads of Schools:

There is only one way to prevent the further erosion of our higher educational institutions: Institute collegial governance at universities by insisting on majority academic control of university senates and introduce measures to enforce at least some academic control over university managers, such as the election of Deans, Heads of School, and Senior Managers. If they held some accountability to academic staff then they would finally be compelled to widen their perspectives, to listen to voices other than their own, and to consider the implications of their decrees.⁴⁶

3.54 The ANU Governance Project proposed a number of initiatives, not least the creation of a university senate to replace the academic board, or to sit alongside the council and academic board. The senate would provide oversight of both the council, and executive management:

Staff and students want to see the data that underpins decisions, not just summaries crafted by executives.

A Senate would help solve these problems by creating an accountability loop between the ANU community and Council. Council and the executive would be required to table Senate reports and respond formally to its recommendations. Staff saw this as the only way to end the culture of secrecy and disempowerment.⁴⁷

3.55 USAP similarly had a suite of recommendations they considered to be essential to improve the culture of their university:

- Establish an Independent Staff Ombudsman Office reporting to the Senate.
- Implement a Research and Teaching Freedom Charter safeguarding academic independence.
- Mandate Open Competitive Recruitment for Leadership Roles.
- Adopt a Trauma-Informed Workplace Conduct Framework, ensuring support for staff reporting misconduct.

⁴⁵ Dr Erika Gonzalez Garcia, Associate Professor Miranda Lai, Ms Olga Garcia-Caro, and Dr Caroline Norma, *Submission 70* (47th Parliament), p. 1.

⁴⁶ Name Withheld, *Submission 249* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

⁴⁷ ANU Governance Project Working Group, *Submission 18*, Attachment 2, p. 15.

- Publish an Annual University Governance and Integrity Report, externally audited.
- Mandate Maximum Administrative Overhead Ratios, reinvesting in student and research services.
- End reliance on unnecessary consultants; restore internal capability.⁴⁸

3.56 The suggestions and recommendations above are a snapshot of the various reforms that members of university communities say are urgently required. As discussed in Chapter 2, the inquiry has uncovered a myriad of views and concerns about the direction universities are heading, and questions around whether the transformation of the culture of universities benefits the university community as a whole.

⁴⁸ USAP, *Submission 113* (47th Parliament), Attachment 1, p. 7.

Chapter 4

University employment practices

- 4.1 The committee received a significant volume of evidence in relation to employment practices at Australian universities. While committed to the higher education sector and the public mission of universities, participants painted a picture of a sector characterised by a highly-casualised and vulnerable workforce, excessive workloads, and a lack of compliance with workplace laws.¹
- 4.2 The systemic nature of these issues was highlighted by a range of participants, including one academic who had been insecurely employed for more than 15 years. In this capacity they said they faced excessive workloads, including significant unpaid hours, but still had to rely on Centrelink payments between contracts to meet basic living expenses:
- This issue is systemic, not personal. I have many academic friends in similar precarious positions, and we all endure these working conditions. Excessive workloads are the direct result of under-resourcing and untenable funding models, which rely on unpaid staff labour to uphold teaching and research quality. Without systemic change, injuries, burnout, and overwork will persist as unavoidable outcomes of governance systems that prioritise cost-cutting over the welfare of staff and quality education.²
- 4.3 While acknowledging there have been occasions when universities have not met regulatory standards, the Australian Higher Education Industrial Association (AHEIA) contended that these shortfalls are identified by universities' governance processes, with management then working 'to address the issues and correct any impacts on those affected'.³
- 4.4 For AHEIA, universities' self-reporting of underpayments to the Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO) provides evidence of the sector's 'enhanced ... investment in governance resourcing' in the wake of the FWO's focus on the sector. It argued that in the absence of 'robust governance capabilities', there would be fewer universities self-reporting underpayments as these issues would not have been detected 'by sub-optimal governance monitoring processes and practices'.⁴

¹ See, for example, Mr Omer Kerem Konakci, *Submission 274* (47th Parliament), [p. 2]; Social Work Policy and Advocacy Action Group at RMIT University, *Submission 19*, pp. 1 and 3; Name Withheld, *Submission 286* (47th Parliament), [pp. 1–3]; Name Withheld, *Submission 251* (47th Parliament), [pp. 1–5]; Name Withheld, *Submission 192* (47th Parliament), [pp. 2–3]; Name Withheld, *Submission 233* (47th Parliament), [pp. 1–2].

² Name Withheld, *Submission 179* (47th Parliament), pp. 1 and 2.

³ Australian Higher Education Industrial Association (AHEIA), *Submission 45* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

⁴ AHEIA, *Submission 45* (47th Parliament), pp. 2 and 3.

4.5 However, this view did not appear to be shared by other participants, who pointed to long-standing and well-known issues around underpayments in the sector.⁵ Indeed, Mr Simon Walker noted that:

If a private company engaged in such widespread wage violations, regulators would question its corporate governance; similarly, a public university doing so indicates that internal checks (like audit and risk committees) did not detect or prevent unlawful practices.⁶

4.6 In addition, the FWO indicated that universities began reporting underpayments after it wrote to them in November 2020—based on existing intelligence and public reports about alleged non-compliance in the sector:

We wrote to Chancellors and Vice Chancellors of 42 universities in November 2020 based on our intelligence and public reports regarding alleged sector non-compliance with workplace laws. Since then, many Australian universities have reported substantial underpayments to the FWO, affecting both academic and professional staff. Our investigations have revealed systemic sector-wide non-compliance.⁷

4.7 According to the FWO, its investigations related 'largely to breaches of enterprise agreements relating to casual professional staff and academic staff'. These breaches included:

- misclassifying academics' duties, roles or qualifications;
- paying casual academics according to piecework 'benchmarks' (for example, time per student, or per exam of essay marked), rather than the hourly rates set out in enterprise agreements;
- unpaid time for casual academics; and
- failure to pay minimum shifts, as well as casual allowances and loadings, as per enterprise agreements.⁸

4.8 To this end, AHEIA argued for recognition of the sector's 'complex regulatory framework', with recent changes to the *Fair Work Act 2009* creating 'significant uncertainty within the sector vis a vis its legal obligations in respect of fixed-term and casual employees'. In addition, AHEIA stressed that the underpayment of staff was not a deliberate business strategy to reduce costs:

Contrary to some assertions, wage underpayment is not and never has been part of any business plan at any university to unfairly extort money from

⁵ See, for example, National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), *Submission 15* (47th Parliament), p. 18; Public Universities Australia, *Submission 71* (47th Parliament), p. 49; Name Withheld, *Submission 283* (47th Parliament), [pp. 1–15]; Name Withheld, *Submission 277* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

⁶ Mr Simon Walker, *Submission 112* (47th Parliament), [p. 9].

⁷ Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO), *Submission 16* (47th Parliament), p. 1.

⁸ FWO, *Submission 16* (47th Parliament), pp. 2 and 3.

their value employees and there never has been any concrete evidence to support such a contention.⁹

- 4.9 Whether deliberate or not, it is clear from evidence provided to the committee that non-compliance with workplace laws has contributed to a significant breakdown in trust between university staff and management. In this context, more than one participant conveyed a sense of deep cynicism and mistrust in relation to their employer's motivations and actions:

We eagerly await the university management's submission on their claims regarding legislative compliance and adherence to workplace laws and regulations. In reality, the institution operates within a toxic work culture devoid of trust and accountability, where routine breaches of the code of conduct and employment laws have been normalised. Violations of industrial laws and policies are treated as business as usual, with managers acting as though they are above the law — perhaps even above the almighty. Some will paint a picture of themselves as model citizens who strictly follow the law, but this is nothing more than lip service. There is no independent oversight ensuring that their statements are factually accurate, and if they are misleading or outright false, who will hold them accountable? The answer is simple: nobody. Our legislative framework for the tertiary education sector is fundamentally broken.¹⁰

- 4.10 A similar sentiment was conveyed by the Australian National University (ANU) Governance Project Working Group, which found a 'crisis of trust' among the ANU community:

A crisis of trust was the phrase many used to describe the cumulative effect of executive dominance, secrecy, weak accountability, exclusion, and poor decision-making. Restructures, job insecurity, and governance failures were said to create an environment of stress, disillusionment, and exhaustion. *'There is now a complete lack of trust and good faith in the way the senior executive engages with staff (let alone students).'* Others echoed: *'I no longer have any trust in the governance and their decisions due to their lack of transparency and their continued lies.'*¹¹

- 4.11 The mistrust in the sector was also recognised by Professor John Pollaers, Convenor of the University Chancellors Council, who told the committee that:

Over the past year, through a lot of collaboration and a lot of discussion, chancellors, vice-chancellors and staff have come together in the most open dialogue this sector has seen. We've heard difficult truths about underpayment, insecurity and the erosion of trust.¹²

⁹ AHEIA, *Submission 45* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

¹⁰ Name Withheld, *Submission 289* (47th Parliament), p. 8.

¹¹ Australian National University Governance Project Working Group, *Submission 18*, Attachment 1, [p. 26].

¹² Professor John Pollaers, Convenor, University Chancellors Council, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 10 November 2025, p. 33.

4.12 For the FWO, 'compliance with workplace laws ultimately supports improved culture, institutional reputations and, importantly, improved outcomes for not just affected staff but student bodies and the broader Australian community'.¹³

4.13 In this context, the FWO described the scale of universities' non-compliance with workplace laws as 'particularly disappointing', with significant impacts on staff wellbeing:

The scale of non-compliance has been particularly disappointing given the university sector's social licence, receipt of substantial taxpayer support, and because existing governance structures have regrettably not, in our experience, ensured workplace compliance. This has had a hefty financial and wellbeing impact on university staff.¹⁴

4.14 This impact was described by Mr Simon Walker as multifaceted, with staff facing 'financial stress, lower morale, and a sense of being undervalued—hardly the conditions under which a university can thrive'. Further, Mr Walker pointed out that 'academics on precarious contracts are disincentivised from speaking out on governance issues or academic matters' due to a 'real and genuine fear that doing so will preclude being rehired'.¹⁵

4.15 Non-compliance in the sector—particularly in relation to the treatment of casual workers—was also seen as eroding the reputation and social licence of Australia's universities:

Universities have not only relied excessively on casual workers; they have illegally underpaid them. These underpayments now run to many millions of dollars, and the effect of universities' non-compliance with the law has not only been the exploitation of skilled and committed workers but damage to the universities' social licence in the community. Universities are now widely regarded as bad employers, even lawless bosses, with inevitable impacts on public support for their activities.¹⁶

4.16 For participants such as the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), this is the result of 'decades of cultural change' in university councils, along with the corporatisation of Australian universities and a growing reliance on non-government funding', which has eroded 'good governance structures and practice'.

4.17 While the bulk of the evidence presented to the committee raised ongoing concerns about universities' employment practices, there were some examples of improving practice provided—including changes made at the University of

¹³ FWO, *Submission 16* (47th Parliament), p. 5.

¹⁴ FWO, *Submission 16* (47th Parliament), p. 4.

¹⁵ Mr Simon Walker, *Submission 112* (47th Parliament), [p. 9].

¹⁶ Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS), *Submission 48* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

Melbourne after it signed an enforceable undertaking with the FWO related to its underpayment of more than 25 000 staff.¹⁷

- 4.18 More broadly, the FWO noted 'improved engagement from the sector and the increasing improvement in acknowledgement of systemic issues'. Despite this, the FWO still cautioned that 'more work is needed':

While the FWO welcomes the improved engagement from the sector and the increasing improvement in acknowledgement of systemic issues, sector-wide resolution of non-compliance and the underlying causes is not yet complete.¹⁸

- 4.19 A similar sentiment was conveyed by the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS), which noted improvements but argued that universities needed to be better employers:

To be fair, universities do appear to have improved their legal compliance in the wake of wage theft scandals and more stringent government regulation. Yet, they have hardly begun the task of treating casual workers with the dignity they deserve, and with proper attention to their psychosocial wellbeing ... In general, universities need to do better as employers.¹⁹

- 4.20 The committee is aware that a link between good employment practices and university performance was also recognised by the Expert Council on University Governance:

To achieve its purpose and objectives, the university must be able to attract and retain staff with the right skills, experience, capabilities and diversity. Being a good place to work and study, and a good employer, is critical to this.²⁰

- 4.21 The remainder of this chapter outlines participants views on:

- the link between university governance and workplace law compliance;
- insecure work in Australian universities;
- the treatment of casual employees at Australian universities;
- impacts of insecure employment on staff wellbeing; and
- suggested actions to improve university employment practices.

- 4.22 The impact of corporatisation and workforce casualisation on the quality of teaching and learning at universities is addressed in in Chapter 5.

¹⁷ NTEU, *Submission 15*, pp. 18–19.

¹⁸ FWO, *Submission 16* (47th Parliament), pp. 2 and 4.

¹⁹ CHASS, *Submission 48* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

²⁰ Expert Council on University Governance, *Final Report and Principles*, p. 66.

University governance and workplace law compliance

- 4.23 A link between poor university governance processes and non-compliance with workplace laws was identified by a range of participants, including the FWO, which explained that its recent investigations of the sector had revealed 'systemic sector-wide non-compliance'.²¹
- 4.24 According to the FWO, this non-compliance has been underpinned by 'inadequate governance and a lack of senior management oversight', with 'poor practices that do not prioritise workplace relations risks or compliance' described as 'common'. This includes 'inadequate oversight by governing boards and audit and risk committees, and an absence of systems for identifying compliance risks'.²²
- 4.25 Other factors identified by the FWO as contributing to universities' non-compliance with workplace laws include the high number of casual workers in the sector, as well as 'a lack of investment in human resources functions, payroll systems, expertise and auditing'.²³
- 4.26 A similar observation about the impact of university governance on employment practices was made by the Victorian Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions, which noted that a number of issues in the university sector, including workforce casualisation and underpayments, 'have been attributed, at least in part, to failures of governance'.²⁴
- 4.27 Likewise, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) stated that 'workforce and employment problems'—such as the over-casualisation of staff and non-compliance with workplace laws—were a common governance challenge across the higher education sector.²⁵
- 4.28 Some submitters also connected poor employment practices in the sector with the growing corporatisation of Australian universities. For example, the NTEU contended that evidence from the FWO has linked 'the deeply ingrained managerial culture and corporatised practices of universities with a failure to meet the expectation that universities should set the example as "exemplary" employers'.²⁶

²¹ FWO, *Submission 16* (47th Parliament), p. 2. See also, NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament), p. 18.

²² FWO, *Submission 16* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

²³ FWO, *Submission 16* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

²⁴ Victorian Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions, *Submission 12* (47th Parliament), p. 4.

²⁵ Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), *Submission 17* (47th Parliament), p. 4.

²⁶ NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament), p. 25.

4.29 Further, the Australia Institute noted that corporatisation had led to more aggressive cost-cutting, increased workforce casualisation, higher workloads and widespread underpayments:

As universities have become more corporatized, their strategies for cutting labour costs have become more aggressive, and similar to labour cost suppression strategies common in the private sector. The result has been increasing use of casual and temporary contracts, larger class sizes, increased workloads for staff, and even widespread wage theft.²⁷

4.30 A similar view was expressed by a sessional lecturer from RMIT University, who described universities being run as businesses, with class delivery 'treated as a for-profit service'. This, in turn, was seen to incentivise universities to maximise student numbers and decrease costs 'via casualisation of staff and overburdening what few permanent staff remain'.²⁸

4.31 In this corporatised environment, employee-related costs were viewed as 'a prime target for cost-cutting measures when universities aim to reduce expenditure'. While not out of line with other human service industries, labour costs represent 'the largest share ... of university expenses':

This includes wages and salaries, superannuation and pension contributions, payroll tax, leave entitlements and workers compensation for academic and non-academic staff. Teaching and research, the primary services performed by universities, are inherently labor-intensive activities, and hence labour costs naturally constitute a large share of total university expenses. This is also true in other human and public service industries.²⁹

4.32 As discussed in Chapter 2, participants also discussed the role of declining public funding in driving corporatisation of the sector, poor governance practices, and a focus on cost saving measures. For example, Associate Professor Jessica Harris and Dr Kathleen Smithers contended that the lack of funding has resulted in poor governance practices by driving a 'reliance on casual work, and an overall lack of institutional oversight of the management of casual employees'.³⁰

4.33 The Australia Institute made a similar observation and submitted that a reduction in public funding for universities and an increased reliance on private sources of revenue has 'pressured these public institutions to adopt a business

²⁷ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*Public Attitudes on Issues in Higher Education*), p. 10.

²⁸ Name Withheld, *Submission 269* (47th Parliament), [p. 3].

²⁹ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*Public Attitudes on Issues in Higher Education*), p. 10.

³⁰ Associate Professor Jessica Harris and Dr Kathleen Smithers, *Submission 32* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

model shaped intrinsically by competitive market considerations ... increasing prices wherever possible and prioritising cost saving measures'.³¹

- 4.34 Likewise, the NTEU linked the corporatisation of universities and their dependence on non-government funding with increased managerialism and the adoption of 'unstable and insecure employment arrangements' designed to reduce labour costs 'in the short term'.³²
- 4.35 This view appeared to be supported, at least in part, by Charles Sturt University, which stated that current funding arrangements 'drive universities to rely on a casual teaching workforce in order to manage within the Commonwealth funding allocated'.³³

Insecure work in Australian universities

- 4.36 Issues around the casualisation of the university workforce and the use of insecure fixed term contracts were raised frequently during the committee's inquiry.³⁴
- 4.37 CHASS observed that 'universities run to a great extent on a large, casualised precarious workforce',³⁵ while the Australia Institute described the 'deteriorating quality and security of employment' as a 'major concern' for university staff and the quality of education they provide.³⁶
- 4.38 Universities' reliance on insecure employment arrangements was described as 'a significant governance failure' by Dr Brett White, with 'up to 70 per cent of teaching ... delivered by casual or sessional staff, many of whom work under precarious conditions with low pay, no job security, and little access to research funding or professional development opportunities'.³⁷
- 4.39 As noted in the previous section, the casualisation of the university workforce was seen by some participants as a deliberate strategy to cut labour costs. For example, the Australia Institute submitted that 'over the past 30 years, insecure

³¹ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*Public Attitudes on Issues in Higher Education*), p. 7.

³² NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament), p. 4.

³³ Charles Sturt University, *Submission 52* (47th Parliament), p. 12.

³⁴ See, for example, Dr Raffaele Ciriello, *Submission 4* (47th Parliament), [p. 1]; Dr Erika Gonzalez Garcia, Associate Professor Miranda Lai, Ms Olga Garcia-Caro, Dr Caroline Norma, *Submission 70* (47th Parliament), [p. 2]; Dr Alex Burns, *Submission 99* (47th Parliament), p. 2; Mr Omer Konacki, *Submission 274* (47th Parliament), [p. 1]; Name Withheld, *Submission 150* (47th Parliament), [p. 1]; Name Withheld, *Submission 169* (47th Parliament), [p. 4]; Name Withheld, *Submission 145*, [p. 1].

³⁵ CHASS, *Submission 48* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

³⁶ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*Public Attitudes on Issues in Higher Education*), p. 11.

³⁷ Dr Brett White, *Submission 229* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

employment has become a core business strategy in the higher education sector'.³⁸

- 4.40 A similar view was expressed by an experienced academic who has 'worked in precarious employment in universities for over 15 years':

The chronic casualisation of teaching is not incidental—it reflects deliberate governance decisions that prioritise cost-cutting over sustainable employment models, leaving staff without job security or fair compensation. It is also profoundly harmful to students and the sector.³⁹

- 4.41 However, for universities such as the University of Sydney, casual staff were seen as 'a critical component of the workforce' who support the delivery of education through teaching, lecturing and tutoring, 'in response to student load and activity fluctuations across semesters'.⁴⁰

- 4.42 Similarly, the University of Adelaide reflected that casual staff help to 'address short-term needs, support academic delivery, and contribute contemporary industry knowledge' as well as enhancing 'responsiveness to operational demands and new opportunities'. In addition, it submitted that there are a range of factors that influence rates of casualisation:

... including program and course demand management, industry-specific skill needs and personal choice for casual teaching and short-term grant funding'.⁴¹

- 4.43 The remainder of this section addresses rates of casual employment at Australian universities, the link between casualisation and non-compliance with workplace laws, and the actions being taken by some universities to reduce casualisation.

Rates of casual employment at Australian universities

- 4.44 The committee heard varying—though similar—evidence from participants about the growth of casual employment at Australian universities. According to the Australia Institute, figures from the Department of Education show that between 2000 and 2020 the number of casual staff employed at Australian universities increased from 12 670 to 23 946 (in full-time equivalents, FTE). In addition, casual employment grew much faster than total employment over the past two decades (89 per cent versus 19 per cent).⁴²

³⁸ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*Public Attitudes on Issues in Higher Education*), p. 10.

³⁹ Name Withheld, *Submission 179* (47th Parliament), p. 1.

⁴⁰ University of Sydney, *Submission 39* (47th Parliament), p. 13.

⁴¹ University of Adelaide, *Submission 54* (47th Parliament), p. 14.

⁴² The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*At the Crossroads: What is the post-COVID future of Australia's Public Universities*), p. 40.

4.45 However, the Australia Institute also noted that 'FTE measures of employment ... mask the true scale of casual employment':

Based on figures from the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission in 2020, a total of 207,829 people were employed by public universities, 84,000 of them employed on a casual basis. Casual staff thus accounted for 40.5 per cent of all employment (measured in headcounts, rather than FTEs).⁴³

4.46 Similarly, the NTEU estimated that in 2023, the 10 580 FTE of casual 'teaching only' staff would have equalled around 50 000 actual staff members.⁴⁴ Further, its estimation suggested that 49 per cent of staff at Australian universities were employed on a casual basis, with 19 per cent on a limited term basis, and 32 per cent on a permanent/tenurial basis. This appeared to mask significant variation between institutions, with the highest rate of casual employment among universities estimated at 67 per cent, while the lowest was estimated at 32 per cent. In terms of limited term employment, the highest rate was 33 per cent and the lowest was 5 per cent.⁴⁵

4.47 Overall, NTEU modelling suggested that 68 per cent of university workers have been employed on casual or fixed term contracts, 'often to perform ongoing work for very long periods'. In relation to non-casual workers only, it appears that 37 per cent are employed on fixed term contracts. This compares to 3.4 per cent of workers in the broader economy who are employed on fixed term contracts.⁴⁶

4.48 According to the NTEU, the 'trend is getting worse, with the number of fixed term staff in the sector almost doubling since 2000 whereas the number of continuing staff has only grown by 58 per cent'.⁴⁷

4.49 Estimates of the proportion of teaching delivered by casual and/or sessional staff ranged from over 50 per cent to up to 70 per cent.⁴⁸ Indeed, one submitter with nine years' experience as a sessional lecturer indicated that their university's

⁴³ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*At the Crossroads: What is the post-COVID future of Australia's Public Universities*), p. 40.

⁴⁴ NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament), p. 21.

⁴⁵ NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament), Attachment 1, p. 17. The estimated headcount for casual employees was calculated as six times FTE.

⁴⁶ NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament), Attachment 1, p. 17.

⁴⁷ NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament), Attachment 1, p. 17.

⁴⁸ Professor George Williams AO, Vice-Chancellor and President, Western Sydney University, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, p. 3 and Dr Brett White, *Submission 229* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

human resources department told them that approximately 95 per cent of all teaching at the university was undertaken by sessional staff.⁴⁹

- 4.50 Despite the known concerns about casualisation in the sector, very few universities provided information on rates of casual employment within their institutions. A number of university submissions did not mention casual employment at all.
- 4.51 Of those that did provide information, the University of Adelaide stated that in 2023, casualisation rates for its academic staff were 17.9 per cent (compared with a sector average of 21.6 per cent) and 10.6 per cent for professional staff (compared with an industry average of 10.1 per cent).⁵⁰
- 4.52 The University of Sydney indicated that in 2024, it employed 9180 FTE academic and professional staff (5210 continuing and 3970 fixed term) and engaged an average of 5000 casual staff each month (representing 2680 FTE staff).⁵¹
- 4.53 The Innovative Research Universities advised that in 2023, its seven member universities employed 'approximately 18 000 staff (FTE), of whom approximately 2650 were casual staff'.⁵²
- 4.54 Difficulties arising from lack of casual staffing data were raised by the University of Technology Sydney Branch of the NTEU (NTEU UTS), which reported that the data are complicated by the way 'staffing is tracked and reported, with variations in headcount and full-time-equivalent numbers provided in different categories of employment'. As an example, NTEU UTS described how a lack of data mean UTS is unable to report against its commitment to 'parallel increases in continuing and decreases in casual appointments in the same area':

... the UTS Staff Agreement (2021) includes sets of clauses ... relating to the use of fixed-term and casual employment, and conversion of roles to continuing appointments. Casual numbers for UTS (according to HES data) over the period 2022–24 are 641, 722, and 739, comprising 16.71%, 17.55%, and 17.33% of total workforce over the same period. The Enterprise Agreement commits the University to parallel increases in continuing and decreases in casual appointments in the same area, however despite reporting requirements ... the university claims that it is not possible to report on casual staffing by work area. The result of this reporting concern is that although they claim that secure continuing work has been created with corresponding reductions in casual numbers, they are unable to

⁴⁹ Name Withheld, *Submission 269* (Name Withheld), [p. 1].

⁵⁰ University of Adelaide, *Submission 54* (47th Parliament), p. 14.

⁵¹ University of Sydney, *Submission 39* (47th Parliament), p. 12.

⁵² Innovative Research Universities, *Submission 64* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

reconcile that with the increased number of FTE casual employees as a proportion of total FTE staffing.⁵³

- 4.55 In part, a lack of definitive data about rates of casual employment may be related to the way data are currently collected by the Department of Education (Box 4.1).

Box 4.1 Department of Education – higher education data collection⁵⁴

The Department of Education collects and disseminates statistics related to the provision of higher education in Australia. This includes data on the numbers and characteristics of university staff.

There are two separate casual staff data submissions—estimated casual staff and actual casual staff. Both submissions use an FTE staffing measure.

Estimated casual staff

The estimated casual staff submission includes an estimated FTE staffing level for casual staff in the calendar year. This submission includes a single figure for the reference year, without any detail of gender, function, classification, organisational unit, or so on.

Actual casual staff

The actual casual staff submission includes actual staff resources expended by casual staff in the calendar year measured in FTEs. The data are provided in aggregate rather than unit record (i.e. a single record may relate to many staff members), and include:

- gender;
- work contract;
- function (teaching, research, teaching & research, other);
- current duties classification; and
- academic or non-academic organisational unit.

- 4.56 To this end, the department noted that it was 'scoping improvements' that would require universities to provide better data 'on casual staff numbers to increase transparency and understanding of workforce patterns and issues'.⁵⁵

High rates of casualisation contribute to non-compliance with workplace laws

- 4.57 As mentioned previously in this chapter, the high rate of casual employment at Australian universities has been cited as one of the factors underpinning systemic sector-wide non-compliance with workplace laws.

⁵³ University of Technology Sydney Branch of the NTEU (NTEU UTS), *Submission 92* (47th Parliament), [p. 13].

⁵⁴ Department of Education, [Staff Data](#) (accessed 21 November 2025).

⁵⁵ Department of Education, *Submission 37* (47th Parliament), p. 15.

- 4.58 The precarious nature of casual employment was noted by a number of participants, including one lecturer who put plainly that 'sessional staff are casual employees with no sick leave, recreational leave or job security'.⁵⁶
- 4.59 The precariousness of insecure work was recognised by the Australia Institute, which stated that it 'has eroded the power of workers to enforce the terms of their contracts or bargain for better conditions'.⁵⁷
- 4.60 Another submitter described casual academics as 'vulnerable to exploitation' due to 'employment practices that generate power differences between human resource management (and academics in a hirer/management role) and casual academics'.⁵⁸
- 4.61 One former academic compared the current employment of casual academics to the Bull System of daily casualised labour used on Australian wharves in the early 20th century—'they had no security and, and to keep themselves employable, would work excessive hours, skip safety protocols and do whatever was required to keep their jobs'.⁵⁹
- 4.62 The vulnerability of those in insecure work is heightened by fear of retribution if they raise concerns about underpayments or other workplace issues. For example, the NTEU suggested that workforce casualisation had 'created a workforce that is less likely to speak out or challenge management decisions' and pointed to a 'tight nexus ... between insecure work and wage theft'.⁶⁰
- 4.63 In line with this, the Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association noted that those employed in casual roles are 'unlikely to log complaints due to job insecurity'.⁶¹
- 4.64 Difficulties facing casual academics who consider complaining were highlighted by an academic from the University of Sydney:

Not only can it be intimidating—appeals are directed to Heads of School and high level Faculty managers rather than their immediate supervisors—but as they are employed only semester by semester, it is very easy for them to lose future work if they are seen as difficult. No reason need be given for not rehiring an individual on a casual basis.⁶²

⁵⁶ Name Withheld, *Submission 269* (Name Withheld), [p. 1].

⁵⁷ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*At the Crossroads: What is the post-COVID future of Australia's Public Universities*), p. 52.

⁵⁸ Name Withheld, *Submission 185* (47th Parliament), p. 1.

⁵⁹ Name Withheld, *Submission 186* (47th Parliament), [p. 3].

⁶⁰ NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament), p. 4.

⁶¹ Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association, *Submission 44* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

⁶² Name Withheld, *Submission 280* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

4.65 A similar view was expressed by a submitter from the Queensland University of Technology:

Lower ranking staff such as PhD students who teach are expected to make complaints about underpay internally, but they risk jeopardising future career opportunities and will rarely speak out.⁶³

4.66 The fear of retribution appeared to be reflected in the results of a survey by the Australian Association of University Professors, which found that 69.8 per cent of respondents 'agree/strongly agree that reporting wrongdoing leads to retaliation'.⁶⁴

4.67 A further example was provided by Mr Walker, who explained how a group of casual staff who worked at James Cook University for over a decade had requested conversion to ongoing employment. According to Mr Walker, the request was refused, 'and those who persisted with a review were not offered work from 2022 onwards' in what he described as 'a clear act of retribution'.⁶⁵

4.68 The effect of insecure work in subduing complaints about non-compliance was also reflected in evidence from the FWO, which stated that the insecurity of work, 'particularly for casual academic staff, leads to a culture within universities where employees rarely raise underpayment concerns or where a systematic claims review approach is not adopted'.⁶⁶

Some universities are actively working to reduce casualisation

4.69 While many submissions from universities did not address workforce casualisation, some highlighted the steps being taken to reduce reliance on casual employment. For example, the University of Melbourne noted that 'workforce structures which rely heavily on casual employment are neither desirable nor sustainable'. To this end, it advised that it has been working to reduce casualisation, re-think its employment model, and improve employment and management practices:

Between 2018 and 2024, the University increased the size of its continuing workforce while reducing dependency on casual and short-duration fixed-term employment. This has resulted in achieving the objective set in our 2024 Enterprise Agreement, with 79.6% of our employees in our core workforce as at the end of 2024.⁶⁷

⁶³ Name Withheld, *Submission 277* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

⁶⁴ Australian Association of University Professors, *Submission 115.1* (47th Parliament), p. 2 (emphasis removed).

⁶⁵ Mr Simon Walker, *Submission 112* (47th Parliament), [p. 10].

⁶⁶ FWO, *Submission 16* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

⁶⁷ University of Melbourne, *Submission 53* (47th Parliament), p. 6.

- 4.70 This was reflected in evidence from Ms Katarina Kapobassis, Vice-President, Administration and Finance, and Chief Operating Officer at the University of Melbourne, who told the committee that since 2019, the university had reduced its casual workforce from 16 per cent to 9.2 per cent.⁶⁸
- 4.71 Similarly, the University of Sydney pointed to its current Enterprise Agreement, which commits the university to reducing reliance on casual staff. This includes:
- taking all reasonable steps to achieve a 20 per cent reduction in the proportion of the casual academic workforce;
 - increasing roles for continuing staff by funding and advertising 330 new continuing academic positions; and
 - committing to 25 per cent of the new education focused positions being filled by long-term casual and fixed term staff, and 50 per cent of the new teaching and research positions to be filled by existing eligible staff.⁶⁹
- 4.72 In addition, the University of Sydney submission stated that between January 2023 and September 2024, 444 staff members had used casual conversion legislative provisions to 'convert to either a continuing or fixed-term position'.⁷⁰ This figure was updated at a public hearing by Professor Annamarie Jagose, Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor and Provost at the University of Sydney, who told the committee that since 2023, 'some 700-plus casual workers have converted to either fixed-term or continuing employment'.⁷¹
- 4.73 The use of casual conversion provisions was also noted by Professor George Williams AO, Vice-Chancellor of Western Sydney University (WSU), who told the committee the university had 'offered 160 staff conversions from casual to secure employment' over three years. According to Professor Williams, this was 'one of a number of initiatives that address what is a really serious problem of insecure work in the sector'.⁷²
- 4.74 The University of New South Wales also highlighted its commitment, in negotiations with the NTEU, to providing more secure employment opportunities for casual academic employees:

This includes a commitment in respect of at least 20 percent of UNSW's existing casual academic workforce. These opportunities may include conversion to continuing or convertible tenure-track employment,

⁶⁸ Ms Katarina Kapobassis, Vice-President, Administration and Finance, and Chief Operating Officer, University of Melbourne, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2025, p. 3.

⁶⁹ University of Sydney, *Submission 39* (47th Parliament), p. 13.

⁷⁰ University of Sydney, *Submission 39* (47th Parliament), p. 13.

⁷¹ Professor Annamarie Jagose, Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor and Provost, University of Sydney, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2025, p. 3.

⁷² Professor George Williams AO, Vice-Chancellor and President, Western Sydney University, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, pp. 2 and 3.

alternative offers of employment, or prioritising existing casual academics for available roles before seeking to fill the role externally.⁷³

4.75 The NTEU also recognised some decasualisation across the sector and particularly applauded the efforts of WSU in relation to casual conversions:

We have, however, seen some decasualisation of the sector and that was largely won through our enterprise-bargaining processes. We call them rounds of bargaining, but in our last round of bargaining we pushed very hard for decasualisation of the sector, and we were very pleased with universities like Western Sydney where they really looked at converting casuals to permanent employees.⁷⁴

4.76 To this end, Professor Williams credited the work done by his predecessors and the NTEU, who worked in partnership to have decasualisation 'written into our enterprise agreements' and held this up as 'a great example, a sector-leading initiative, of unions and management working together to deal with a genuine problem that affects both staff and students'.⁷⁵

The treatment of casual employees at Australian universities

4.77 Alongside concerns about the high rate of casualisation at Australian universities, numerous participants raised concerns about the treatment of casual staff and those on fixed term contracts. Two of the most frequently raised issues were the underpayment of casual staff, and the varying approaches to casual conversion in the sector.

Underpayment of casual staff

4.78 Multiple participants drew attention to the widespread underpayment of staff at Australian universities. For example, Associate Professor Harris and Dr Smithers noted that 'more than 140 000 Australian university staff members have been underpaid by \$265 [million] ... with the NTEU reporting that wage theft in the university sector will total over \$400 [million].⁷⁶

4.79 Indeed, the committee is aware that since presenting its interim report, the University of Wollongong has entered into an Enforceable Undertaking with the FWO that will see it make more than \$6.6 million in payments to 5340 staff members who were underpaid between 2014 and 2024. According to the FWO, 'key causes of the widespread underpayments were the university's poor

⁷³ University of New South Wales, *Submission 34* (47th Parliament), p. 5.

⁷⁴ Dr Alison Barnes, National President, NTEU, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, p. 5.

⁷⁵ Professor George Williams AO, Vice-Chancellor and President, Western Sydney University, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, p. 4.

⁷⁶ Associate Professor Jessica Harris and Dr Kathleen Smithers, *Submission 32* (47th Parliament), [p. 1]. See also, The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*Uni Vice-Chancellors keep getting richer while those who teach and research are left behind*), p. 3.

governance processes as well as fundamental payroll system errors'.⁷⁷ Previous actions taken by the FWO in relation to underpayments at Australian universities were detailed in the committee's interim report.

4.80 Alongside insufficient investment in payroll and timekeeping systems, and a lack of centralised human resources functions, one of the key trends identified by the FWO as leading to non-compliance was a 'failure to comply with enterprise agreement (EA) provisions'. As noted earlier in this chapter, this included:

- misclassifying duties, roles or qualifications of academics against classification structures;
- paying casual academics according to piecework 'benchmarks', such as time-per student, exam or essay marked, instead of EA hourly rates;
- unpaid time for casual academics; and
- failing to pay minimum shifts, casual employee allowances and loadings in accordance with EAs.⁷⁸

4.81 Examples of these compliance failures were detailed in evidence provided to the committee. Submitters described multiple instances of misclassification of work and unpaid work—including unpaid hours arising from the application of piecework benchmarks. One senior teaching academic reflected on their time as a workplace representative, during which they 'witnessed many instances where workplace laws and the provision of the Enterprise Agreement have been disregarded by management':

Wages theft has occurred in two ways; by deliberate mis-categorisation of work leading to underpayment; and by forced unpaid overtime or forced unpaid work. Forced unpaid work occurs because academics are allocated work with insufficient time allowance to complete the work to the standards specified.⁷⁹

4.82 In relation to unpaid work, one tutor described how they often perform unpaid work, including responding to emails, meeting with students and developing teaching materials, 'while the hours paid for 'preparation time' do not even cover the time to read the course materials'. In addition, they described 'severe wage theft' in the marking of assessments:

⁷⁷ FWO, 'The University of Wollongong signs Enforceable Undertaking', [Media release](#), 25 September 2025 (accessed 8 October 2025). Since focusing on the university sector (announced in 2022), the Fair Work Ombudsman has entered into Enforceable Undertakings with La Trobe University, University of Sydney, University of Melbourne, the University of Technology Sydney, the University of Newcastle and Charles Sturt University and Griffith University; secured court penalties against the University of Melbourne; and commenced ongoing legal action against the University of NSW.

⁷⁸ FWO, *Submission 16* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

⁷⁹ Name Withheld, *Submission 145*, [p. 2].

For example, a course paid 15 minutes per assessment to mark a 15-minute video presentation, which is insufficient time to watch the video and provide meaningful feedback.⁸⁰

4.83 Unpaid preparation time also featured in reports provided to the NTEU UTS:

... we have also received reports of casual staff not having paid preparation time despite the genuine need for preparation to take place prior to the delivery of academic activity such as running computer lab sessions with students.⁸¹

4.84 NTEU UTS went on to explain that the success of casual staff in obtaining payment for preparation time was dependent on 'providing written evidence that they were clearly directed to do so by a supervisor or manager' leaving 'staff directed verbally or more ambiguously without adequate payment for their preparation work'.⁸²

4.85 Another submitter, Mr Omer Kerem Konacki, an academic at the University of Sydney, described how the university had changed the terms of his contract—sometimes mid semester—to reduce marking hours. Mr Konacki said that while the university claimed his contract assigned him too many marking hours, the reduction in hours 'resulted in myself and all the other casual staff working unpaid hours for marking'. Mr Konacki also stated that after being selected for a position advertised as 100 per cent fixed term contract, the university reduced the contract to 50 per cent 'without any consultation or explanation'.⁸³

4.86 The need to work unpaid hours was also raised by an academic who has been in insecure employment since 2007. They noted that 'academic staff, particularly those in casual and contract roles, consistently face excessive workloads that cannot reasonably be completed within paid hours'. This was particularly the case for marking, where 'allocated grading hours often fail to account for the time required to meet higher education standards'.⁸⁴

4.87 Dr Michael Tomlinson, a former director of TEQSA's assurance group, noted that the adequacy of compensation for sessional staff was a 'recurring issue':

Sessional staff have a significant burden of post-class assessment work, but also pre-class preparation for teaching which includes scholarly work necessary for them to remain current with their discipline and with advances in learning and teaching techniques. Sessional rates may not be adequate to compensate them for these responsibilities.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Name Withheld, *Submission 151* (47th Parliament), p. 1.

⁸¹ NTEU UTS, *Submission 92* (47th Parliament), [p. 12].

⁸² NTEU UTS, *Submission 92* (47th Parliament), [p. 12].

⁸³ Mr Omer Kerem Konacki, *Submission 274* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

⁸⁴ Name Withheld, *Submission 179* (47th Parliament), p. 2.

⁸⁵ Dr Michael Tomlinson, *Submission 9* (47th Parliament), p. 4.

4.88 The extent of unpaid work performed by casual staff was underscored by the Australia Institute, which referred to research by the NTEU and the USYD Casuals Network that found 90 per cent of surveyed casuals worked more than their paid hours:

In total, 1,998 hours of unpaid work was completed, compared to 4,343 hours of paid work. This means on average casuals are not being paid for 32 per cent of the work they complete. This confirms that casual staff are systematically not provided enough paid time to complete the tasks they are given.⁸⁶

4.89 The misclassification of roles and work was another common theme of academics' evidence to the inquiry. For example, a sessional lecturer at RMIT University described how a 'significant proportion of sessional staff' are misclassified under the university's EA 'based on their skill and contribution to class content', with significant differences in hourly pay for those classified as tutors rather than lecturers:

The common understanding is that a 'lecturer' develops class content based on their expertise, whereas a 'tutor' assists delivery and assessment of content developed by a lecturer, hence the lower rate of pay. In practice, all sessional teachers are classified as 'tutors' regardless of skill and whether they develop the class content—upon questioning HR explained that the distinction between 'lecturer' and 'tutor' is determined by the university at their will, presumably preferring 'tutor' as it involves paying lower wages. I recognise this is a fault within the EBA, but it is also a clear misrepresentation of staff contributions/qualifications, and abuse of that misrepresentation to underpay staff.⁸⁷

4.90 The NTEU UTS stated it had received reports of casual staff 'running educational sessions with students which closely resemble tutorial sessions in their scope and required learning outcomes, but are classed as "other academic activity" thus attracting a lower rate of pay'.⁸⁸

4.91 Along with AHEIA, some universities, including Charles Sturt University, stressed that the underpayment of staff has not been deliberate:

Thorough and independent review demonstrated there was no deliberate underpayment. Payment inaccuracies occurred because of provisions in the enterprise agreement and the underpinning awards that are complicated, difficult to implement, and often difficult to apply correctly, especially in the absence of a sophisticated HR system to record and pay on hours worked.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*At the Crossroads: What is the post-COVID future of Australia's Public Universities*), p. 41.

⁸⁷ Name Withheld, *Submission 269* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

⁸⁸ NTEU UTS, *Submission 92* (47th Parliament), [p. 12].

⁸⁹ Charles Sturt University, *Submission 52* (47th Parliament), p. 10. See also, AHEIA, *Submission 45* (47th Parliament), p. 3; Deakin University, *Submission 33* (47th Parliament), [p. 4].

4.92 This view was shared by Dr Michael Tomlinson, who stated that in his opinion, there was no reason to believe underpayments were intentional. Rather, it was more likely that underpayments 'originated in the complexity of different award structures for the many different types and levels of staff, and unintentional misclassification of staff'.⁹⁰

4.93 In addition, multiple universities detailed actions taken to identify and rectify underpayments. For example, the University of Sydney referred to its ongoing program of work 'to identify past incorrect payments and remediate for affected staff' as well as the actions it was taking to ensure compliance in the future:

Alongside this historical review and remediation, we have introduced standardised systems, processes and controls to help ensure we pay our people correctly and meet our recordkeeping obligations, now and in the future. We are continuing to keep the Fair Work Ombudsman informed about the progress of the review and entered into an Enforceable Undertaking on 10 December 2024. This agreement outlines the work undertaken to date and the University's commitment to ensure ongoing compliance with workplace laws.⁹¹

4.94 However, some participants appeared cynical about claims of unintentional underpayments. In relation to underpayments at the University of Sydney, one academic contended that:

There was no admission of deliberate underpayment. When cases of underpayment come to light, university management normally blame system failures, accidents, and the complexity of their enterprise agreements.⁹²

4.95 Rather than being unintentional, this academic argued that the university had deliberately adopted employment practices that 'significantly reduced pay for casual academics compared with what they ... previously received for the same work'. In their view, these practices 'represent deliberate, systematic underpayment relative to entitlements under the enterprise agreement':

One sign of premeditation is that the policies attempt to redefine things with longstanding conventional meanings, taking advantage of perceived terminological loopholes in the enterprise agreement in ways that always result in lower pay. These redefinitions conflict with common usage, and with the ways the terms have previously been interpreted in applying pay codes. Specifically:

- Seminars have been redesignated as 'lectures + tutorials';

⁹⁰ Dr Michael Tomlinson, *Submission 9* (47th Parliament), p. 4.

⁹¹ University of Sydney, *Submission 39* (47th Parliament), p. 14. See also, Charles Sturt University, *Submission 52* (47th Parliament), p. 10; University of Technology Sydney, *Submission 14* (47th Parliament), p. 12; University of Melbourne, *Submission 53* (47th Parliament), pp. 5–6; University of New South Wales, *Submission 34* (47th Parliament), p. 5.

⁹² Name Withheld, *Submission 280* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

- Marking has generally been assessed as 'not requiring significant academic judgement,' even at postgraduate level; and
- Unit coordinator status has been allocated to other staff who are not directly involved in teaching or assessment for the unit.⁹³

4.96 One submitter, who has worked as a casual academic since 1986, suggested that these practices are not new. While a student, they were employed as a demonstrator for first-year laboratory practicals. In this role they were paid for their laboratory time but not for the time taken to mark the students' reports:

We were told by the academic in charge that this was because we had not yet graduated from our bachelor's degrees and so were not qualified to do the marking, which is why the university couldn't pay us to do the marking. This meant we did the marking but were not paid for it.

... one afternoon, the academic in charge of the laboratories came to me at my desk with a stack of laboratory reports (which was his share of the marking) and told me to do them.

Not only were we not being paid for our share of the marking, which we were unqualified to do, but we were also being used by tenured academic staff to complete their marking work without pay.⁹⁴

4.97 The submitter went on to describe a number of similar experiences in the years that followed, including:

- delivering weekly lectures but being paid at the lower tutorial rate, and not being paid for marking 1860 assignments, 465 laboratory reports and 155 exam papers as part of the same subject; and
- delivering tutorials but being paid at the lower laboratory demonstrator rate because the academic in charge booked a laboratory space instead of a tutorial room (the tutorials had nothing to do with the laboratory).⁹⁵

4.98 The committee also received evidence from the NTEU that reclassifying work to reduce costs was seen as a 'standard efficiency measure in Australian universities'. It provided the following quote from a university employee:

I taught a tutorial in a subject for a number of years. Then one year the tutorial got rebranded as a 'workshop'. The content and required teaching stayed the same. My rate of pay however changed from the 'tutorial' rate of \$160 per tutorial and all associated activity to 'other academic activity' rate \$51 for the same work.⁹⁶

⁹³ Name Withheld, *Submission 280* (47th Parliament), [pp. 1–2].

⁹⁴ Name Withheld, *Submission 283* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

⁹⁵ Name Withheld, *Submission 283* (47th Parliament), [pp. 1–2].

⁹⁶ NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament), Attachment 1, p. 21.

4.99 Another academic told of being instructed to classify one-hour lectures as 'other', which attracted a lower hourly rate than lecturing. When they sought clarification about what differentiated a 'lecture' from 'other', the college dean responded 'that "functionally there is no difference"'.⁹⁷

4.100 In addition to reclassifying work, Dr Lachlan Clohesy of the ACT Division of the NTEU told the committee that some university staff have been directed to claim fewer hours than they worked:

This is in the ANU College of Systems and Society, which is a new name, but the school of computing is one of the schools there. What's happened is there are two-hour labs, and the tutors who are teaching those two-hour labs have been instructed in writing from their supervisors to claim only 1.5 hours of payment for those labs, and to consider the last half-hour of those classes as consultation, which is covered in the preparation time for that class they're in at the time. They've received pretty unambiguous written directions to claim that. That's one of the worst examples you see across the economy of being instructed to claim less than what you're working.⁹⁸

4.101 Indeed, Associate Professor Harris and Dr Smithers said their research had uncovered reports that casual staff have been 'pressured to falsify timesheets and underclaim hours that they have worked, and continued expectations that staff will work well beyond their paid hours'.⁹⁹

4.102 Further, Mr Konacki argued that universities' administrative systems are used 'as a buffer to exploit casuals' in a way that he perceived as intentional:

I lodged a claim for not being paid for consultation hours (we were made to allocate every week for one of our units), hours which I had worked and were within my contracted hours to claim. It has been 3 years since I lodged that claim, and I am still waiting for it to be processed. Systemic and administrative failures should not occur in such large institutions and leads me to believe that universities are doing this intentionally.¹⁰⁰

Approaches to casual conversion in the higher education sector

4.103 The committee heard from a number of academics who had been employed by their universities for many years on a series of short-term contracts. One submitter described being 'placed on a casual contract for approximately eight years while working five days a week thus missing out on [long service leave] and other benefits'.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Name Withheld, *Submission 257* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

⁹⁸ Dr Lachlan Clohesy, Secretary, ACT Division, NTEU, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, p. 10.

⁹⁹ Associate Professor Jessica Harris and Dr Kathleen Smithers, *Submission 32* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

¹⁰⁰ Mr Omer Kerem Konacki, *Submission 274* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

¹⁰¹ Name Withheld, *Submission 196* (47th Parliament), p. 1. See also, Name Withheld, *Submission 186* (47th Parliament), [p. 3], Name Withheld, *Submission 193* (47th Parliament), [p. 2]; Mr Simon Walker,

4.104 The Australia Institute also described how 'many fixed-term teaching staff report being employed on rolling short-term contracts for years on end, despite teaching ordinary units in line departments'.¹⁰²

4.105 In line with this, the NTEU reported the experience of one university worker who had been employed on 14 consecutive one-year contracts, having been informed that 'the university will never carry the risk of employees at [my research centre] for longer than 2 years at a time'.¹⁰³

4.106 According to some participants, universities have deliberately structured their employment arrangements to avoid having to offer permanent roles to casual employees. For example, one sessional lecturer described as 'routine', their university's practice of employing sessional staff for a semester, firing them at the end of the semester, before re-hiring them for the following semester as needed—'thus bypassing laws requiring part time employment be offered to casuals who work the same position for more than six months'. As a result, the sessional lecturer reported having had 18 separate employment contracts with the university in a nine-year period.¹⁰⁴

4.107 An apparent reluctance to convert casuals to full-time employment was also reflected in evidence from a sessional lecturer at RMIT University. They described how their repeated requests for a part-time or full-time position had been denied, 'despite exceptional performance and nine years of commitment to the School I work with'. The explanation provided by the university was that:

... the university simply was not funding part-time positions, and that the only way I might be considered would be commencing a PhD with the School itself—an approach that would just so happen to be financially rewarding for the School, with very little consideration for the education value of such a PhD.¹⁰⁵

4.108 Likewise, Mr Konacki said he had worked as a casual academic at the University of Sydney for 20 years, where he applied unsuccessfully for casual conversion three times over his 20-year employment period, with his most recent application also denied initially:

I have applied for conversion to full time employment 3 times in the past 20 years, and only in April 2024 it was accepted. My most recent application for conversion was initially 'not eligible for conversion', which was only

Submission 112 (47th Parliament), [p. 10]; Name Withheld, *Submission 260* (47th Parliament), [p. 3]; Name Withheld, *Submission 283* (47th Parliament), p. 15.

¹⁰² The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*At the Crossroads: What is the post-COVID future of Australia's Public Universities*), p. 41.

¹⁰³ NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament), Attachment 1, p. 18.

¹⁰⁴ Name Withheld, *Submission 269* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

¹⁰⁵ Name Withheld, *Submission 269* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

overturned after 9 months of push and various delays. If it wasn't for the backing of the union, I would still be a casual.¹⁰⁶

4.109 Associate Professor Harris and Dr Smithers argued that the way universities have responded to recent casual employment changes under the *Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Closing Loopholes No. 2) Act 2024*, had particularly impacted sessional teaching staff, who are generally 'employed on a semester-by-semester basis, with regular hours and work within a semester'.¹⁰⁷

4.110 According to Associate Professor Harris and Dr Smithers, 'there has been wide variation in responses across university settings' to this type of work no longer being deemed casual. This includes universities limiting the number of casual employees, 'leaving many highly skilled academics without work, particularly in regional settings'.¹⁰⁸

4.111 A similar view was expressed by the Australian Historical Association, which argued that 'the twin forces of managerialism and neoliberalism' have 'incentivised universities to comply with recent legislation about casualisation in bad faith'. This includes:

- universities dropping casuals—rather than converting them to ongoing positions—and incorporating their teaching work 'into the workloads of already stretched permanent staff'; and
- 'cynically adopted' change management processes that are 'technically correct' but 'clearly seek to replace "expensive" staff at levels D and E (who are experts in their fields with decades of experiences) with (often teaching-only) level A staff'.¹⁰⁹

4.112 According to at least one submitter, this also includes universities blocking teaching opportunities for grant-funded research staff over fears they may request conversion to continuing employment:

Universities are restricting grant-funded researchers from teaching due to fears they might claim ongoing employment under new laws. If researchers teach, their role may no longer be seen as solely tied to external funding, increasing the risk of conversion to a continuing position.

This approach is overly cautious and unreasonable, as it treats all researchers as potential legal risks rather than supporting their career progression.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Mr Omer Kerem Konacki, *Submission 274* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

¹⁰⁷ Associate Professor Jessica Harris and Dr Kathleen Smithers, *Submission 32* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

¹⁰⁸ Associate Professor Jessica Harris and Dr Kathleen Smithers, *Submission 32* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

¹⁰⁹ Australian Historical Association, *Submission 36* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

¹¹⁰ Name Withheld, *Submission 180* (47th Parliament), p. 1.

Impacts of insecure employment on staff wellbeing

4.113 Numerous submitters provided accounts of the physical, emotional and financial and impacts of insecure employment on university staff.¹¹¹ For example, one submitter described how their colleagues had pushed themselves beyond their limits to maintain quality standards:

Colleagues of mine—dedicated, conscientious educators—have pushed themselves beyond their physical and mental limits to try and maintain education standards. Some have worked 14-hour days during peak marking periods. Many colleagues have suffered injuries from this overwork, often spending weeks recovering and incurring significant medical expenses. This is entirely unsustainable.¹¹²

4.114 In relation to financial impacts, an academic from the ANU argued that the expansion of insecure forms of employment, along with the 'systematic underpayment of teaching staff' was 'forcing highly qualified individuals to cobble together precarious combinations of sessional work whilst living in poverty or precarity well into their thirties'.¹¹³

4.115 Another academic told the committee that many teaching staff 'are forced to rely on Centrelink payments during periods between contracts, effectively substituting the sick leave or annual leave that universities fail to provide'.¹¹⁴

4.116 The financial impact of insecure work was also illustrated by another submitter who 'had never been able to buy a home' and described being paid so little 'that I qualified for Centrelink payments (which is embarrassing and demoralising)'. She described the vulnerability and worry that this caused:

As a female in my very late 50's I know I am vulnerable to becoming homeless. This constantly worries and depresses me. I would not be in the situation now if Australian universities had not stolen my wages from me for the last four decades. They have made my life a misery.¹¹⁵

4.117 The wide-reaching impacts of insecure work were recognised by Professor Williams AO during discussion of the casual conversion program at WSU:

Over half of all teaching is done by casuals. I've been a casual myself ... and I have talked to many people over many years, and I understand the corrosive impact that it has on the quality of their lives. For example, it affects decisions to start families and it affects decisions about getting a

¹¹¹ See, for example, Social Work Policy and Advocacy Action Group at RMIT University, *Submission 19*, p. 2; Name Withheld, *Submission 185* (47th Parliament), p. 1; Name Withheld, *Submission 286* (47th Parliament), [p. 3].

¹¹² Name Withheld, *Submission 179* (47th Parliament), p. 2.

¹¹³ Name Withheld, *Submission 31*, [p. 2].

¹¹⁴ Name Withheld, *Submission 179* (47th Parliament), p. 2. See also, Name Withheld, *Submission 283* (47th Parliament), [p. 15].

¹¹⁵ Name Withheld, *Submission 283* (47th Parliament), [p. 15].

house—all of those normal things that casual work gets in the way of. Also what it does is it harms students because a casual staff member can't plan for the long term, and we want people thinking, 'How does the curriculum develop over two, three or five years?'¹¹⁶

- 4.118 Submitters also referred to casual staff being treated as though they are not 'real' university staff members. For example, CHASS stated that 'universities still largely act as if such workers are not full members of the university workforce or community. They are often omitted from websites. They are not always invited to staff meetings'.¹¹⁷
- 4.119 In a similar vein, an academic tutor at the ANU described casual staff not being allowed into departmental meetings, and being 'left feeling anxious, lacking information, feeling like second-class people'.¹¹⁸
- 4.120 Likewise, Mr Konacki described working as a casual academic at the University of Sydney for 20 years, where he stated that his work was 'in demand' but he was 'never made to feel ... part of the University of Sydney'.¹¹⁹
- 4.121 This sense of isolation was also noted by a sessional lecturer who observed that as sessional staff are paid 'exclusively for class delivery', they are 'not part of the university workforce, isolating them professionally'. This, in turn, results in a 'lack of connection of colleagues, poor coordination and lack of backups if a sessional staff member cannot teach a given class'.¹²⁰
- 4.122 At least one submitter described the impact of the 'stark differences' in the experiences of casual and ongoing staff:

... staff with ongoing employment are paid to carry out their research activities, they have access to research funding, and they can even hire others as research assistants to carry out research tasks. Those without an ongoing employment position ... are often self-financing and self-subsidising their own academic work life activities—for example, writing up publications from their PhD research, attending seminars and conferences, and engaging in self-promotion. These types of activities are all expected of an early or mid-career researcher if they seek to be competitive enough in recruitment processes for ongoing secure employment positions. Yet once again, these types of activities are resourced by casual academics themselves through, as noted, earnings opportunity costs, savings, and continually finding ways to deal with the lived emotional, financial, and social impacts. There are many casual academics who become totally

¹¹⁶ Professor George Williams AO, Vice-Chancellor and President, Western Sydney University, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, p. 3.

¹¹⁷ CHASS, *Submission 48* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

¹¹⁸ Name Withheld, *Submission 286* (47th Parliament), [p. 3].

¹¹⁹ Mr Omer Kerem Konacki, *Submission 274* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

¹²⁰ Name Withheld, *Submission 269* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

disheartened and simply cannot afford the further over-investment in pursuit of a research career.¹²¹

Suggested actions to improve university employment practices

4.123 Some participants acknowledged recent improvements in the sector following the focus on poor employment practices in the university sector. For example, the NTEU commended WSU for 'diligently following through' on its commitment to 'create 150 new ongoing teaching-research positions with the goal of reducing casualised teaching by 25 percent'.¹²²

4.124 In addition, the FWO observed 'improved engagement ... from the sector' and 'some improvement in the sector's acknowledgement of systemic issues'.

4.125 While the FWO described this as 'an important step on the right direction towards fostering a culture of compliance' it stressed that further work is required as it continues to invest 'significant time and resources into university investigations'.¹²³

4.126 According to the FWO, the following remain areas where 'ongoing investment' by universities will be 'key to ... making good on previous failures and embedding sustained compliance with workplace law obligations':

- maintaining contemporary payroll and record keeping system infrastructure;
- improving oversight through centralised processes and providing workplace relations and Enterprise Agreement training to human resources, recruitment and payroll staff;
- maintaining employee complaint and review mechanisms;
- establishing tripartite bodies (comprising management, employees, and union representatives) to ensure information flow and consultation on governance and management of workplace compliance; and
- improving governance measures such as the inclusion of a standing item on workplace law compliance at university council meetings.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Name Withheld, *Submission 185*, p. 1.

¹²² NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament), p. 4.

¹²³ FWO, *Submission 16* (47th Parliament), pp. 1 and 2.

¹²⁴ FWO, *Submission 16* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

4.127 In addition to the findings of the FWO, participants advocated for a range of actions to improve employment practices at Australian universities. These included:

- improved transparency and reporting in relation to casual staff, including a requirement for providers to 'report courses, subjects, and teaching hours undertaken by casual staff';¹²⁵
- universal adoption of the FWO's improved governance and compliance framework, including:
 - revising the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 to require university councils to have committees dedicated to workplace law compliance;
 - revising the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 to require universities to have internal workplace law compliance units to ensure continued improvement in compliance, culture and training;
 - each university establishing (or strengthening) joint consultative committees with relevant unions with a focus on workplace law compliance and pursuing secure work as an objective;¹²⁶
- a commitment by universities to act as 'exemplary employers';¹²⁷
- targets for reducing casualisation, such as reducing the proportion of casual staff to around 10 per cent of total employment at universities (via casual conversion provisions, as well as limiting the use of casuals to 'legitimate cases of short-term or seasonal work');¹²⁸
- requiring universities to justify the hiring of casual staff in excess of five years without offering conversion to ongoing positions;¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Mr Simon Walker, *Submission 112* (47th Parliament), [p. 17]. See also, Australian Multicultural Action Network, *Submission 1*, p. 4; NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament), Attachment 3, p. 7; Curtin Student Guild, *Submission 80* (47th Parliament), p. 2.

¹²⁶ NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament), p. 10.

¹²⁷ NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament), p. 10. Among other actions, it was suggested that this would involve: a commitment to reducing the employment insecurity and instability based on a renewed focus on workforce planning and continuing employment; developing appropriate secure career pathways and professional development opportunities for both professional and academic staff; ensuring that employees making employment related decisions have skills in employment relations, including in-depth knowledge of the obligations of the university; and ensuring that robust proactive mental health support systems are in place to support a mentally healthy and safe workplace and to imbue and promote the ethos of a healthy work-life balance.

¹²⁸ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*At the Crossroads: What is the post-COVID future of Australia's Public Universities*), p. 6. See also, Dr Shumi Akhtar, *Submission 288* (47th Parliament), p. 11; Name Withheld, *Submission 179* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

¹²⁹ Mr Simon Walker, *Submission 112* (47th Parliament), [p. 17].

- expanding the size of the university workforce to 'reduce unsustainable workloads and improve the quality of academic jobs'¹³⁰ and ensuring universities are 'adequately staffed with enough permanent full-time qualified academics and staff with relevant experience';¹³¹
- challenging established norms about unpaid hours for academics (including weekend work)¹³² and requiring universities to pay staff for the hours they work, including removing 'piece work' approaches (including unreasonable caps on marking time);¹³³
- commissioning research on the extent to which sessional staff are adequately remunerated for work undertaken in addition to teaching contact hours;¹³⁴ and
- requiring universities to provide greater pay and workload transparency for all staff, as well as better mechanisms for ensuring that universities provide fair working conditions and job security for all staff (rather than simply a bad-faith compliance with the letter of the law).¹³⁵

4.128 To this end, the committee is aware of recent changes to employment laws, which the Department of Education said were designed to 'improve fairness and job security for employees, including those in the higher education sector'. These changes include:

- **new limits on fixed term contracts** (two years or two consecutive contracts, whichever is shorter), which aim to improve job security for those 'employed on rolling fixed term contracts, who could otherwise reasonably be employed on a permanent basis'; and
- **reforms to casual employment**, which 'aim to improve job security by ensuring casual employees working like permanent employees have a clearer pathway to permanent employment if they want it'.¹³⁶

¹³⁰ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*At the Crossroads: What is the post-COVID future of Australia's Public Universities*), p. 6.

¹³¹ Curtin Student Guild, *Submission 80* (47th Parliament), p. 2.

¹³² Australian Council of Heads of Social Work Education, *Submission 58* (47th Parliament), p. 18.

¹³³ Associate Professor Jessica Harris and Dr Kathleen Smithers, *Submission 32* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

¹³⁴ Dr Michael Tomlinson, *Submission 9* (47th Parliament), p. 4.

¹³⁵ Australian Historical Association, *Submission 36* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

¹³⁶ Department of Education, *Submission 37* (47th Parliament), pp. 15–16.

4.129 The committee also noted the final report of the Expert Council on University Governance—in particular Principle 8 (Responsible)—which would require university governing bodies to ensure that:

... all staff are properly remunerated, that senior management remuneration is aligned with public expectations and sector benchmarks, and that the university has a clear and sustainable workforce strategy.¹³⁷

4.130 More specifically, Principle 8 would require university councils to:

- oversee the university's workforce strategy and design that provide for fair and sustainable employment; and
- monitor implementation of the workforce strategy and design.¹³⁸

4.131 The Expert Council on University Governance further advised that 'a committee overseeing people and culture matters helps the governing body to meet its accountability for overseeing the workforce and remuneration'. Among other activities, this committee should:

- ensure there is an appropriate workforce strategy and design, and appropriate remuneration framework, and monitor their implementation,
- monitor compliance with regulatory requirements in relation to staff and students such as remuneration, harassment, inclusion and diversity; and
- ensure remuneration outcomes are consistent with individual accountabilities and performance and demonstrate alignment with the desired culture.¹³⁹

4.132 In terms of university workforce strategies, the Expert Council on University Governance stated they should:

- support implementation of the strategic plan and achievement of the strategic objectives;
- acknowledge the current state of the workforce and the university's future needs;
- have clear objectives and desired outcomes, including meeting regulatory requirements, providing a good place to work and study, and meeting the expectations of staff and students;
- have actions with clear accountabilities to achieve the planned future state; and
- include appropriate mechanisms for talent acquisition, development and retention.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Expert Council on University Governance, [Final Report and Principles](#), p. 52.

¹³⁸ Expert Council on University Governance, [Final Report and Principles](#), p. 52.

¹³⁹ Expert Council on University Governance, [Final Report and Principles](#), pp. 66–67.

¹⁴⁰ Expert Council on University Governance, [Final Report and Principles](#), p. 67.

Chapter 5

Education quality and the student experience

- 5.1 The quality of Australia's higher education system was mentioned by various inquiry participants. For example, the University of Queensland referred to the sector's 'world-renowned reputation for high quality teaching, graduate outcomes and research commercialisation'.¹
- 5.2 Likewise, Professor Andrew Deeks, Vice Chancellor and President of Murdoch University noted that 'the quality of Australian education and the Australian student experience is acknowledged around the world'.²
- 5.3 Indeed, the committee received evidence from universities and peak bodies about the priority universities place on the quality of education and the student experience. For example, Universities Australia noted its role in representing 'Australia's 39 comprehensive universities, all of which offer high-quality teaching and research experiences'.³
- 5.4 This was reflected in evidence from Professor Annamarie Jagose, Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor and Provost at the University of Sydney, who told the committee of the university's commitment to high quality education:
- The public rightly expects public universities to deliver high-quality education and research that makes a meaningful difference to their lives. At Sydney we are deeply committed to this purpose across all areas of our institution. Students are at the heart of what we do at the University of Sydney, and in 2025 we continue to prioritise improving the quality of teaching and engaging students as partners.⁴
- 5.5 Deakin University stated that 'the quality of education Deakin and the interests of students, staff and the community are the primary areas of focus for the University Council',⁵ while the University of New South Wales highlighted its aim to 'improve and transform all lives through excellence in research, outstanding learning and teaching experiences, and a commitment to advancing Australia's economic growth and prosperity'.⁶

¹ University of Queensland, *Submission 43* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

² Professor Andrew Deeks, *Submission 96* (47th Parliament), [p. 4].

³ Universities Australia, *Submission 13* (47th Parliament), p. 1.

⁴ Professor Annamarie Jagose, Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor and Provost, University of Sydney, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2025, p. 1.

⁵ Deakin University, *Submission 33* (47th Parliament), [p. 5].

⁶ University of New South Wales, *Submission 34* (47th Parliament), p. 1.

- 5.6 Similarly, Western Sydney University's (WSU) submission referred to its mission to 'ensure access to a world-class higher education, a great student experience, research that delivers impact, and dynamic, thriving Western Sydney communities.'⁷ This was underscored by the Chancellor, Professor Jennifer Westacott AC, who told the committee that WSU focused on putting its students first, serving them and the region'.⁸ Likewise, Vice-Chancellor, Professor George Williams AO, reflected on the question 'good governance to what end? That, of course, is to staff, students and the quality of higher education'.⁹
- 5.7 Despite this, multiple contributors raised concerns about a decline in the quality of education being offered by Australian universities. While the committee heard that a range of factors have contributed to this perceived decline, various participants suggested it has its roots in the corporatisation of universities and poor governance practices.
- 5.8 For example, the Australia Institute submitted that a large proportion of Australians 'are aware and concerned' about the impact of university corporatisation on educational quality. It highlighted survey findings showing that 83 per cent of Australians 'were concerned that universities focus on profit at the expense of education', with 50 per cent of all respondents being very concerned.¹⁰
- 5.9 This concern was reflected in evidence from Miss Jasmine Toronis, an Honours student, who contended that universities are increasingly acting as 'profit-driven enterprises', rather than public institutions 'dedicated to education, research and student wellbeing'. Miss Toronis described the current system as 'fundamentally failing the very people it claims to serve: both students and educators'.¹¹
- 5.10 Likewise, Dr Molly Dragiewicz, an academic with decades of experience in Australian and international universities, explained that she was submitting to the inquiry because of 'the rapid degradation of the quality of Australian university education' she has observed since emigrating to Australia in 2012. According to Dr Dragiewicz, 'factors related to tertiary education governance

⁷ Western Sydney University (WSU), *Submission 29* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

⁸ Professor Jennifer Westacott AC, Chancellor, WSU, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, p. 1.

⁹ Professor George Williams AO, Vice-Chancellor and President, WSU, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, p. 1.

¹⁰ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*Public Attitudes on Issues in Higher Education*), pp. 7–8.

¹¹ Miss Jasmine Toronis, *Submission 8*, [p. 1].

have a profound impact on students' educational experiences, employment outcomes, and working conditions for university staff'.¹²

5.11 A similar view was expressed by Dr Farida Akhtar, who also traced declining standards back to the quality of governance at Australian universities:

When governance quality is compromised—whether at the university-wide or Faculty or Department level—it triggers a cascade of negative consequences, affecting the broader educational ecosystem, the quality of research, teaching, and individual performance, and ultimately, the university's reputation.¹³

5.12 Conversely, Dr Akhtar contended that 'strong governance directly contributes to a robust education system, enhances research quality, and supports effective teaching', which ultimately strengthens the reputation of universities 'on both the national and global stages'.¹⁴

5.13 The remainder of this chapter focuses on:

- reputational risks arising from declining quality standards;
- factors influencing the quality of education at Australian universities; and
- student experiences at Australian universities, including class sizes.

Declining quality standards and reputational risks

5.14 Multiple participants highlighted the risks that declining quality standards pose to the reputation of Australian universities. For example, in the rationale for its audit of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) noted 'significant public interest in the integrity of admissions standards, academic misconduct (including contract cheating) and the integration of international students into Australian campuses'. Further, it contended that 'these issues have a direct impact on the reputation of the higher education sector and the interests of students'.¹⁵

5.15 To this end, Dr Marija Taflaga, Dr Francis Markham, and Professor Keith Dowding stressed the importance of quality teaching and research to the benefits students receive from a university education:

Students also have an interest in the quality of teaching and research. The benefits of the education they receive depends on the credibility of the knowledge universities produce and disseminate. Unlike customers in a conventional market, students cannot easily assess the quality of what they are receiving at the time of 'purchase'; the value of their education is only realised over the course of their careers. This creates a classic problem of information asymmetry—which is why universities rely on academic

¹² Dr Molly Dragiewicz, *Submission 91* (47th Parliament), p. 1.

¹³ Dr Farida Akhtar, *Submission 98* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

¹⁴ Dr Farida Akhtar, *Submission 98* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

¹⁵ Australian National Audit Office, *Submission 51* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

self-regulation and disciplinary standards of rigour to safeguard quality. When these standards are upheld, students gain degrees that are trusted by employers, professions, and the wider public. When they are eroded, students bear the cost in diminished educational outcomes and reputational damage to their qualifications.¹⁶

5.16 In this context, Professor Lionel Page described a situation where Australian students are incurring significant debts 'for degrees that may be diminishing in both educational content and market value'. Professor Page noted the 'growing challenges' this represents in terms of Australia's workforce development, with 'the erosion of academic standards' meaning 'university qualifications have become less reliable indicators of graduate capabilities'.¹⁷

5.17 A similar view was put forward by Public Universities Australia (PUA), which observed 'growing and legitimate public concern about the value of university degrees' and referred to a quote by a former vice-chancellor who noted that 'some degrees may be equivalent to "painting stripes on donkeys and calling them zebras"'.¹⁸

5.18 PUA also raised concerns that Australia's international standing is being diminished by a decline in academic quality and standards:

The manifest decline in academic quality and standards for which management bears responsibility, and the inability of Australian universities to compete in terms of quality with genuinely world-leading institutions, place our reputation at risk, despite, again, the illusion of performance.¹⁹

5.19 To this end, Dr Brett White observed that 'the decline in rigorous academic assessment and the rise of commercial pressures compromise the integrity of Australian higher education institutions and damage their international reputation'.²⁰

5.20 Likewise, Mr Ian Gray highlighted a 'fundamental conflict of interest' for university councils 'between making money and setting standards'. In particular, Mr Gray drew attention to the consequences of lower admission and pass standards for degree level courses:

¹⁶ Dr Marija Taflaga, Dr Francis Markham and Distinguished Professor Keith Dowding, *Submission 6*, p. 8.

¹⁷ Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), p. 12.

¹⁸ Public Universities Australia (PUA), *Submission 71* (47th Parliament), pp. 38–39.

¹⁹ PUA, *Submission 71* (47th Parliament), p. 42.

²⁰ Dr Brett White, *Submission 229* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

The consequences of both lower entry and pass standards range from possible catastrophic injury in vocational areas to damage to Australia's multi-billion dollar education sector's reputation.²¹

5.21 A similar view was expressed by one academic who put plainly:

Management is committed to doing everything possible to print more degrees, at any cost. Standards have plummeted, and blatant academic misconduct is ignored as long as the student can plant a shred of doubt. Enrolment numbers are the only thing that matters now.²²

5.22 The impact of academic misconduct was also highlighted by Professor Page, who referred to the growing prevalence of contract cheating and stated that the failure to address academic misconduct risked weakening the reputation of Australian universities and eroding confidence in the value of Australian university degrees.²³

5.23 For PUA, the decline in quality was seen as a risk to Australia's reputation as an exporter of higher education in the Asia-Pacific region. It cautioned that many students from the Asia-Pacific region—who are focused on the quality of education and can afford to do so—already apply to study in the United States, the United Kingdom or Europe, where there is a concentration of higher quality universities. PUA continued:

Our positioning as a major 'exporter' of higher education within the Asia-Pacific region has depended upon few if any institutions in those other countries able to trade on a reputation similar to Australia (as well as the perception that studying in Australia offered an easy entrée to permanent residency here), but with the decline in our own academic reputation and the emergence of multiple universities in China and India able to rival our own, our niche market is at risk. If neither government nor universities confront the reality of our deficient academic quality and standards, the reputation of our universities will itself further decline, and that in turn will pose significant financial risk within the current parameters.²⁴

5.24 Concerns about the impact of lower standards on international student demand were also noted by Dr John Quiggan, although he observed there has not yet been a noticeable decline:

... there have been concerns that the financial incentives to maintain student numbers and 'keep customers satisfied' has led to a downgrading of academic standards. One feature of this concern is a belief that if the certification provided by Australian university qualifications is seen as less reliable, demand from international students will decline, thereby 'killing

²¹ Mr Ian Gray, *Submission 2* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

²² Name Withheld, *Submission 147* (47th Parliament), p. 1.

²³ Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), p. 11.

²⁴ PUA, *Submission 71* (47th Parliament), pp. 42–43.

the goose that lays the golden egg'. So far, at least, this decline has not been apparent.²⁵

Factors influencing quality of education at Australian universities

- 5.25 While the perceived decline in the quality of education at Australian universities was seen to have its roots in university corporatisation and poor governance practices, inquiry participants also drew attention to specific factors impacting education quality. These included increased workforce casualisation, growth in class sizes (and academic workloads), changing student cohorts (and the impact on entry and assessment standards), as well as a rise in academic misconduct.
- 5.26 The remainder of this section provides a brief overview of the evidence received in relation to these factors.

The impact of increased workforce casualisation

- 5.27 A number of participants made a link between the rise in insecure employment and a reduction in the quality of teaching at universities. For example, the Curtin Student Guild put plainly that 'staff working conditions are student learning conditions—universities cannot provide high-quality education if their workforce is overworked, underpaid, and unable to plan for job security.'²⁶
- 5.28 In a similar vein, the Australia Institute noted that job insecurity was compounding pressures on academics and tutors. It pointed to a report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which warned that casualisation is associated with negative impacts on staff—such as lower incomes and greater job dissatisfaction—that detract from the provision of quality education.²⁷
- 5.29 Dr White described how those on short-term contracts are 'often overburdened with excessive teaching loads, leaving little time for research or meaningful student engagement'. This, in turn, 'affects students' learning experiences, as casual staff often lack the institutional support necessary to provide high-quality, consistent teaching'.²⁸
- 5.30 A lack of meaningful student engagement was reflected in evidence from Miss Toronis, who described casualisation as 'rampant, leaving many teaching staff without job security, adequate time for student support or fair working conditions'. According to Miss Toronis, this has resulted in larger classes and minimal feedback, as well as 'reduced support services and lecturers who are

²⁵ Dr John Quiggan, *Submission 11* (47th Parliament), [p. 17].

²⁶ Curtin Student Guild, *Submission 80* (47th Parliament), p. 7.

²⁷ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*At the Crossroads: What is the post-COVID future of Australia's Public Universities*), p. 42.

²⁸ Dr Brett White, *Submission 229* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

overworked and underpaid'.²⁹ Miss Toronis described her own experience as an Honours student:

I paid over \$10,000 for an Honours year with fewer than 100 contact hours, classes thrown together last minute and minimal support. Not because of a lack of staff care but because the system is designed to keep them overworked, under-resourced and replaceable.³⁰

5.31 The impact of casualisation on student engagement was also reflected in evidence from an academic who described how it was increasingly difficult to maintain quality standards:

The reality of university teaching in 2025 is grim: staff are overworked, underpaid, and so stretched that it is increasingly difficult to meet important standards of quality. Governance systems that perpetuate casualisation and austerity inevitably compromise education quality. Underpaid staff face untenable workloads, often forced to rush through assessments, limiting time for meaningful feedback and engagement with students.³¹

5.32 Limited marking time was also noted by Associate Professor Jessica Harris and Dr Kathleen Smithers, who explained that casual staff can be limited to claiming 'a maximum of one hour per student across a teaching period'. In some instances, 'staff are only paid for 10 minutes to assess and provide feedback on student work, severely limiting their capacity to support student learning'.³²

5.33 This point was underscored by PUA, which submitted that lecturers—particularly those in casual employment—are 'advised *not* to devote the time necessary to fully read, assess and provide feedback on assignments and are not paid to do so'. The PUA suggested that the failure of universities to 'employ and pay sufficient lecturers' discourages grading and feedback—which 'are a form of teaching'—and defeats the purpose of assessments.³³

5.34 Further, in its discussion about the 'dumbing down' of the nation, PUA argued that cost-cutting measures have led to the creation of 'increasing numbers of teaching only academic appointments, that formally break the nexus between teaching and research'. Similarly, it stated that students are separated from active researchers by the casualisation of the teaching workforce.³⁴

²⁹ Miss Jasmine Toronis, *Submission 8*, [p. 3].

³⁰ Miss Jasmine Toronis, *Submission 8*, [p. 2].

³¹ Name Withheld, *Submission 179* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

³² Associate Professor Jessica Harris and Dr Kathleen Smithers, *Submission 32* (47th Parliament), pp. 1–2.

³³ PUA, *Submission 71* (47th Parliament), p. 32.

³⁴ PUA, *Submission 71* (47th Parliament), p. 32.

- 5.35 Dr Molly Dragiewicz referred to the elimination, or significant reduction, of 'synchronous lectures/teaching by PhD-qualified permanent academics' who are subject matter experts. Dr Dragiewicz argued that this change is driven by 'a desire to reduce expenditure on teaching' and has resulted in job losses, reduced student contact hours and 'replacement of teaching by PhD qualified experts with tutorials and "facilitation" by gig workers on casual contracts'.³⁵
- 5.36 In addition, Dr Dragiewicz submitted that the reduction in 'live teaching' has increased teaching administration workloads, resulting in reduced course preparation time, reduced course quality, and reduced learning quality for students.³⁶
- 5.37 Further, Dr Dragiewicz asserted that while universities have responded to concerns by 'insisting that tutorials are superior', they are a 'poor replacement for lectures by PhD-qualified experts' given:
- the variation in academic disciplines, which means that 'one size does not fit all for appropriate course structure or delivery modes';
 - tutorials are primarily delivered by PhD students (in some fields an honours degree, which tutors may have, is only four courses and one research paper beyond the bachelor's degree); and
 - tutors normally have not read the course texts or attended lectures for the courses they tutor, meaning professors/lecturers may have to simplify tutorial content, leading to complaints from students about the quality of such tutorials.³⁷
- 5.38 Concerns about the employment of non-PhD qualified lecturers were also raised by PUA, which expressed the view that 'an earned and examined PhD by research as a specialist qualification' should be the minimum standard for appointment as a lecturer. The PUA highlighted the consequences of what it described as 'degraded entry into professional academic work and professional training':

In view of the progressive decline in all academic quality and standards in every discipline area in every Australian university, we now have entire generations of university lecturers educated only at Australian universities to inferior standards, who are not conscious of their own limitations or easily able to remedy them, who are now fully integrated within a defective and sub-standard system, and who could not educate a future generation to higher standards without first improving their own education. They have been 'conditioned' by this system, they do not know that it was different

³⁵ Dr Molly Dragiewicz, *Submission 91* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

³⁶ Dr Molly Dragiewicz, *Submission 91* (47th Parliament), pp. 3–4.

³⁷ Dr Molly Dragiewicz, *Submission 91* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

pre-Dawkins, and like most Australians they have limited experience and understanding of different international systems.³⁸

- 5.39 To this end, the committee is aware that the employment of underqualified casual academics has also been the subject of recent media coverage of breaches of the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 by the University of Sydney. According to media reporting, the university breached staffing standards by employing undergraduates—with as little as a year or two of study behind them—to teach other undergraduates and even master's students.³⁹

The impact of increased class sizes

- 5.40 Evidence provided to the inquiry pointed to a significant increase in class sizes at Australian universities over the past 40 years. For example, PUA reflected that, in around 1980, the teacher-student ratio at Australian universities was approximately 1:12 (calculated on full-time ongoing lecturers only). While PUA stated that a ratio of 1:10 is 'considered optimal', the current ratio in Australia is 'as high as 1:70+' (depending on calculation method). The PUA also noted that it also relies on 'a majority of casualised lecturers', who it argued should not be included in calculations as 'they are not paid to provide the essential level of teaching and supervision that this ratio is supposed to reflect'.⁴⁰
- 5.41 The issue of increased class sizes was also raised by the Australia Institute, which argued that employing fewer staff members per student at universities is a widely used cost saving measure, with 'major implications for the quality of education'.⁴¹
- 5.42 The Australia Institute also observed that since the 2008 Review of Australia Higher Education—which found 'rising student-staff ratios were jeopardising the quality of teaching and the learning support provided to students'—'class sizes have become even bigger with fewer faculty per student'. The Australia Institute also pointed to the results of its survey, which found that 68 per cent of Australians were 'concerned about larger class sizes and fewer faculty per student', with 25 per cent being very concerned.⁴²

³⁸ PUA, *Submission 71* (47th Parliament), p. 29.

³⁹ Lucy Meyer, '[U-turn at USYD: Uni scrambles after breaching federal requirements](#)', *Crikey*, 4 November 2025.

⁴⁰ PUA, *Submission 71* (47th Parliament), p. 57.

⁴¹ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*Public Attitudes on Issues in Higher Education*), p. 12.

⁴² The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*At the Crossroads: What is the post-COVID future of Australia's Public Universities*), p. 41 and (*Public Attitudes on Issues in Higher Education*), p. 12.

- 5.43 The impact of increased class sizes on teaching and learning was discussed by both students and academics. Mr Will Burfoot, President of the Australian National University (ANU) Students Association reported a decrease in class and course availability, as well as class sizes that result in sub-optimal learning experiences, including some students being forced to sit on the floor:

Many report that they are unable to participate in their tutorials anymore, with so many people in the class that they are forced to sit on the ground if they want to be involved. Others have said they can barely see the whiteboard, much less participate in their tutorials, which have doubled if not tripled in size. Tutorial frequency has decreased for some degrees. Others have had fieldwork and labs cancelled. Courses you had planned to study are no longer being offered. These are all regular experiences of an ANU student. This is the reality that we are facing, and it is the direct consequence of a series of governance failures.⁴³

- 5.44 Further, Ms Ashlyn Horton, National President of the National Union of Students, told the committee that some students at ANU were unable to assign themselves to tutorials in the timetabling system 'because the classes are so overfilled'.⁴⁴

- 5.45 PUA noted that a lack of availability and large class sizes—along with a decline in their use as assessment exercises—meant that tutorials were no longer serving their original function:

Tutorials have specific functions that are no longer achievable, both because the class sizes are too large—they should not be more than 12 - and every course should be able to hold sufficient tutorial classes with paid academic staff for any number of students enrolled—and because often no longer being assessment exercises, students no longer prepare for them and therefore often learn nothing from them, and may not even attend.⁴⁵

- 5.46 Academics also shared their frustration about the impact of increased class sizes on the quality of education they are able to provide. One tutor said that class sizes are 'often too large, with up to 30 students per tutor', which 'makes it impossible for tutors to provide meaningful, in-depth support to individual students'. Overall, they observed that university employment practices and a lack of support for tutors negatively affects education quality:

The current employment practices and lack of support for tutors directly impact students' learning experiences. Students have expressed to me how they feel unsupported and disengaged, which undermines the quality of

⁴³ Mr Will Burfoot, President, ANU Students Association, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, p. 20.

⁴⁴ Ms Ashlyn Horton, National President, National Union of Students, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, p. 24.

⁴⁵ PUA, *Submission 71* (47th Parliament), p. 28.

education they receive. Tutors likewise express frustration and burnout, further reducing the quality of teaching and support available to students.⁴⁶

5.47 A similar view was shared by the Australia Institute, which described the burden of large class sizes on student learning and staff wellbeing:

Academics and tutors are burdened with heavier marking loads, and interpersonal and applied skills are more difficult to incorporate into learning activities and assessments with larger class sizes. Students have fewer opportunities to participate in class discussions, and receive attention to their personal needs, in very large classes. All this has negative implications for the wellbeing of both staff and students, compounded by increasing job insecurity and turnover of academic staff.⁴⁷

5.48 In contrast, the Australia Institute noted that smaller classes 'have been found to improve higher level thinking, student motivation, and satisfaction with their educational experience. In contrast, large classes are particularly detrimental to learning outcomes for disadvantaged students'.⁴⁸

The impact of changing student cohorts

5.49 As discussed in Chapter 2, international students have become an increasingly important source of revenue for Australian universities. For many participants, this reliance on international student revenue has contributed to a decline in academic standards.⁴⁹ For example, Professor Lionel Page argued that a focus on 'revenue generation through the aggressive recruitment of international students has precipitated a marked decline in academic standards', with the integrity of academic programs compromised to the extent that some institutions have awarded degrees to students who lack 'basic English proficiency':

Following a lower[ing] of the standard of students accepted, academics are under pressure from management not to fail a large proportion of them. This pressure is exerted both on the content being taught whose technical level is often progressively eroded to make it accessible to struggling students, and on the assessment policy, lowering standards.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Name Withheld, *Submission 151*, p. 1.

⁴⁷ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*Public Attitudes on Issues in Higher Education*), p. 13.

⁴⁸ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*At the Crossroads: What is the post-COVID future of Australia's Public Universities*), p. 42.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Dr John Quiggan, *Submission 11* (47th Parliament), [p. 17]; Professor Paul Turnbull, *Submission 223* (47th Parliament), [p. 2]; Name Withheld, *Submission 282* (47th Parliament), p. 2; Name Withheld, *Submission 169* (47th Parliament), [p. 2]; Name Withheld, *Submission 258* (47th Parliament), [p. 4].

⁵⁰ Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), pp. 10–11 (citation omitted).

- 5.50 This view was supported by evidence from Dr White, who also contended that the push to enrol more international students had incentivised lower entry requirements and greater tolerance of academic misconduct:

Numerous reports indicate that some universities have pressured academics to pass underperforming students to maintain revenue streams. In one case, staff at an Australian university reported being coerced into inflating grades and ignoring plagiarism to ensure high-paying international students remained enrolled.⁵¹

- 5.51 The apparent manipulation of assessments and exclusion policies to retain student enrolments was recognised by another submitter who highlighted the potentially vast difference in achievement between students awarded the same qualification:

Universities manipulate exclusion policies and internal transfer mechanisms to retain students who would otherwise fail out, artificially maintaining enrolment numbers. Students may be passed with sub-50% scores via supplementary assessments in all subjects and receive the same degree and [Grade Point Average] as those that pass outright, and internal degree transfers are used to shift students into alternative programs to maintain retention figures.⁵²

- 5.52 While there was a focus on international student enrolments, some participants also pointed to an increase in the numbers of domestic students who are not sufficiently prepared to attend university – nor adequately supported once they are there. For example, PUA stated that while the government encourages 'as many students as possible' to complete post-secondary qualifications, it does not support less prepared/able students taking longer to complete their courses and 'opposes attrition or non-completion'. At the same time, universities 'tend to pass and graduate most students irrespective of the level of education actually achieved'. According to PUA, 'this system is not conducive to ensuring that every graduate is fully qualified and knowledgeable, but rather the opposite'.⁵³

- 5.53 In this context, one academic said that universities had sacrificed standards 'in the pursuit of more bums on seats and hence dollars in the coffers'. As an example, they described how, rather than teaching skills to an objective level, a unit with a fail rate above a certain level must be reviewed 'to see what is "wrong" with it and to make a plan to "fix" it'. The effect of this, they advised, was that academics are 'being told that we must pass people who do not know the material and do not have the expected skills'.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Dr Brett White, *Submission 229* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

⁵² Name Withheld, *Submission 169* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

⁵³ PUA, *Submission 71* (47th Parliament), p. 23.

⁵⁴ Name Withheld, *Submission 141* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

- 5.54 A similar view was expressed by another submitter who stated that courses with 'historically rigorous assessments' were being redesigned 'to improve pass rates', blaming academics for student failure without addressing the declining entry standards' or student readiness.⁵⁵
- 5.55 Concerns about the level of support offered to both domestic and international students were raised by another academic who had worked at universities in Australia and overseas. They observed both a rise in the number of students with higher support needs, as well as a reduction in the support available to students and subsequent pressure on academics to relax standards:

... there is progressively less and less support for our students in terms of less assessment tasks, less rigorous assessment tasks, less supervision in laboratories, less quality feedback on student work, more online assessment which is easier to mark (but which is susceptible to cheating), less help for students who are struggling with course content ... University academics are heavily overworked ... and the needs of the students when they enrol are increasing as well (more international students with English as a second language, students no longer need to have completed prerequisite courses at secondary school, more students with physical or mental disabilities, more students with mental health issues, more absentee students (and who may not even engage with study online), more students who struggle to find sufficient time for study while supporting themselves financially with full-time paid employment ... There appears to be pressure to maintain expected distributions of grades for courses despite these challenges and I suspect that lax assessment rigor and more generous mark allocation on assignments and exams is now being deployed to maintain historical grade distributions and to mask a decrease in student academic performance. Again, this is in stark contrast to my experience working at universities in other countries where maintaining academic standards and institutional reputation was paramount ...⁵⁶

The impact of academic misconduct

- 5.56 Multiple submitters pointed to the impact of academic misconduct—and universities' responses to it—on academic standards and integrity. For example, Professor Page indicated that the lowering of academic standards has been compounded by 'the pervasive prevalence of contract cheating'. Professor Page noted research suggesting between two and eight per cent of students had 'engaged in commercial contract cheating', with the percentage increasing significantly 'when truth telling is incentivised'. He continued:

In 2022 alone, over 1,889 plagiarism and misconduct cases were recorded, an increase from 1,353 in 2018, with 89% of these cases being substantiated.

⁵⁵ Name Withheld, *Submission 169* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

⁵⁶ Name Withheld, *Submission 238* (47th Parliament), [pp. 1–2].

Weak enforcement measures and administrative reluctance to confront the issue likely lead these numbers to be underestimated.⁵⁷

5.57 Despite the increasing incidence of misconduct, Professor Page contended that universities 'often turn a blind eye to such violations' and that academics feel pressured to pass students who are suspected of cheating, 'fearing repercussions from university management if they uphold rigorous academic integrity standards'.⁵⁸

5.58 This was reflected in the evidence of another academic who failed two students' assignments for plagiarism and reporting the academic misconduct:

In two specific instances, I identified and reported clear cases of plagiarism where students had directly reproduced content from the prescribed textbook. My decision to fail these assignments and report the academic misconduct was overturned, with the grades changed to passes without my consultation. Furthermore, I received a reprimand for not providing 'educative feedback' in these cases, seemingly prioritising student satisfaction over academic integrity.⁵⁹

5.59 Evidence provided to the committee suggested that academic misconduct has been amplified by the watering down of assessments, including the move to online examinations. For example, one academic asserted that there was a drive at their university 'to get rid of exams all together, or to run them unsupervised (for example, to allow students to do them online from their bedrooms)'. While they stated there were 'genuine problems with exams as an assessment tool', they stressed that 'they are the *only* known way to efficiently test what a student knows, as opposed to what their friends or ChatGPT knows'.⁶⁰

5.60 Similarly, PUA argued that the degradation of assessments was 'complicated by the high incidence of plagiarism and use of AI, to which perhaps the only solution would be to conduct individual oral exams ... and invigilated written exams to which no aids are admitted'.⁶¹

5.61 The link between online exams and potential misconduct was also noted by other submitters, including an academic tutor at the ANU, who suggested that the lack of resources to monitor online exams meant that 'many students cheated and used AI tools inappropriately'. In addition, they disclosed that tutors were

⁵⁷ Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), p. 11 (citation omitted).

⁵⁸ Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), p. 11 (citation omitted).

⁵⁹ Name Withheld, *Submission 257* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

⁶⁰ Name Withheld, *Submission 141* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

⁶¹ PUA, *Submission 71* (47th Parliament), p. 27.

prevented from acting on this, instead being 'pressured into passing and inflating students despite clear evidence of such academic malpractice'.⁶²

5.62 In addition, Dr John Fitzsimmons suggested that the increasing difficulty of detecting such misconduct has reduced the value and trustworthiness of the traditional learning pedagogies upon which universities' reputations have depended:

Nowadays, it's impossible to look at a student's assignment with a strong sense of its authenticity. The Internet provides so many options for students to augment their own work with the work of others including AI. This is largely undetectable. The point is that from a governance perspective, the practices of learning pedagogies upon which the university's reputation once depended are now if not useless then certainly untrustworthy.⁶³

Suggested actions to address concerns about the quality of education at Australian universities

5.63 Inquiry participants proposed a range of actions in response to the perceived decline in quality of education at Australian universities. These included:

- strengthening the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency's (TEQSA's) basic principles of regulation;
- setting minimum standards in relation to staff qualifications, staff to student ratios, and 'live' contact hours;
- strengthening transparency and oversight of admissions processes;
- introducing external credentialing to protect academic standards; and
- increasing support for students.

Strengthen TEQSA's basic principles of regulation

5.64 Evidence provided to the committee suggests there is a view among some universities and peak bodies that TEQSA has sufficient powers to regulate matters outlined in the TEQSA Act's objects. For example, the University of Southern Queensland argued that 'TEQSA already has all the powers it needs to carry out the function for which it was established' and highlighted TEQSA's key purpose as expressed in the objects of the TEQSA Act, which is to:

... protect and enhance Australia's reputation for quality higher education and training services, our international competitiveness in the higher education sector and excellence, diversity and innovation in higher education in Australia.⁶⁴

⁶² Name Withheld, *Submission 286* (47th Parliament), [p. 2]. See also, Name Withheld, *Submission 238* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

⁶³ Dr John Fitzsimmons, *Submission 79* (47th Parliament), [p. 3].

⁶⁴ University of Southern Queensland, *Submission 57* (47th Parliament), p. 2.

5.65 Similarly, Independent Higher Education Australia took the view that:

... TEQSA's regulatory framework is robust for addressing corporate governance in higher education with respect to its core mission, that is, promoting academic integrity, protecting student interests and ensuring the overall quality and reputation of Australia's higher education sector.⁶⁵

5.66 Further, the ANAO described protection of 'the reputation of the higher education sector and the interests of students' as 'TEQSA's key regulatory purpose'.⁶⁶

5.67 However, TEQSA pointed out that the TEQSA Act 'does not specifically link the use of regulatory powers to public interest matters such as those in the Act's objects'. Instead, it explained that 'the basic principles in Part 2 of the TEQSA Act are framed in a way that':

- involves a lengthy list of matters required to be considered in each exercise of power, primarily framed by reference to aspects of an individual institution's history or risk to compliance
- does not specifically address the need to consider possible harm arising from risks or failures by individual institutions.⁶⁷

5.68 According to TEQSA, this means there is no requirement for it to specifically consider public interest matters—'such as the protection of students or of Australia's reputation for quality higher education'—when contemplating regulatory action.⁶⁸

5.69 In this context, TEQSA identified an opportunity to address this limitation by strengthening the basic principles of regulation 'to prioritise student protection, provider accountability and Australia's reputation for high quality education'. TEQSA argued that:

An explicit requirement to consider matters relevant to the interests of students or the preservation of Australia's reputation for quality higher education would reflect an improved balance between the sector's protection from harsh or unjust regulatory intervention and the paramount importance of the protective purposes in the objects of the TEQSA Act.⁶⁹

5.70 To this end, the committee is aware that the recent consultation paper, *Modernising and Strengthening TEQSA's Powers*, contained questions relating to changes that would ensure students are at centre of the higher education regulatory system. This included a question relating to the need for 'a positive

⁶⁵ Independent Higher Education Australia, *Submission 31* (47th Parliament), p. 10.

⁶⁶ Australian National Audit Office, *Submission 51* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

⁶⁷ Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), *Submission 17* (47th Parliament), p. 13.

⁶⁸ TEQSA, *Submission 17* (47th Parliament), p. 13.

⁶⁹ TEQSA, *Submission 17* (47th Parliament), p. 13.

duty on providers to take reasonable and proportionate actions to comply with the Threshold Standards':

A positive duty means TEQSA could act early, for example, where providers fail to take reasonable steps to protect students, rather than waiting for negative student outcomes to occur before acting. Under a legislated positive duty, providers would need to demonstrate they meet the Threshold Standards actively and continuously, through mechanisms such as regular reporting, monitoring, evaluation and evidence of preventive or supporting actions.⁷⁰

Establish minimum standards for staff qualifications, staff to student ratios and 'live' contact hours

5.71 In response to concerns about a lack of standards relating to staff qualification and contact hours, Dr Dragiewicz proposed introducing 'minimum standards for in-person or synchronous online teaching by PhD qualified professors in permanent appointments'. According to Dr Dragiewicz, this could involve setting:

- minimum staff to student ratios (based on permanent, full-time academic staff) calculated on the number of academic staff required to teach the number of enrolled students (using rolling five-year average enrolments);
- a minimum of three live course contact hours with a professor or lecturer per course week:
 - currently, Australia has no standards for minimum contact hours with a PhD-qualified professor or lecturer or sessional tutor, which means 'it is not only possible but common to acquire a recognised university degree despite experiencing no actual teaching';
- a minimum requirement for 75 per cent of courses in a degree to be taught by PhD-qualified academics on permanent contracts;
- a maximum of 15 per cent of courses in a degree to be taught by PhD qualified sessional academics on term contracts; and
- a maximum of 10 per cent of courses to be taught by higher degree research students-non-PhD qualified sessional academics on semester/term contracts.⁷¹

Improve the transparency and oversight of admissions processes

5.72 In response to concerns about lower entry standards, Professor Page recommended a range of measures that would 'mitigate the conflict of interest inherent in the current system', thereby allowing universities to 'uphold their

⁷⁰ Department of Education, [Modernising and Strengthening TEQSA's Powers Consultation Paper](#), pp. 5 and 6.

⁷¹ Dr Molly Dragiewicz, *Submission 91* (47th Parliament), pp. 5–6.

academic integrity while contributing responsibly to Australia's migration framework'.⁷² These measures included:

- decoupling educational and migration objectives, which could involve reassessing the weight of university enrolment in migration eligibility criteria, ensuring that academic institutions focus primarily on education;
- establishing an independent body to oversee international student admissions to ensure decisions are based on academic merit and not influenced by potential financial gains related to migration incentives;
- public disclosure of universities' admission criteria and processes for international students, including any adjustments made to language proficiency requirements, to maintain accountability and public trust;
- fostering closer cooperation between universities and immigration agencies to ensure alignment between student admissions, educational standards and migration policies; and
- undertaking periodic audits of university admissions to ensure compliance with established academic standards and to identify any conflicts of interest arising from the dual role of universities.⁷³

Introduce external credentialing to protect academic standards

5.73 In response to concerns about the lowering of academic standards to attract and retain students, Professor Page suggested the introduction of external credentialing, which would allow 'academic organisations to set and uphold knowledge and skill standards independently of university management'. Professor Page noted the use of this approach in professional fields:

In professional fields such as accounting and finance, external accreditation bodies have long played a role in maintaining education quality. For instance, CPA Australia has established accreditation standards to evaluate the quality of accounting programs and their providers, ensuring that graduates possess the necessary competencies for professional practice. Similarly, the Institute of Certified Management Accountants (ICMA) administers the Certified Management Accountant (CMA) program, which rigorously assesses management accounting expertise.⁷⁴

5.74 Professor Page argued that the broader use of credentialing frameworks would:

- provide objective measures of educational outcomes by ensuring universities adhere to established academic standards and reducing incentives to lower curriculum quality;
- empower academic organisations by shifting some authority over standards away from university management and toward professional and academic associations;

⁷² Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), p. 16.

⁷³ Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), pp. 15–16.

⁷⁴ Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), p. 16 (citations omitted).

- restore confidence in university qualifications by introducing independent benchmarks; and
 - strengthen Australia's international reputation by reinforcing the credibility of Australian higher education.⁷⁵
- 5.75 To achieve this, Professor Page recommended that the Australian Government should support academic organisations to develop third-party credentialing processes based on existing international models. This could include:
- encouraging professional and academic bodies to define standardised exit assessments;
 - establishing independent credentialing panels comprising academic representatives from multiple institutions and industry experts; and
 - introducing policies to integrate third-party credentials into academic and professional qualification pathways.⁷⁶

Increase support for students

- 5.76 As detailed earlier in this chapter, a number of participants raised concerns about the support available to students, including the lack of time for meaningful engagement and feedback. To this end, submitters proposed a range of actions aimed at providing a more supported student experience. For example, as part of a recommendation to limit casualisation and improve job security, Miss Toronis proposed that all academic contracts include a requirement for 'paid time for feedback and student support'. She also proposed investing in 'student-facing education' by allocating funding to 'direct student support and academic mentorship, rather than administrative growth'.⁷⁷
- 5.77 Another student, Ms Lola Seittenranta, described receiving 'poor feedback' during her studies, which she felt was likely related to the micromanagement and inflexibility of paid marking time. To address this issue, Ms Seittenranta recommended introducing 'a guarantee that students will receive appropriate academic support, such as individual formative feedback directly from the teaching staff within their course'.⁷⁸
- 5.78 Given changes in the student cohort, there were also concerns about a lack of support for students who may not be adequately prepared for university study. To this end, PUA suggested that every university should have a funded and staffed tutorial service available to provide additional support:

Lecturers should be able to assume that every student before them has already achieved certain levels of knowledge and skills, which can then be

⁷⁵ Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), pp. 16–17.

⁷⁶ Professor Lionel Page, *Submission 103* (47th Parliament), p. 17.

⁷⁷ Miss Jasmine Toronis, *Submission 8*, [p. 3].

⁷⁸ Ms Lola Seittenranta, *Submission 6* (47th Parliament), pp. 2 and 4.

further nurtured and built upon during their tertiary studies, but this cannot be assumed. Therefore, in order to provide sufficient support for all of these students, including but not limited to improving their English, research and arguing and analytical skills, every university should have a fully funded and staffed tutorial service available to tens of thousands of students daily.⁷⁹

- 5.79 In a similar vein, one experienced academic—who highlighted the increased needs of students arising from a broader student cohort—argued for more funding for teaching support in order 'to provide a good student experience with fair and rigorous assessment and proper feedback on student work'.⁸⁰
- 5.80 To this end, the committee is aware that the Australian Government is introducing a system of demand-driven needs-based funding to 'support students from underrepresented backgrounds ... to progress their studies and complete their degrees'. Under this system, universities would receive additional per-student funding to provide academic and wraparound supports for students.⁸¹

⁷⁹ PUA, *Submission 71* (47th Parliament), p. 23.

⁸⁰ Name Withheld, *Submission 238* (47th Parliament), [p. 2].

⁸¹ Department of Education, [Funding reforms for a better, fairer higher education system](#), p. 2.

Chapter 6

Interoperability of regulation across jurisdictions

- 6.1 This chapter looks at higher education regulation across Commonwealth, state and territory jurisdictions, as well as potential changes aimed at improving the quality of governance at higher education providers.
- 6.2 While the current dual regulatory architecture was seen by some participants as creating inconsistencies in governance and accountability, many submitters highlighted the challenges of navigating complex and growing regulatory requirements, with calls for greater simplification and clarification across state and Commonwealth jurisdictions.
- 6.3 The remainder of this chapter deals with the current legislative and regulatory framework, the quantity and complexity of current requirements, suggested actions to improve the coordination of regulation across jurisdictions, as well as the committee view and recommendations.

Legislative and regulatory framework

- 6.4 As outlined in the committee's interim report, Australia's higher education sector is governed by a complex legislative and regulatory framework that involves Commonwealth, state and territory governments and multiple agencies with higher education responsibilities. Some of the agencies with higher education regulatory responsibility are listed in Figure 6.1.
- 6.5 The Commonwealth legislative framework for higher education is primarily based on the *Higher Education Support Act 2003*, which governs funding, and the *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011* (TEQSA Act), which sets out quality assurance and regulation.¹ The Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 is a central component of the TEQSA Act, which establishes the minimum requirements providers must meet.²
- 6.6 Australian higher education providers need to be registered with TEQSA, which ensures compliance with the Commonwealth higher education legislation and policy frameworks.³
- 6.7 Other key regulatory and stewardship bodies in the sector include the interim Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC), the Australian, Skills Quality Authority and the National Student Ombudsman.

¹ Department of Education, *Quality regulation in higher education* (accessed 30 October 2025).

² Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), *Contextual overview of the HES Framework 2021* (accessed 30 October 2025).

³ Department of Education, *Submission 17* (47th Parliament), pp. 3–4.

Figure 6.1 Agencies with higher education regulatory responsibilities

Commonwealth, state or territory governments (including departments of education and relevant Ministers)	State and territory parliaments and assemblies, through university Acts of establishment and other relevant state-based legislation
Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP)	Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA)
National Student Ombudsman (NSO) / Commonwealth Ombudsman	State and territory-based ombudsman offices
Australian Research Council (ARC)	National, state or territory-based anticorruption commissions
National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC)	Australian Research Integrity Committee (ARIC)
Tuition Protection Service	Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO)
National, state or territory-based audit offices	

Source: TEQSA, *Submission 17 (47th Parliament)*, p. 5.

- 6.8 Nearly all Australian public universities are established under legislation in the state or territory in which they are registered.⁴ Among other things, this establishing legislation creates reporting requirements in relation to work health and safety, financial accounting and audit, and workplace relations.⁵
- 6.9 Some participants observed that this legislative and regulatory framework has led to a situation where the Commonwealth largely has responsibility for the regulation and funding of universities, while the states and territories have oversight of actual governance.⁶ For example, Mr Simon Walker noted the focus of Commonwealth regulators 'on standards of education and research, not necessarily on whether a university's council is governing properly, complying with state laws, or handling finances and grievances appropriately':

This can lead to regulatory lacunae where significant governance concerns (for example, persistent transparency failures or questionable business ventures) are not addressed in either level of government.

This dual jurisdiction has led to inconsistencies in governance and accountability. Universities enjoy significant autonomy under their state

⁴ Department of Education, *Submission 17 (47th Parliament)*, pp. 3–4.

⁵ Universities Chancellors Council, [Governance of Australian Universities](#) (accessed 30 October 2025).

⁶ See, for example, Dr John Quiggan, *Submission 11 (47th Parliament)*, p. 11; Dr Andrew Henderson, *Submission 25 (47th Parliament)*, [pp. 1–2 and 7]; Dr John Fitzsimmons, *Submission 79 (47th Parliament)*, [p. 1]; Macquarie University, answers to questions taken on notice, 8 September 2025 and written questions on notice from Senator David Pocock (received 12 September 2025).

Acts, but without clear, harmonised oversight, neither level of government takes responsibility when problems arise.⁷

- 6.10 Dr John Quiggan submitted that a major weakness of Australia's dual regulatory framework 'was the fact that university governance operates under the rules of state governments which have almost no role, and little interest, in the funding and performance of universities'. As an example, Dr Quiggan argued that:

Another striking consequence of the current governance structure is that issues of misconduct in areas such as enrolment and research, involving national government funding, are dealt with by state anti-corruption commissions. Thus, it is possible that the same conduct in relation to a national research grant or the allocation of a nationally supported student place might be deemed corrupt in one state and legitimate in another.⁸

- 6.11 The ACT Government highlighted that under the TEQSA Act, state and territory governments 'are not themselves regulators of higher education'. Consequently, the ACT Government argued that its 'ability to "collect, analyse, interpret" the university's data as TEQSA can (per TEQSA Act section 134(e)) to assess whether financial safeguards are functioning appropriately is limited'.⁹

- 6.12 Professor George Williams, Vice-Chancellor of Western Sydney University, argued that 'we are fundamentally missing a holistic vision of the mission of universities and how regulation can both support that and also hold in check where universities move outside it'. Professor Williams told the committee:

A larger point I'd make is that the federal-state divide is of enormous significance here. It's not lost on me—the irony of a Senate committee looking at governance controlled by state legislation. Surely it's time to think about those issues as to how we actually get the regulatory scheme right, because there's regulatory incoherence between those two levels in many cases, and it's between states in many cases.¹⁰

Quantity and complexity of current regulatory requirements

- 6.13 Participants described the complex legislative and regulatory requirements that universities are subject to, with several stakeholders noting the risks associated with adding to the existing regulatory compliance burden.¹¹

⁷ Mr Simon Walker, *Submission 112* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

⁸ Dr John Quiggan, *Submission 11* (47th Parliament), p. 11.

⁹ Mr Andrew Barr MLA, Australian Capital Territory Minister for Economic Development, *Submission 114* (47th Parliament), p. 2.

¹⁰ Professor George Williams AO, Vice-Chancellor and President, Western Sydney University, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, p. 5.

¹¹ See, for example, Group of Eight, *Submission 49* (47th Parliament), p. 2; Murdoch University, *Submission 18* (47th Parliament), p. 7; Macquarie University, answers to questions taken on notice, 8 September 2025 and written questions on notice from Senator David Pocock (received 12 September 2025).

6.14 The University Chancellors Council (UCC), for example, emphasised the 'requirements that are imposed on Australian universities through overlapping jurisdictions of federal and state or territory governments':

In addition to compliance with the Federal Department of Education Skills and Employment requirements as a condition of funding, Australian universities are answerable to other Federal Government departments and agencies, not least TEQSA. State governments and Auditors-General have their own separate requirements. In addition, as universities are also public entities which are within, for example, Freedom of Information and Public Interest Disclosure legislation.¹²

6.15 Similarly, Macquarie University emphasised the significant duplication, complexity and ambiguity created by the dual regulatory environment across both state and federal jurisdictions:

This complexity is manifest in overlapping state and federal requirements. This is evident, for example, across sexual safety and gender-based violence frameworks, anti-discrimination laws, workplace relations and work health and safety, research integrity and financial reporting standards. Each of these requirements require different processes, portals, and timelines for substantially similar information.¹³

6.16 The University of New South Wales pointed out that it operated 'within a complex legal and regulatory environment spanning both state and federal jurisdictions' and that it was currently 'required to comply with no fewer than 272 laws and regulations, including 10 that specifically govern higher education'.¹⁴

6.17 Likewise, the University of Sydney noted that its Legislative Compliance Register recorded '331 legislative instruments and associated documents, of which 157 have been assessed as imposing significant compliance obligations'. It argued that the 'legislative environment in which large research-intensive Australian universities operate is complex and continually changing'.¹⁵

6.18 More broadly, Universities Australia (UA) told the committee that the sector was dealing 'with an enormous amount of additional regulation'. Mr Luke Sheehy, Chief Executive Officer of UA, commented:

Seemingly, with each piece of additional funding or intervention from the government—particularly this government—there is an additional regulatory sting. If universities, as public, not-for-profit institutions, are to

¹² Universities Chancellors Council (UCC), *Submission 23* (47th Parliament), Appendix 2 (*University Chancellors Council Response to Australian Higher Education Accord Panel further questions*), p. 6.

¹³ Macquarie University, answers to questions taken on notice, 8 September 2025 and written questions on notice from Senator David Pocock (received 12 September 2025).

¹⁴ UNSW Sydney, *Submission 34* (47th Parliament), p. 5.

¹⁵ The University of Sydney, *Submission 39* (47th Parliament), p. 11.

continue to deliver in the national interest, it's really important that our regulation be looked at.¹⁶

- 6.19 Other submitters to the inquiry cautioned against further duplication and additions to the compliance burden of universities.¹⁷ For example, Professor Max Lu, Vice-Chancellor and President, University of Wollongong, argued that 'overregulation could put a lot of burden on the sector, not only in terms of resources but also in terms of opportunity lost'.¹⁸
- 6.20 In a similar vein, Macquarie University argued that it continues 'to face accelerating regulatory change requiring us increasingly to divert resources away from our core mission of research and education toward compliance'.¹⁹
- 6.21 Independent Higher Education Australia (IHEA) warned that overregulation 'costs providers time and money, which can lead to finding savings elsewhere within the organisation. This may lead to redundancies and come at the cost of innovation and greater use of technology, which impacts students'.²⁰
- 6.22 In this context, the UCC described the 'importance of maintaining a balance between regulatory oversight and institutional autonomy' and argued that 'overregulation can limit innovation and academic freedom, both of which are essential components of the higher education sector'.²¹
- 6.23 Some of these issues were noted in the Final Report and Principles of the Expert Council on University Governance (Expert Council). However, the final report also observed that 'many of the submissions received from universities failed to engage proactively and genuinely in addressing areas of weakness and or in identifying scope for improvement in governance practices and outcomes':

Instead, submissions and commentary focused on describing existing legislative and regulatory requirements and burdens, the challenge of engaging some stakeholders, and how their governance performance was both sufficient and appropriate. While recognising that many universities have and are continuing to address areas of concern, and made time to

¹⁶ Mr Luke Sheehy, Chief Executive Officer, Universities Australia, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, p. 13. See also, Ms Vicki Thomson, Chief Executive, Group of Eight, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, p. 12.

¹⁷ See, for example, Flinders University, *Submission 56* (47th Parliament), p. 2; Australian National University, *Submission 107* (47th Parliament), p. 12; Macquarie University, answers to questions taken on notice, 8 September 2025 and written questions on notice from Senator David Pocock (received 12 September 2025).

¹⁸ Professor Max Lu, Vice-Chancellor and President, University of Wollongong, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025., p. 41.

¹⁹ Macquarie University, answers to questions taken on notice, 8 September 2025 and written questions on notice from Senator David Pocock (received 12 September 2025).

²⁰ Independent Higher Education Australia, *Submission 31* (47th Parliament), p. 4.

²¹ UCC, *Submission 23* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

participate in the Council's consultations, the level of positive and proactive engagement in the genuine work of the Council and how it might address some of the sector's governance challenges and improve trust and confidence, was not at the level hoped for.²²

Suggested actions to improve the coordination of regulation

6.24 Several inquiry participants proposed a range of actions and responses aimed at improving the coordination of regulation across higher education jurisdictions, including:

- harmonising regulatory and reporting arrangements; and
- improving information sharing and collaboration.

Harmonising regulatory and reporting arrangements

6.25 Multiple participants reflected on the need to address regulatory duplication and complexity across the higher education sector.²³ For example, Swinburne University of Technology noted that as a dual sector institution it had difficulty in adhering to different regulators, and argued that 'improvements could be made to streamline the accreditation processes':

A 'one-stop shop' would be advantageous in reducing the administrative burden and duplication of meeting the requirements of the regulating bodies. We understand that the vision for the new and proposed Australian Tertiary Education Commission would bring together higher education and vocational under the one roof, but more should be done to address the jurisdictional reporting requirements.²⁴

6.26 Dr Martin Parkinson, Chancellor of Macquarie University, told the committee that in an 'ideal situation, we would be in a world where one level of government was totally responsible for postsecondary education'. Dr Parkinson observed:

To the extent that you're getting duplication by having both levels of government involved, that's obviously a burden on the operation of the institutions. So harmonisation would be a good thing, and better still, perhaps one day, would be being regulated and funded solely out of one sector or one level of government.²⁵

²² Expert Council on University Governance, *Final Report and Principles*, pp. 25–26.

²³ See, for example, Australian Catholic University, *Submission 62* (47th Parliament), p. 3; Western Sydney University, *Submission 29* (47th Parliament), p. 2; Macquarie University, answers to questions taken on notice, 8 September 2025 and written questions on notice from Senator David Pocock (received 12 September 2025).

²⁴ Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 35* (47th Parliament), [p. 3].

²⁵ Dr Martin Parkinson, AC, PSM, Chancellor, Macquarie University, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, p. 54.

- 6.27 Additionally, Macquarie University argued that 'the legislation for ATEC needs to be carefully considered to ensure clear role definition between ATEC and TEQSA to avoid overlap and unnecessary reporting burden'.²⁶
- 6.28 While noting that the Universities Accord had resulted in closer collaboration between jurisdictions, Innovative Research Universities argued that continuing 'dialogue and streamlining across jurisdictions will be required to avoid further duplication' and recommended that 'ATEC undertake a comprehensive review of university regulation and reporting to address this issue'.²⁷
- 6.29 A similar proposal was put forward by the UCC, which suggested that a 'Ministerial Council be established covering all tertiary education, with appropriate expert advice and with a mission that includes clarifying, simplifying and removing duplication from the sector'.²⁸
- 6.30 The National Tertiary Education Union argued that there needed to be a more focused approach on both the regulatory framework that outlines good governance and on overseeing provider compliance'.²⁹ As such, it recommended the establishment of a 'National Framework, which could be overseen by TEQSA and/or other regulatory bodies (such as ATEC) but should also reference the different government jurisdictions'.³⁰
- 6.31 The Australian Catholic University (ACU) submitted that 'as the higher education sector transitions into new arrangements, it is crucial that regulatory and reporting requirements are reviewed holistically'. ACU argued that:
- [a] streamlined approach will facilitate efficient and effective administration while avoiding unnecessary red tape that burdens both providers and government. The goal should be to foster a regulatory environment that is conducive to innovation and educational excellence rather than one that stifles progress through excessive bureaucracy.³¹
- 6.32 Similarly, Group of Eight called for measures 'cutting unnecessary and burdensome red tape that directs resources and attention away from reforms that could deliver tangible and substantial improvements to enable universities to better deliver for students, staff and communities'.³²

²⁶ Macquarie University, answers to questions taken on notice, 8 September 2025 and written questions on notice from Senator David Pocock (received 12 September 2025).

²⁷ Innovative Research Universities, *Submission 64* (47th Parliament), [p. 3].

²⁸ UCC, *Submission 23* (47th Parliament), Appendix 2 (*University Chancellors Council Response to Australian Higher Education Accord Panel further questions*), p. 7.

²⁹ National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), *Submission 15* (47th Parliament), p. 8.

³⁰ NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament), p. 8.

³¹ Australian Catholic University, *Submission 62* (47th Parliament), p. 5.

³² Group of Eight, *Submission 49* (47th Parliament), p. 2.

- 6.33 In relation to the implementation of the Expert Council's new governance principles, Mr Sheehy argued that 'anything that looks at harmonisation in this space and ensures that our governance arrangements, or the principles for governance arrangements, are fit for purpose and harmonised is a good thing'.³³
- 6.34 To this end, the committee notes the recommendations of the Expert Council, in particular, the following part of Recommendation 3:
- Education Ministers consider reviewing their legislation and regulations against the Principles and consider legislative reform to align with the Principles where that will reduce regulatory duplication and complexity and enhance adoption of the Principles.³⁴
- 6.35 The final report also recommended that TEQSA be appropriately resourced to monitor and evaluate the new principles and recommendations.³⁵ It went on to note that if the principles 'are to be mandatory and administered by a regulator, then closer attention will be required in drafting requirements including to take into account existing legislation and regulation that applies'.³⁶
- 6.36 Additionally, the committee is aware that the recent consultation paper, *Modernising and Strengthening TEQSA's Powers*, contained questions relating to opportunities to streamline regulation for universities and other education providers, so they can focus on teaching and learning.³⁷

Improving information sharing and collaboration

- 6.37 A range of participants advocated for greater information sharing and collaboration across jurisdictions to ensure better legislative compliance. For example, IHEA argued that while TEQSA has information sharing arrangements with a range of other agencies, such as the Fair Work Commission and the Australian Securities and Investments Commission, 'there may be opportunities to enhance and streamline these arrangements'.³⁸
- 6.38 This view was echoed by the ACT Government, which suggested that it may be useful to consider whether TEQSA's ability to share information with other Commonwealth agencies could be extended to states and territories where

³³ Mr Luke Sheehy Chief Executive Officer, Universities Australia, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, p. 14.

³⁴ Expert Council on University Governance, *Final Report and Principles*, pp. 35–37.

³⁵ Expert Council on University Governance, *Final Report and Principles*, p. 36.

³⁶ Expert Council on University Governance, *Final Report and Principles*, p. 40.

³⁷ Commonwealth Department of Education, [Modernising and Strengthening TEQSA's Powers Consultation Paper](#), p. 8.

³⁸ Independent Higher Education Australia, *Submission 31* (47th Parliament), p. 4.

TEQSA identifies a high financial risk.³⁹ It also noted that it would review the Expert Council's recommendations and 'assess whether the [University of Canberra] Act needs harmonising amendments to put them into effect'.⁴⁰

- 6.39 TEQSA pointed out that one of the principles that it observed 'is that universities and higher education providers provide data once, and then all agencies access and use that data for their own regulatory and compliance purposes in order to manage that burden'. TEQSA argued that 'to the greatest extent possible, we leverage off the type of data that universities generate in the normal course of their business for their own internal compliance purposes'.⁴¹
- 6.40 The Victorian Government highlighted the 'need for established forums for dialogue and shared decision making on higher education matters among Commonwealth, state and territory governments'. The Victorian Government argued that it was 'important that the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments engage collaboratively on any proposals for reform of higher education governance and regulation'.⁴²
- 6.41 As noted in the committee's interim report, TEQSA recommended that a national data-sharing framework be established which 'would implement a coordinated approach to higher education data collection and sharing across relevant agencies, allowing TEQSA to access information it needs without imposing additional administrative burdens on providers'.⁴³
- 6.42 To support efforts to better coordinate access to data, the committee's interim report recommended that TEQSA 'take steps to improve governance reporting requirements to enable it to identify and mitigate risk across the university sector, including public reporting on the results of its compliance processes'.⁴⁴

³⁹ Mr Andrew Barr MLA, Australian Capital Territory Minister for Economic Development, *Submission 114* (47th Parliament), p. 2.

⁴⁰ Mr Andrew Barr MLA, Australian Capital Territory Minister for Economic Development, *Submission 114* (47th Parliament), p. 2.

⁴¹ Dr Mary Russell, Chief Executive Officer, TEQSA, *Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, p. 49.

⁴² Victorian Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions, *Submission 12*, p. 1.

⁴³ TEQSA, *Submission 17* (47th Parliament), p. 16.

⁴⁴ Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee, *Quality of governance at Australian higher education providers – Interim report*, September 2025, p. 120.

Committee view

The role and purpose of universities

- 6.43 Of all the issues considered in this report—the corporatisation of universities, compliance with workplace laws, employment security, academic autonomy, and educational quality—a central theme underpinning all of them, is what the role and purpose of Australian universities should be.
- 6.44 Many contributors questioned whether universities today are principally public institutions with a primary responsibility to educate students, undertake research, and contribute to the economic prosperity of the nation—and if so, how should this be ensured, and indeed, supported.
- 6.45 The tension between universities operating for the public good, and attracting funding from private sources, creates a dichotomy in how they operate, and which parts of their operations they prioritise. Evidence received throughout the inquiry suggests that many universities have yet to find the optimal balance for all members of university communities.
- 6.46 This notion of establishing a central vision that underscores the public function of universities was discussed by a range of submitters.
- 6.47 For example, one submitter argued that governance of universities 'needs to reflect a vision for universities that sees them as engaging with a wide range of social and planetary issues rather than purely as a place to gain narrow job skills or to accrue profit to a corporate entity'.⁴⁵
- 6.48 The Australia Institute declared that it was 'time Australia proclaimed a national vision for higher education that reconfirms the public service mission of the sector, and prioritises the needs of students, staff, and society'.⁴⁶
- 6.49 Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt AO, a member of the former Australian Universities Accord Panel, pointed the committee to the Accord Panel's proposal to create an overarching objective for universities to underpin their role and purpose:

I don't want to underplay the importance of us starting to think about universities as a public good, which has been lost with the period of corporatisation ... It was one of the reasons why we recommended an objective for the higher education sector so that we can refocus on that ...⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Stretton Health Equity, *Submission 30*, 47th Parliament) [p. 3].

⁴⁶ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament), Appendix A (*At the Crossroads: What is the post-COVID future of Australia's Public Universities*), p. 47.

⁴⁷ Professor Larissa Behrendt, Interim First Nations Commissioner, Department of Education, *Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, p. 19.

- 6.50 The committee is both aware and supportive of the Expert Council on University Governance's Principle 4 (Transparency), which states that 'purpose should be a powerful driver of decision-making and activity, aligning effort and decisions throughout the university in furtherance of its contribution to society and reflecting its contribution to the public good', and that 'public universities should be accountable to the communities they support, and their purpose, objectives and performance should be transparent to those communities'.⁴⁸
- 6.51 The Committee is of the view that universities are indeed public institutions, established for the public good, and their governance arrangements should reflect that.
- 6.52 The committee supports the announcement that the principles proposed by the Expert Council will be written into regulation as part of the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 and that universities will be required to report annually to TEQSA against these principles on a 'if not, why not' basis. The committee also looks forward to the recommendations of the University Accord, being brought to fruition by the welcome establishment of the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC). ATEC's task of working across the tertiary education system to provide an overarching objective for all institutions to work collaboratively to meet the needs of students, community, research users and employers, will provide the focus required to ensure the sector meets the expectations as a public good, for all in the community.
- 6.53 As a starting point, the committee would like to see the principles that set out the role and purpose of the institutions to be core objectives in the legislation that establishes them.

Recommendation 1

- 6.54 The committee recommends that state and territory governments review the establishing acts of universities to ensure the primacy of public research and education in their objects and functions, and consider the composition of members on governing bodies that ensure this can be achieved.**

The corporatisation of universities

- 6.55 As set out in its Interim Report, the committee recognises that one of the key elements in shaping the culture of an institution is the representation on governing bodies, and the participation of all members of the university community in decision-making forums. These elements together are key to ensuring accountability and transparency.
- 6.56 The perceived lack of transparency of decisions, especially around engagement and spending on consultants, selection of council-appointed members of governing bodies, remuneration of senior executive roles, and decisions that

⁴⁸ Expert Council on University Governance, [Final Report and Principles](#), p. 61.

appear to focus on revenue raising rather than education, has fostered a deep mistrust with universities.

6.57 As discussed in Chapter 3, this debate is not new. In the late 1990s there were warnings of how the sector was changing as a result of a reduction in government funding.⁴⁹ These changes were not without consequence.

6.58 In 2001, a predecessor of this committee also reported on the changing culture in Australian universities from a collegial model to an 'enterprise or corporate model', which has resulted in:

... an instinct to stifle uncomfortable opinions of a kind usually associated with academic institutions. They have an understandable tendency to place the value of the university's reputation before their obligation to protect the rights of its faculty members to free expression.⁵⁰

6.59 This aligns today with the views of many contributors to the inquiry.

6.60 The committee understands and shares the frustrations of many in the university community who are dismayed by the perceived demise of the collegial model of governance. The committee considers that the recommendations in its Interim Report, which align strongly with many of the principles in the final report of the Expert Council on University Governance, can help reshape universities' governing bodies.

6.61 However, in addition to those recommendations, and in light of the issues raised in this final report, the committee sees value in ensuring that council members are obliged to consider the central purpose the university in their role, and the performance of the council as a body be assessed against that purpose.

Recommendation 2

6.62 The committee recommends that the duties of council members should reflect the primacy of education for the public good, and assessments of the performance of university councils should reflect their role in ensuring the primacy of public research and education as the core functions of universities.

University funding model

6.63 The committee notes the evidence raised regarding the funding model for universities, and in particular criticisms of the Job Ready Graduate Scheme introduced in 2021 by the Morrison Government.

⁴⁹ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105*, (47th Parliament), p. 7.

⁵⁰ Dr Hazel Ferguson, Higher Education Support Amendment (Freedom of Speech) Bill 2020, *Bills Digest No. 28*, 2020-21, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2020, p. 7.

- 6.64 The committee recognises the impact of this policy on the sector. The committee supports the need for ATEC to further consider recommendations of the Accord, and to prioritise work to better understand the cost of teaching and learning to provide advice on overall higher education funding levels per student.
- 6.65 However, the committee does not believe such pressures excuse a failure to meet governance standards.

Preservation of the collegial model of governance and academic freedom

- 6.66 Similar to addressing the issue of corporatisation of universities, the committee is of the view that if the recommendations of its interim report are accepted and enacted throughout the sector, this would go a long way to addressing some of the governance issues that currently beset many universities.

Employment practices

- 6.67 As briefly discussed in the committee's Interim Report, wage underpayments have been described in the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report as proof that that current governance obligations on university councils 'do not always translate into effective oversight and support for staff and students, and that this is a systemic challenge'.⁵¹
- 6.68 Various submitters highlighted the widespread underpayment of staff at Australian universities. For example, the University of Wollongong NTEU Branch reported that governance failures had resulted in significant wage underpayment, noting the university was required to repay '\$10 [million] to staff in 2024'.⁵²
- 6.69 The committee was deeply disturbed to learn, through the NTEU's *Public Universities Wage Theft Report*, that it had identified more than \$382 million in underpayments across the sector.⁵³
- 6.70 Instances of wage underpayments are not the only problematic employment practices exposed in the sector, it is indicative of the governance problems that have undermined the relationship between staff and university management.
- 6.71 In welcoming evidence from the Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO) that there is 'improved engagement' from the sector,⁵⁴ the committee is still deeply concerned that some institutions have absolved themselves from responsibility

⁵¹ Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee, *Quality of governance at Australian higher education providers – Interim Report*, September 2025, p. 4 and Australian Government, *Australian Universities Accord Interim Report*, June 2023, p. 129.

⁵² NTEU University of Wollongong Branch, *Submission 78* (47th Parliament), p. 6.

⁵³ NTEU *Submission 15*, Attachment 4, [p. 4].

⁵⁴ Fair Work Ombudsman, *Submission 16* (47th Parliament), p. 1.

for wage underpayments, and it seems that too many did not see it as a governance issue at all.

6.72 The FWO also submitted that there remains much work to be done, and pointed to several areas that will be key to 'sustained compliance with workplace law obligations'.⁵⁵ The following recommendations reflect that evidence, and are also guided by the Expert Council Principle 8, which requires universities councils to ensure staff are properly remunerated and that the university has a clear and sustainable workforce strategy.

Recommendation 3

6.73 The committee recommends that the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, in addition to the embedding of the Expert Council on University Governance into the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021, update its guidance to universities to support proactive adoption of key compliance, oversight and governance measures (such as the following measures agreed by the University of Melbourne in its Enforceable Undertaking with the Fair Work Ombudsman) including by:

- **implementing a comprehensive enterprise resource planning system that includes a human resources and finance system, payroll system, and rostering and time-and-attendance system, and undertaking an audit of the new system following its implementation;**
- **embedding a worker voice mechanism, such as a standing committee comprised of representatives from the National Tertiary Education Union and university management, and a focus on corporate governance by ensuring there is centralised oversight of and accountability for wage compliance and an effective flow of information in respect of wage compliance issues from employees to executive level, and vice versa;**
- **establishing subcommittees of the University Council and the University Executive with an explicit focus on workplace relations compliance as well as a new centralised Employment Compliance Directorate committed to supporting a culture of compliance and continuous improvement; and**
- **commissioning training and education for relevant staff and providing clear internal pathways for employees to raise queries relating to their wages and entitlements.**

6.74 Another central issue, in terms of workplace practices that have caused damage to trust in university management, is that of casualisation and insecure work.

6.75 Throughout the inquiry, the committee heard that high levels of casualisation and the use of fixed term contracts and the insecurity that it brings to staff, flows through the culture of institutions, and results in reduced levels of

⁵⁵ Fair Work Ombudsman, *Submission 16* (47th Parliament), pp. 1 and 3–4.

accountability for executive management with staff afraid to speak out, as well as having a major impact of the quality of education provided.

- 6.76 The committee heard that the levels of casualisation vary throughout the sector, with one submitter placing the figure as 'up to 70 per cent of teaching ... delivered by casual or sessional staff, many of whom work under precarious conditions with low pay, no job security, and little access to research funding or professional development opportunities'.⁵⁶
- 6.77 The committee also heard that high levels of casualisation results in high levels of non-compliance with workplace laws. The precarious nature of insecure employment leaves staff members highly vulnerable to poor workplace employment practices, with little or no recourse to challenge their conditions
- 6.78 This was emphasised by the University of Queensland NTEU Branch, which noted that sessional academics are frequently contracted for insufficient hours and regularly undertake substantial unpaid work to meet teaching requirements.⁵⁷
- 6.79 Despite the known concerns about casualisation in the sector, very few universities provided information on rates of casual employment, and several university submissions did not mention casual employment at all.
- 6.80 The committee does acknowledge that some institutions are making efforts to reduce their levels of casual employment, however there is still significant work to do to reduce insecure work in the sector, and indeed to understand better the scale of the problem.
- 6.81 The committee is of the view that universities should be required to gather and provide accurate, timely data on casual staffing levels, and how they are utilised.

Recommendation 4

- 6.82 **The committee recommends that the Department of Education prioritise its work related to requirements for universities to provide improved data on the number of casual staff to increase transparency and understanding of workforce patterns and issues (including headcounts, as well as the proportion of teaching hours undertaken by casual staff).**
- 6.83 The committee is of the view that in addition to TEQSA ensuring that universities incorporate the measures outlined in Recommendation 4 above, TEQSA should also have a role in assessing an institution's staffing profile, with particular regard to how it impacts the delivery of high-quality education.

⁵⁶ Dr Brett White, *Submission 229* (47th Parliament), [p. 1].

⁵⁷ NTEU University of Queensland Branch, *Submission 102*, [p.6].

Recommendation 5

6.84 The committee recommends that the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 be amended to require academic boards to conduct an annual review of the academic staffing profile for each course, ensuring there is sufficient academic oversight, teaching capacity and support to maintain high-quality learning and outcomes. This review should also ensure that courses with practicums or work-integrated learning have an adequate number and quality of placements with appropriate supervision. The balance of continuing and casual staff must support consistent teaching quality and reliable access to individual student assistance.

Recommendation 6

6.85 The committee recommends that the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency develop a monitoring and reporting framework for course quality and staffing, and establish an ongoing program of course monitoring to provide continued assurance of quality and appropriate staffing.

Education quality

- 6.86 The impact of poor workforce employment practices on the quality of education delivered to students was also a major theme in the evidence the committee received.
- 6.87 There were several suggestions for areas that the Australian Government, through TEQSA, should focus on to arrest the perceived decline in the quality among some submitters of education provided at universities, and to improve the experience of students. These included strengthening TEQSA's basic principles of regulation; setting minimum standards in relation to staff qualifications, staff to student ratios, and 'live' contact hours; and increasing support for students.
- 6.88 While there was evidence provided that TEQSA has sufficient powers to consider the quality of education provided, TEQSA told the committee that these were not framed adequately to maximise their impact when TEQSA was undertaking its regulatory functions.
- 6.89 For example, TEQSA submitted that the TEQSA Act 'does not specifically link the use of regulatory powers to public interest matters such as those in the Act's objects', resulting in there being no requirement for it to specifically consider public interest matters—'such as the protection of students or of Australia's reputation for quality higher education'—when contemplating regulatory action.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ TEQSA, *Submission 17* (47th Parliament), p. 13.

6.90 The committee is also aware of items for discussion in the Department of Education's Modernising and Strengthening TEQSA's Powers Consultation Paper, that considers the best way to place students at the centre of the university regulatory system is to place a positive duty on providers to avoid negative student outcomes, rather than waiting for those outcomes to occur.

6.91 The committee supports this change of focus.

Recommendation 7

6.92 The committee recommends that the Australian Government, as part of its commitment to modernise and strengthen the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency's (TEQSA's) powers:

- **introduce an explicit requirement for TEQSA to consider matters relevant to the interests of students and the preservation of Australia's reputation for quality higher education as part of its regulatory function; and**
- **introduce a positive duty on providers to take reasonable and proportionate actions to comply with the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021.**

6.93 The issues of minimum standards for staff qualifications, staff to student ratios and 'live' contact hours was also raised as a key factor in providing a high quality service to students.

6.94 The appropriate qualifications of staff, and proportion of time that students are taught by highly qualified academics (to PhD level) were seen by some submitters as a key indicator in the quality of teaching. The employment nature of those staff, i.e. whether they are ongoing or not, is also seen as being relevant to the delivery of consistent, high-quality courses, and the provision of appropriate academic support for students.

6.95 The committee supports efforts to ensure that students are provided with high quality teaching, and considers that it should be one of the standards considered by TEQSA in their assessments of universities.

6.96 The committee therefore recommends the following:

Recommendation 8

6.97 The committee recommends that the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency develop a statement of expectations that sets out the key considerations which academic governance processes should oversee in their internal quality assurance. This should include ratios of continuing vs casual staff, experience of teaching staff including PhD candidates and subject coordinators. It should also set out expectations of regular reporting to the governing body.

- 6.98 The final area that is considered in this report is the interoperability of regulation across the country.
- 6.99 The committee is sympathetic to the evidence from some universities that there is a lack of harmonisation in regulatory and reporting arrangements across federal, state and territory jurisdictions.
- 6.100 There were suggestions for how this could be improved, such as access and sharing of data, and streamlining of reporting arrangements, with the principle of reporting once, and that being used by all relevant bodies. The committee is supportive of those concepts. It also notes and supports the recommendations of the Expert Council in this area:
- Education Ministers consider reviewing their legislation and regulations against the Principles and consider legislative reform to align with the Principles where that will reduce regulatory duplication and complexity and enhance adoption of the Principles.⁵⁹
- 6.101 There was a suggestion that ATEC be tasked with reviewing the regulatory and reporting burden on the sector, and the committee welcomes efforts to identify areas that could be improved. However, the committee is of the view that the immediate focus should be on ensuring the appropriateness of regulations that universities need to comply with, rather than looking at the quantum of regulation.
- 6.102 As stated in the conclusion of the committee's Interim report, the committee recognises the important role universities play as autonomous, self-governing institutions. However, poor governance, wrongly focussed decision-making, and poor employment practices have damaged the trust that university communities, as well as the public and the government, have in the sector. In the committee's view the sector needs to refocus to ensure that their primary purpose as a public good is evident in all aspects of their operations.

Senator Marielle Smith
Chair
Senator for South Australia

⁵⁹ Expert Council on University Governance, [Final Report and Principles](#), pp. 35–37.

Coalition Senators' additional comments

Overview

- 1.1 Evidence to this inquiry confirms that governance failures in Australian universities are real and systemic:
 - Unsafe campuses for both staff and students (including persistent failures to deal effectively with sexual assault and sexual harassment, and to address root causes of antisemitism);
 - Weak complaints handling;
 - Opaque decision-making; and
 - Poor management of conflicts of interest.
- 1.2 The Universities Accord (Accord) process itself acknowledges that existing governance obligations have too often failed to translate into effective protection for staff and students.
- 1.3 Coalition Senators accept that reform is required. However, the evidence points to failures of basic governance and culture under existing laws, rather than a shortage of regulation.
- 1.4 The response from the Albanese Government, strongly supported by the Greens, appears to be to multiply regulators, inquiries and reporting requirements. Coalition Senators are not persuaded that this approach will deliver safer, better governed universities.
- 1.5 Coalition Senators consider the primary purposes of universities—to provide excellent teaching and learning to students and high-quality research in the national interest—should guide all university activities and corresponding governance expectations.

Systemic governance failures and culture

- 1.6 The Office of the Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO) told the inquiry that governance weaknesses, and a lack of senior management oversight, have been key drivers of systemic underpayment of staff in universities, not isolated errors.
- 1.7 The Universities Accord process likewise found that:
 - Governance and regulatory arrangements have been too slow to respond to issues around student wellbeing and staff employment; and
 - Fragmented legislative requirements create 'unnecessary complexity' for providers attempting to understand and comply with their obligations.
- 1.8 Evidence from staff and student submissions describes recurring problems of limited transparency, erosion of trust, perceived corporatisation, constrained staff and student voice, and weaknesses in accountability and decision-making culture.

- 1.9 The central lesson is that councils and executives have too often failed to discharge duties they already have. The solution is not simply to create new bodies, or to turn councils into quasi-parliaments with representative functions. Rather, the solution to poor governance is to insist on high standards of competence, probity and accountability, through governance bodies that are steered by people with expertise and experience in the field.

Regulatory complexity and overlapping insight

- 1.10 The inquiry heard that universities now operate in an increasingly dense and fragmented regulatory environment. The University of Melbourne, for example, told the committee it must navigate 'more than 400 pieces of legislation' across its operations.¹
- 1.11 As noted above, the Accord Final Report expressly observed that regulatory arrangements are complex and fragmented.
- 1.12 The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) provided an extraordinary and damning submission on regulatory complexity, listing no fewer than 13 different bodies with responsibility for 'control or oversight' in the sector—not including TEQSA itself. This means there are at least 14 different bodies with some sort of regulatory oversight over the universities sector already, and TEQSA itself has stressed that the list is 'non-exhaustive', saying:

The higher education regulatory environment is complex, with multiple government agencies, statutory bodies and oversight entities playing distinct but interconnected roles. Some have specific authority over aspects of provider operations, such as employment law, financial compliance and administrative decision making. Others influence through legislative control, policy enforcement or oversight of institutional processes. The table below lists some, but not all, of the bodies with some responsibility in the sector.

¹ Professor Michael Wesley, Acting Vice-Chancellor, The University of Melbourne, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2025, p. 2.

Other bodies responsibility for higher education providers

Commonwealth, state or territory governments (including departments of education and relevant Ministers)	State and territory parliaments and assemblies, through university Acts of establishment and other relevant state-based legislation
Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP)	Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA)
National Student Ombudsman (NSO) / Commonwealth Ombudsman	State and territory-based ombudsman offices
Australian Research Council (ARC)	National, state or territory-based anticorruption commissions
National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC)	Australian Research Integrity Committee (ARIC)
Tuition Protection Service	Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO)
National, state or territory-based audit offices	

Each of these bodies plays a distinct role, but their functions can intersect with TEQSA's oversight of provider governance.²

1.13 It is not to the point that each of these bodies may not, technically, be classed as a 'regulator' within the sector. The point is that universities must respond to each of them, deal with the laws, regulations, rules, reporting obligations and relationships that go with each of them, as well as the conflict between rules that inevitably arises.

1.14 In evidence to the committee, Department of Education witnesses appearing on behalf of the interim Australian Tertiary Education Commission highlighted the complexity that is generated by virtue of these duplicating and overlapping arrangements:

The thing we've noted in discussions to date with TEQSA, ASQA, the ARC and so on is really just about making sure questions go to the right postbox or to the right place. **One of the things is that there is now such a set of regulators and such a set of oversight bodies that it's really important that it be clear for participants in the higher education system—for want of a better term—to know where to direct things** and where those institutions redirect things and make what they're doing public...³

1.15 That centres of higher learning should need assistance to 'know where to direct things' is a damning indictment.⁴

² Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, *Submission 17* (47th Parliament), p. 5.

³ Professor Mary O'Kane, Interim Chief Commissioner, Interim Australian Tertiary Education Commission, *Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, p. 15 (emphasis added).

⁴ Professor Mary O'Kane, Interim Chief Commissioner, Interim Australian Tertiary Education Commission, *Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, p. 15.

- 1.16 But despite this mess, Labor insists that governance in the universities sector will be improved with the addition of a 15th regulatory body, the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC).
- 1.17 Coalition Senators acknowledge Recommendations 5, 6 and 8 relate directly to new regulatory expectations and should be weighed against a principle of better accountability, not simply more regulation.

No clear policy need or business case for an ATEC

- 1.18 The Albanese Government has announced an ATEC as part of its response to the Accord, and has established an interim ATEC on a non-statutory footing in the meantime.
- 1.19 The stated intent of the ATEC is to provide 'stewardship' to the sector.⁵ It is not clear precisely what 'stewardship' means; nor is it clear why that 'stewardship' can only be provided by a new statutory body like the ATEC and not, for example, the Education Department, which as a Department of State established under the Constitution has traditionally had responsibility and oversight for all matters in the portfolio.
- 1.20 Evidence to this inquiry suggests that the interim ATEC's relationship with TEQSA and other governance processes is still being worked out. Indeed, in response to direct questioning, the evidence from the interim ATEC was unclear:

CHAIR: That goes to my next question. The terms of reference for ATEC include a stewardship role for the sector. I'm interested in how you see that applying to university governance or how you might be able to use that role to influence governance outcomes positively.

Prof. O'Kane: The permanent ATEC has to get up and going. We're interim, with a set of terms of reference that are not widely covering governance, but there is a catch-all, an any other business-style clause, at the ends of the terms of reference. Typically in stewardship things, one would look for patterns of where issues are odd, malfunctioning or pulling things down. We're keeping track of the various governance things: this inquiry, the Cilento work and how the chancellors respond. But at the moment we're not going in actively. We do talk to TEQSA, as Danielle said, but we're very much leaving the work they're doing to them, but we're happy to talk to them.⁶

- 1.21 Indeed, throughout this inquiry into governance in the university sector, neither the Government nor any stakeholder has presented this committee with a clear policy problem that the ATEC solves, and which can only be solved by the establishment of an ATEC.

⁵ Professor Larissa Behrendt, Interim First Nations Commissioner, Department of Education, *Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, p. 14.

⁶ *Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, p. 14.

- 1.22 Nor is there a transparent business case of cost-benefit justification for establishing a new body in a sector that already faces significant regulatory complexity. The evidence before this inquiry points instead to:
- Systemic non-compliance with existing obligations (for example, wage theft); and
 - The need for clearer accountability and better enforcement, rather than another advisory layer.
- 1.23 The role that the ATEC ultimately ends up playing, if it is passed into law by this Parliament, is yet to be determined.
- 1.24 The report asserts that ATEC will improve coordination, planning and oversight. These objectives overlap substantially with existing functions already exercised across the Department of Education, TEQSA, ministerial councils and existing inter-jurisdictional funding and planning forums.
- 1.25 In the meantime, Coalition Senators consider that there is no persuasive case that an additional body in the form of an ATEC is required to improve governance in the sector; indeed, there is a very real risk that adding this new body will only add complexity and make things worse.

Confused and fragmented governance reform and lack of a coherent plan

- 1.26 Over recent years the Government has launched a dense array of partially overlapping governance initiatives which affect the university sector. Between:
- the Accord process;
 - the establishment of a National Student Ombudsman;
 - the Expert Council on University Governance report;
 - the establishment of new University Governance Principles;
 - the appointment of an independent expert to ensure universities are 'exemplary employers';
 - the review of TEQSA's legislative framework;
 - the parallel reform to TEQSA's powers that was implemented through the *Education Legislation Amendment (Integrity and Other Measures) Act 2025*; and
 - this inquiry;
- it is clear that there are multiple distinct, but overlapping, processes intended to reshape Australia's universities. What is absent is a clear, logically sequenced and sensible overarching plan to improve governance across the sector.
- 1.27 Case in point: why amend TEQSA's legislation to give it powers to regulate offshore campuses, while at the same time reviewing its legislation to determine what changes to its powers were required?
- 1.28 Coalition Senators accept—and indeed wholeheartedly agree—that governance across the sector should improve.

- 1.29 However, governance is not likely to improve if complex and overlapping regulatory reform processes are stacked on top of existing complex and overlapping regulatory architecture.
- 1.30 The risk is that these parallel and overlapping processes divert the attention of councils and executives away from the core task of ensuring that existing obligations are met, campuses are safe, and public funds are managed with integrity.
- 1.31 Complex and overlapping arrangements create duplication but also leave regulatory gaps—particularly where there is a lack of clarity about which body is responsible for what.
- 1.32 Additional complexity does not enhance governance, instead it turns the organisations primary task into navigating that complexity, pulling resources from delivering outcomes to maintaining ever increasing regulatory burdens. In the case of universities, this is a further diversion of resources from education and research to management of compliance obligations.
- 1.33 The logical place to begin reform of university governance is through a process of simplifying and rationalising existing requirements, clarifying responsibilities and identifying gaps, rather than defaulting to the establishment of new bodies and compliance burdens.

Conflicts of interest, major transactions and probity

- 1.34 Coalition Senators are concerned that the final report recognises serious and systemic conflicts of interest across the sector, but ultimately relies on voluntary governance standards and transparency mechanisms rather than enforceable statutory controls.
- 1.35 The inquiry received extensive evidence of conflicts of interest arising from:
- The integration of consultancy firms into executive management structures;
 - The management of conflicts of interest in senior university leadership roles;
 - The absence of accessible conflict registers at many institutions;
 - Limited transparency of procurement, consulting and restructuring engagements; and
 - Opaque management of major property and commercial transactions, including long-term leases and development deals.
- 1.36 The committee heard criticisms that governing bodies could be self-perpetuating, limiting direct accountability. Submissions and evidence to the inquiry called for stronger conflict-of-interest regimes and more transparency, including publicly available conflict registers and clearer rules around external appointments.

- 1.37 The evidence before the inquiry demonstrated that conflict management frameworks vary significantly across institutions and that public transparency is inconsistent. Voluntary adherence to sector codes has not produced uniform standards of integrity.
- 1.38 Coalition Senators agree that the management of conflicts of interest and major transactions has too frequently fallen short of the standard expected of institutions funded by the public and entrusted with the education of students.
- 1.39 The answer is to strengthen probity expectations and transparency.
- 1.40 Coalition Senators consider that sustainable governance reform requires:
- Enforceable minimum standards for conflict-of-interest management;
 - Cooling-off periods between consultancy and executive appointments;
 - Robust registers of interests at council level;
 - Independent audit oversight of high-risk consulting engagements; and
 - External review of major, long-term or high-value transactions.
- 1.41 These steps should be considered as part of a measured, logically sequenced process intended to improve accountability and decision-making at universities and should avoid models that risk introducing factionalism into governance frameworks.

Antisemitism, student safety and governance

- 1.42 Evidence from Jewish community organisations and advocacy groups painted a disturbing picture of antisemitism on some Australian campuses. The Australian Academic Alliance Against Antisemitism told the inquiry that:
- The extent of antisemitism in the tertiary sector is deep and has become normalised;⁷
 - 57 per cent of Jewish students surveyed have hidden their identity to avoid facing antisemitism;⁸
 - Only around one-third felt safe on campus;⁹ and
 - Formal complaints processes frequently failed to provide effective redress.¹⁰
- 1.43 The submission emphasised that universities are already obliged under the Higher Education Standards Framework to provide safe learning environments and to prevent harassment and discrimination, and that TEQSA has a role in holding providers to account.

⁷ Australian Academic Alliance Against Antisemitism, *Submission 15*, p. 3.

⁸ Australian Academic Alliance Against Antisemitism, *Submission 15*, p. 3.

⁹ Australian Academic Alliance Against Antisemitism, *Submission 15*, p. 8.

¹⁰ Australian Academic Alliance Against Antisemitism, *Submission 15*, p. 1.

- 1.44 Yet TEQSA has not to date issued detailed guidance on antisemitism, nor systematically monitored compliance with these obligations in relation to Jewish students.
- 1.45 Coalition Senators consider that antisemitism represents one of the clearest and most urgent tests of university governance. We are concerned that, while the committee report and government processes speak at length about 'student safety' and 'inclusive culture', they do not set out specific expectations of councils and senior leadership in relation to antisemitism.
- 1.46 The evidence of a virulent antisemitic culture on some Australian campuses is overwhelming. It is a toxic and dangerous mix that constantly conflates Jews with Israel, and uses malevolent and dishonest reasoning to justify the mistreatment of Jewish Australians. We have seen Jewish students and staff spat on, intimidated, excluded, threatened and made to feel unsafe through encampments and constant protest activity. In one incident we heard the story of a Jewish academic whose working area was urinated on with the word 'resign' scribbled on their desk. In another, students were told that it is their duty to make Jews feel uncomfortable. In other places, students occupying university encampments in Australia have actively supported Hamas, a listed terrorist organisation
- 1.47 The consistent message in all these incidents has been that Jews are not welcome on Australian campuses.
- 1.48 This is not just messaging from students and outside activists; it is also the academic cohort. We have seen academics say that Jews don't deserve cultural safety. We have seen academics deny the rapes and sexual torture of 7 October 2023; an approach no different to that of Holocaust denial. These instances undermine institutions that exist to educate and uphold the truth and integrity of human testimony.
- 1.49 All this against a backdrop where we have seen attacks on Jewish homes, businesses and places of worship—including paid terrorist acts supported by Iran, a country dedicated to the destruction of the Jews and the Jewish state.
- 1.50 The growth in antisemitism in this country, and particularly on university campuses, has been out of proportion with other forms of discrimination, particularly given the comparatively small Jewish population in Australia.
- 1.51 Labor has repeatedly refused to countenance a judicial inquiry into antisemitism on campus, preferring instead to dilute these issues.
- 1.52 The Greens have actively supported the worst of these antisemitic activists.
- 1.53 Universities have diminished or rejected calls for action and refused to accept basic measures like the adoption of the full International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism. The general tone from

universities now seems to be that, because the encampments have finished, the problem has evaporated.

1.54 Violent and virulent antisemitism do not spring from nowhere.

1.55 In our view, effective governance in this area must include action to:

- Adopt the IHRA definition of antisemitism;
- Explicitly cover antisemitism in student codes of conduct, campus safety plans and disciplinary frameworks;
- Deliver robust complaints processes that students trust and that deliver timely outcomes;
- Support data collection and reporting on antisemitic incidents; and
- Support a judicial inquiry into antisemitism on Australian campuses.

1.56 Without these elements, assurances about 'culture' and 'safety' ring hollow for Jewish students.

Principles for future reform

1.57 Drawing on the evidence to this inquiry, Coalition Senators would emphasise the following principles for any future reforms:

- **Better accountability, not more regulators.** This is an exercise in simplifying and rationalising regulatory arrangements in order to deliver better governance, rather than adding to systemic complexity.
- **Capable, professional governing bodies.** Councils and governing bodies should be appointed or selected on the basis that they contribute skillsets and experience that will improve governance at the university, rather than on other bases.
- **Robust probity and conflict-of-interest management.** This would involve robust arrangements for conflict-of-interest management, clear rules on external paid roles, and proper external scrutiny of major transactions.
- **Student and staff safety, including antisemitism, as a core governance duty.** Supporting a safe and diverse culture on campus should be a given. Councils and governing bodies must demonstrate they are meeting these obligations in practice.
- **Proportionate regulation based on clearly identified need.** This is a basic principle of good public policy and effective administration and should be embraced as a matter of course across the sector.

Senator Maria Kovacic
Deputy Chair
Senator for New South Wales

Australian Greens' additional comments

- 1.1 The Greens welcome the opportunity to contribute additional comments to the committee's Final Report and thank the witnesses and those who made submissions, contributed their time, and shared their expertise to the inquiry process. These comments are in addition to the Australian Greens' additional comments to the [interim report](#) of the inquiry.
- 1.2 The Greens thank staff and students across universities who have shown immense courage and commitment and refuse to accept the neoliberal corporate culture that pervades our universities. This corporate culture treats staff and students as mere cogs in the wheel of a profit-making university, instead of the heart and soul of a public institution. Staff and students and their unions have spoken out in a hostile and intimidatory environment and this inquiry would not exist without their activism, advocacy, and solidarity. The Greens will continue to amplify their voices in our mission to rebuild universities based on equity, democracy, and public good.
- 1.3 The final report of the committee presents very strong evidence on the complete failures of a neoliberal agenda, and the corporatisation and commercialisation of universities, which has led to obscene Vice-Chancellor (VC) salaries and a bloated managerial class that has lost the trust of their community. The public-focussed knowledge creation teaching and research mission of universities has given way to the commodification and marketisation of public higher education to the detriment of staff, students and the general public.

This is not just mismanagement; it is systemic decay, driven by a leadership culture that thrives on deceit, manipulation, and ruthless self-preservation at the expense of students, academics, and the future of higher education.¹

- 1.4 The Australian National University (ANU) and the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) have become the latest glaring case studies in how the corporate governance model in universities is failing the public interest test, as transparency and accountability are falling by the wayside. For example, the UTS management engaged in bureaucratic contortions to avoid disclosing information.² What is happening at these universities is by no means an anomaly, it is a symptom of a rotten model that has spread across universities in this country. It is a model built on running universities as businesses, where consultant capture and endless restructures have become the norm. KPMG, Nous and other big consultancies feast on public money while the people who teach, research, support students, and hold the university together are

¹ The University of Sydney Association of Professors, *Submission 113* (47th Parliament), p. 3.

² Rick Morton, ['Exclusive: University sought secret KPMG staff spreadsheet'](#), *The Saturday Paper*, 27 September 2025.

overworked, underpaid and exploited. The corporate university model has led to hundreds of millions of dollars in wage theft across the sector in just the last few years and resulted in \$55 000 Arts degrees, courtesy of the disastrous Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) scheme. It is a model that has turned public education—a public good—into a market for profit-seeking firms and austerity-obsessed executives.

- 1.5 The evidence provided to the committee shows not only the high cost and increasing reliance on private consultants, but also the difficulty of determining how much universities are spending on consultants and for what purpose. It is perplexing why there is so much reliance on external consultants, many of whom do not have higher education expertise, when this expertise already exists in universities.
- 1.6 The UTS Governance Project's draft report based on a survey of staff and students, notes that '[d]isregard for internal staff expertise was also frequently described by participants in relation to outsourcing to consultants'.³ It also includes that one participant 'believed that reliance on consultants and what they perceived as disregard for staff expertise extended beyond OSI (Operational Sustainability Initiative), describing examples such as the use of external companies for researcher training'.⁴
- 1.7 Some of the more disturbing evidence relates to external consultants' self-interest in ensuring ongoing demand for their services and the use of consultants by university managements to distance the managers themselves from unpopular decisions. A very troubling aspect of the corporatisation of university governance is the heavy representation of corporate executives or consultants on university councils, which highlights the existence of very real conflicts of interests. As Professor Cortese puts it, 'consultancies and their interests are represented on all sides of the higher education "table"'.⁵
- 1.8 Successive Coalition and Labor governments have played a part in the path to this crisis in universities: chronically underfunding universities, hiking student fees, and leaving staff and students to cope with casualisation, job insecurity, wage theft and crushing student debt for far too long. As highlighted by the Australia Institute and others, Australian universities have one of the lowest levels of public funding compared to other OECD countries. Across the OECD, countries invest an average of 0.99 per cent of GDP, while Australia invests only 0.73 per cent of GDP and Commonwealth funding for universities has been

³ UTS Governance Project, [UTS: How Did We Get Here? How Can We Move Forward?](#), December 2025, p. 44.

⁴ UTS Governance Project, [UTS: How Did We Get Here? How Can We Move Forward?](#), December 2025, p. 44.

⁵ Professor Corinne Cortese, *Submission 75* (47th Parliament), p. 8.

going downwards since tertiary education was free for students in the 1970s.⁶ Universities Australia's submission notes 'student funding arrangements are inadequate, government research has never been lower and universities no longer receive dedicated infrastructure funding. Our sector can't expand in line with Australia's growing need for skills and research under these conditions'.⁷

1.9 Many witnesses yet again raised the negative impacts of the ill-conceived and punitive JRG scheme, which has hiked fees for students and cut funding for teaching. Staff, students and the broader sector have been unanimous in the need to urgently dump this scheme which punishes students and universities.

1.10 The evidence provided by staff and students of a culture of intimidation, silencing, mistreatment, secrecy and exclusion is heart-wrenching.

1.11 Dr Lachlan Clohesy from the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) ACT branch stated during a hearing:

The vice-chancellor told a senior leadership group meeting that she would hunt down leakers—that is language which I think is appalling in a public sector institution, or any workplace, really. We've seen that happen: staff are having their emails searched and monitored; staff are being hauled into meetings at short notice and questioned about leaks; ANU leadership are using CCTV footage from within buildings to surveil and investigate staff.⁸

1.12 Dr Alison Barnes, NTEU National President stated:

... a sector where intimidation, secrecy and exclusion have become routine features of governing culture and bodies. Fifty-nine per cent of respondents described the culture on their university's board as very negative, toxic and intimidating, and even hostile to dissent.⁹

1.13 Ms Mia Campbell, a fifth-year student at UTS and the President of the UTS Students' Association gave evidence that 'at every level, students see how little voice we have in decisions that directly affect our education and how far university leadership has drifted from transparency, accountability and public purpose'.¹⁰

⁶ Universities Australia, [2020 Higher Education Facts and Figures](#), October 2020, p. 21.

⁷ Universities Australia, *Submission 13* (47th Parliament), p. 1.

⁸ Dr Lachlan Clohesy, Secretary, ACT Division, National Tertiary Education Union, *Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, p. 9.

⁹ Dr Alison Barnes, National President, National Tertiary Education Union, *Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, p. 1.

¹⁰ Ms Mia Campbell, President, UTS Students' Association, *Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, p. 29.

- 1.14 Mr Richard Lee, Vice-President of the Council of Australian Postgraduates Association, reported that 'members who are student members on governing bodies have repeatedly talked to us about being treated as second-class members on their respective university councils'. Mr Lee went on to note that in some universities 'the student members are the only ones who are not remunerated for their time. This is indicative of the levels of respect afforded to student members in the university senates'.¹¹
- 1.15 Given the hostile and toxic nature of leadership at universities, it is not surprising that staff at UTS and ANU have lost trust in them and have overwhelmingly voted 'no confidence' in their VCs.¹²
- 1.16 Risks to psychosocial safety and high stress amongst university staff are a result of governance practices which fail to recognise overwork, insecure work, the way change processes are undertaken, as well as the silencing of dissent and fear of speaking out against management decisions. These severely impact the well-being of staff and the fundamental principle of academic freedom.
- 1.17 Also affecting academic freedom is the crackdown we have seen across universities on the right to protest. It is absolutely crucial to protect the democratic right of staff and students to safely protest on their campuses without fear of repression or repercussion. Whistleblowers are a vital part of our democracy, and staff and students should be able to safely report information without fear of punishment.
- 1.18 As institutions whose dominant purpose should be the public good, universities should not partner with industries that cause harm, such as fossil fuel industries and weapons manufacturers. With decreasing funding, universities have increasingly sought out private partnerships and investments, and it became clear through the inquiry just how opaque the partnerships that universities have with big corporations.
- 1.19 Responses to questions on notice in relation to universities' investment and partnerships with fossil fuel, gambling, and weapons companies were unclear and indirect. A number of universities stated they do not invest in 'controversial' weapons¹³ with limited explanation of what weapons they view as sufficiently 'non-controversial'. The University of Melbourne's response encapsulates this

¹¹ Mr Richard Lee, National Vice-President, Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, *Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, p. 31.

¹² Conor Duffy, ['University of Technology Sydney facing crisis amid union-led no-confidence vote in vice-chancellor'](#), ABC, 9 December 2025 and Caroline Schelle, ['ANU staff pass no-confidence vote against chancellor Julie Bishop'](#), *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 March 2025.

¹³ University of Adelaide, answers to questions on notice (received 24 November 2025), p. 7; University of Wollongong, answers to questions on notice (received 25 September 2025), p. 6; and Flinders University, answers to questions on notice (received 1 December 2025), [p. 3].

very evasion, with an explanation of the 'improvements' to 'everyday lives' that defence research has resulted in, neglecting to mention they partner with 13 weapons companies¹⁴, many of whom are directly linked to Israel's genocide in Gaza.

- 1.20 Stop Woodside Monash is a grassroots organisation at Monash University formed in opposition to the university's partnership with Woodside Energy, Australia's largest climate polluter. Their submission states:

It is unclear that Monash University, at any stage, took the opinions expressed by its students and staff on this matter seriously, and that is a failure of governance. There is a growing sentiment, as a result, that university management is callous, corporate, and has lost sight of the scientific and ethical heart that should underpin Australian public tertiary education.¹⁵

- 1.21 During the inquiry, Monash University confirmed that they would not be renewing their existing partnership with Woodside. This was a big win for staff and student activists who want to see their university working towards the public good, not partnering with climate-destroying companies. Disappointingly, however, Monash University failed to rule out any future partnerships with Woodside in answers to questions on notice.
- 1.22 Universities should be places that advance the public good, not help dirty industries profit from human misery. While universities continue to invest and partner with such harmful industries, they will be unable to fulfil their proper purpose to create knowledge and research to progress humanity and for the collective good of society. They must be required to disclose and divest from these partnerships.
- 1.23 While university executives are paid exorbitant salaries and enjoy extravagant benefits, postgraduate research students, who undertake a significant portion of a university's research and teaching, are living off stipends that are below the poverty line. This issue was raised by the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations. If universities are to return their focus to education and research, they must properly remunerate postgraduate researchers. In line with valuing the important work and contribution made by postgraduate researchers to our universities and to innovation, research, and development, the Australian Government must raise PhD stipends to the minimum wage.

¹⁴ Paul Daley, ['WHO worries that Melbourne University's links to arms industry will threaten joint medical research'](#), *The Guardian*, 22 January 2021 and James Costa, ['Transparency? Melbourne University disclosures on weapons links stir more questions'](#), *The Citizen*, 12 July 2024.

¹⁵ Stop Woodside Monash, *Submission 118* (47th Parliament), p. 6.

- 1.24 The Greens welcome this final report, which details a scathing assessment by witnesses and submitters, of the corporatisation of universities and the severity of the crisis at hand. While the report has some good recommendations, it falls short of providing remedies that match the urgent and systemic problems including those of governance, accountability, transparency, funding and fees that have been highlighted by the damning evidence provided during the inquiry.
- 1.25 The Greens make the following recommendations to strengthen this report.

Recommendations (including those in the interim report)

Recommendation 1

- 1.26 That the Australian Tertiary Education Commission's foundational legislation should clearly articulate the public mission and the educational, social, and civic functions of a public university sector.

Recommendation 2

- 1.27 That the establishing acts of universities be amended to clarify that their central purpose is public research and education, not commercial or corporate performance.

Recommendation 3

- 1.28 That the Australian Government immediately reverse the Job-ready Graduates Package fee hikes and funding cuts.

Recommendation 4

- 1.29 That the meetings of all university councils and governing bodies be held in public and be livestreamed online.

Recommendation 5

- 1.30 That all higher education provider governing bodies reflect the community's diversity including First Nations peoples, Culturally and Racially Marginalised people, LGBTIQ+ people and people with disabilities.

Recommendation 6

- 1.31 That the majority of members on university governing bodies have public administration and higher education expertise.

Recommendation 7

1.32 That a minimum membership requirement of at least 50 per cent democratically elected staff and student representatives (including undergraduate and postgraduate students) be set for governing bodies.

Recommendation 8

1.33 That, in addition to council minutes, reports produced for council and annual self-performance reviews be published on university websites.

Recommendation 9

1.34 That complaints processes be examined and enhanced by working with students, staff and student bodies.

Recommendation 10

1.35 That the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency's Higher Education Standards Framework be amended to include a consultation framework for how universities meaningfully involve, consult and work with students and staff as partners in major change proposals and governance, prior to decisions being made.

Recommendation 11

1.36 That to limit the use of consultants and outsourcing at universities, an appropriate Federal government agency develops principles for this purpose that prioritise in-house expertise.

Recommendation 12

1.37 That Federal government funding to public universities be increased in order to fully fund universities and make them free, starting by increasing funding to at least the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development average.

Recommendation 13

1.38 That universities implement protections for whistleblowers and student activists, including the establishment of a Whistleblower Protection Authority, and protect the right of students and staff to protest on university campuses.

Recommendation 14

1.39 Require all public universities to adopt transparent ethical investment and procurement policies, with binding commitments to divest from weapons manufacturers, fossil fuel corporations, and gambling industries.

Recommendation 15

- 1.40 Establish a publicly accessible register of all university partnerships, sponsorships, and funding arrangements with corporations and external entities, including the nature and value of the partnership.**

Recommendation 16

- 1.41 Increase PhD stipends to above the minimum wage.**

Concluding remarks

- 1.42 The corporate reshaping of universities as businesses that operate in a market has replaced the public-focussed mission of the university with an agenda centred on the production of work-ready students and the profit-maximising commercialisation and commodification of education and research. The evidence to the inquiry has made it clear that the corporatisation of universities, the failure of leadership, and the lack of accountability and transparency is as systemic and widespread as wage theft, casualisation, and insecure work.
- 1.43 A university system has been crafted where VCs and executives are paid exorbitant salaries and receive lavish benefits, while staff and students bear the brunt of job cuts, restructures, course cancellations and high fees. Conflicts of interest are rife, and millions of dollars of public funds are being poured into private consultants rather than into our public education.
- 1.44 The failures of governance in universities go hand in hand with decades of underfunding by Commonwealth governments. This is most viciously exemplified by the more recent fee hikes and funding cuts of the JRG scheme, which have been widely condemned and yet have still not been reversed by the Labor government.
- 1.45 Despite the risk of retribution from university managements, immense courage has been shown by university staff, students and their unions in highlighting the structural problems at individual universities and the issues that plague individual universities, as well as the sector more broadly.
- 1.46 Staff and students across universities are calling time on a rotten and broken system and saying enough is enough. They want universities to be collegial communities not corporations. They deem education to be a public good, not a pipeline for private consultancy firms. They want leadership to be accountable, transparent and honest. They are demanding governance that is democratic and representative of staff and students, not stacked with corporate appointees and consultants.
- 1.47 It is unfortunate that the final report's recommendations do not match the urgent need for an overhaul of governance and an increase in funding to address the dire crisis universities face.

- 1.48 It is imperative that the Government listen to the damning evidence provided to this inquiry, take seriously the recommendations being made by staff and students and act strongly to turn things around. This is necessary to ensure our universities can once again be institutions that are grounded in equity, democracy, accountability and transparency, and that are empowered to pursue their public research and education mission, not chase corporate or commercial interests.
- 1.49 Our communities need and deserve an education system run in the public interest, not run into the ground.

Senator Mehreen Faruqi
Deputy Leader of the Australian Greens
Australian Greens spokesperson for Higher Education
Senator for New South Wales

Senator David Pocock's additional comments

Introduction

- 1.1 The work this committee has done over both the previous and current parliamentary terms has been of enormous consequence to Australia's higher education sector. Prior to handing down its final report, the inquiry has already been a catalyst for change.
- 1.2 We have seen the Albanese Government establish an Expert Council on University Governance, a change in leadership and a stop to further forced redundancies at the Australian National University (ANU).
- 1.3 There have been other changes too, ranging from a walk back of job cuts at universities such as the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), to investigations being launched into senior leadership figures such as the Chancellor at Swinburne University.
- 1.4 The spotlight of a Senate inquiry has allowed the sun to shine into some dark places. It has shown that Chancellors and Vice-Chancellors who do not do the right thing by their staff or students, or who otherwise jeopardise their institution's social licence, can and will be held accountable.
- 1.5 I would like to thank the previous and current committee Chairs, Senator Tony Sheldon and Senator Marielle Smith, my colleagues on the committee, the secretariat and everyone who provided testimony, submissions and other evidence—in some cases at great personal cost—in support of this inquiry.
- 1.6 I would also like to thank the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) and its Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Dr Mary Russell in particular for her consistently frank, fearless and forthcoming testimony before the committee, and for the diligence with which TEQSA carries out its duties as higher education regulator even under new and unprecedented circumstances. Such testimony and such an approach stands out and is to be commended.
- 1.7 And I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the University of Queensland's Emeritus Professor Graeme Turner, whose passing last month was a huge loss to Australia's higher education sector. Professor Turner's most recent publication *Broken: Universities, Politics and the Public Good* published in July this year clearly paints the picture this inquiry has seen first-hand of a higher education system in crisis. He charts the demise of what was once a publicly oriented system educating citizens and building knowledge—through decades of underfunding, market-driven policies and over-reliance on international student income—into a fractured, corporatised operation.

- 1.8 My sincere hope is that the work of the committee, and all those who have contributed to it, can help chart a path back to rebuilding the kind of higher education system Australians need, want and deserve. We are incredibly fortunate in this country to have some of the best and brightest researchers, academics and higher educational professionals who dedicate their lives to furthering the public good. We need to get better at valuing their contributions and that of the institutions they call home.
- 1.9 It will take courage and a government willing to spend not only political capital but invest actual capital to restore good governance of, and in, our higher education sector and enable it to achieve its full potential for current and future generations of staff and students.
- 1.10 I wholeheartedly support the committee's view, as articulated in the committee's report that 'universities are indeed public institutions, established for the public good, and their governance arrangements should reflect that'.
- 1.11 The interim Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) provided evidence to the committee during Senate Estimates that some preliminary work is being undertaken to better understand the true costs of teaching and learning. As the drivers behind one of Australia's biggest export industries worth some \$50 billion annually, our academics shouldn't think they need to wear high viz to work to feel like they have a real job.
- 1.12 We need to come up with a better formula for how we fund our public universities. We need to account for the increasing direct and indirect costs of research. We need to be clearer about the purpose of our universities for the public good and be willing to pay them to deliver that. This will allow universities to reduce their over-reliance on international students, to focus on student experience, to support more first-in-family students, to adapt their offerings to a changing world and ultimately, to recapture their social licence.
- 1.13 While welcoming the evidence-based work on costs outlined above, I am alarmed that reform of the failed Job Ready Graduates (JRG) Scheme and a change to the timing of indexation on student debt have not progressed. These key recommendations of the Universities Accord are raised consistently by Vice-Chancellors and first year humanities students alike.
- 1.14 JRG has now been in operation longer under the Labor Government than it was under the Coalition Government. The one-off 20 percent reduction in existing student debt does nothing to address the structural problem or help arts and humanities students being saddled with \$50 000 debts.
- 1.15 At the same time, Australia's spend on research and development is at record lows. Jobs are being shed across the higher education sector, notwithstanding those the committee's work has helped to stop, and more broadly in what feels like a research sector under siege. More than 1000 jobs cut at the CSIRO, a cloud over the Australian Research Council, a failure to release additional Medical

Research Future Fund (MRFF) funds to supplement National Health and Medical Research Council grants and lift grant award rates—these are just some of the signs of a system under extreme stress. I look forward to seeing what the Strategic Examination of Research and Development (SERD) review recommends and how the Albanese Government responds to this critical piece of work. Australia will not continue to be a clever country and successfully confront the challenges before us if we don't turn this declining research and development investment trend around.

Recommendation 1

1.16 The Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) should prioritise work to develop and consult on new models to sustainably fund Australia's universities to achieve their primary purpose in the public good. ATEC's work program must also tackle with urgency reforming the failed Job Ready Graduates Scheme and changing the timing of indexation of student debt.

Recommendation 2

1.17 With due consideration of the final report of the Strategic Examination of Research and Development review, the Australian Government should commit to a pathway for increasing investment in research over the short, medium and longer term. This should also address the long-neglected issue of increasing PhD stipend base rates to support the next generation of researchers and academics our country will rely upon.

Committee's recommendations

1.18 I support the committee's recommendations but argue that the evidence tendered to the committee suggests some need to go further and I submit additional recommendations on top of those proposed.

1.19 Regarding the committee's first recommendation, the evidence points to a need for this to be more explicit and stringent in addressing the composition and representative nature of university governing bodies.

1.20 Similarly, the second recommendation needs to include stronger oversight and accountability mechanisms for university councils and more effective paths for recourse when governance goes awry.

1.21 As TEQSA's CEO Dr Russell told the committee on 4 December:

We're actively contemplating the full range of possible outcomes. And I would have to say this is not something I think that has ever occurred for TEQSA before.¹

¹ Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee, Supplementary Estimates 2025–26, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 4 December 2025, p. 91.

- 1.22 Most importantly, as Australia's national university, and the only one governed by Commonwealth legislation, the committee's report misses a unique opportunity to recommend reforms to the *Australian National University Act 1991* (ANU Act) that could set the ANU up as the gold standard for university governance.
- 1.23 ANU has been a distressing test case of the widespread governance issues that are plaguing Australian universities. But we have an opportunity to make the ANU an exemplar of what university governance can and should look like in this country. This will require continued leadership renewal, reform of the ANU Act, and for successive governments to get serious about how they fund our universities for the public good.
- 1.24 Higher education reform is a complex problem, However, between the Universities Accord, the university governance inquiry and local expertise like the ANU Governance Project, we have been through the processes and amassed the experts with the solutions to solve this.

Roadmap for reform

A broken accountability system

- 1.25 Australian universities are operating within an accountability framework that is no longer fit for purpose. Since the 1980s, the sector has steadily imported the governance practices and managerialism of the for-profit private sector, often without sufficient regard for the fundamentally different public mission universities exist to serve. In the process, governing bodies and senior management have grown increasingly distant from the academic and student communities on whose behalf they exercise authority. Collegial governance has steadily fallen away as universities have expanded into vast institutions managing billions of dollars in public and private assets, and a model of top-down control—entrenched by the rise of managerialism and formalised through the governance protocols of 2004—has taken firm hold.² As one former Vice-Chancellor told us, a '... root cause ... is an uncritical assumption that a modified version of "corporate governance" is appropriate for a university'.³

² Emeritus Professor William Maley, *Submission 5* (47th Parliament); Professor John Quiggin, *Submission 11* (47th Parliament); Professor Serena Dipierro, *Submission 76* (47th Parliament); University of Queensland NTEU Branch, *Submission 102* (47th Parliament); Emeritus Professor Stephen Parker AO and Emeritus Professor Stephen Bottomley, *Submission 43*.

³ Emeritus Professor Stephen Parker AO and Emeritus Professor Stephen Bottomley, *Submission 43*, p. 3.

- 1.26 Universities are now governed by university councils composed of individuals of considerable professional standing.⁴ Yet they too often lack the time, the sectoral understanding and the full information required to effectively discharge responsibilities on behalf of institutions that exist not for private gain, but for the public good.⁵ These councils are functionally self-appointing, structurally insulated and, in practice, largely impermeable to meaningful internal challenge. As one academic serving on the UTS Council noted, 'when I communicated an invitation to some members to meet with professors in the faculties, one responded, "I don't think that would be appropriate"'.⁶
- 1.27 The evidence before this committee demonstrates that councils fail to meet the basic accountability standards that would be uncontroversial in either a corporate boardroom or a democratic parliament. In corporations, shareholders can remove directors who fail to deliver. In democratic systems, citizens can remove governments that forfeit their confidence. In our universities, however, councils exercise vast power in a realm where no equivalent mechanism of internal consequence or accountability exists.⁷ This is not a design flaw; it is a foundational defect in university governance arrangements, and one that strikes at the heart of the sector's legitimacy.
- 1.28 This state of affairs persists in large part because the composition of university governing bodies is, in practice, shaped overwhelmingly by the office of the Chancellor. While the formal appointment processes are set out in each institution's establishing legislation, the effect in operation is a concentration of influence within a remarkably small circle. Councils do include elected representatives of staff, students, alumni and ex-officio executives, and that pluralism is important. Yet across Australian public universities, the clear majority of seats on council—some 68 per cent—are filled by appointed members, many drawn from corporate, financial or consultancy backgrounds.⁸ These appointments are ostensibly guided by skills and diversity matrices. But the evidence before the committee makes clear that the Chancellor exercises a decisive influence at every critical juncture, chairing the nominations committee, shaping the pool of candidates, advising ministers on preferred appointments, and overseeing both the appointment and performance

⁴ University Chancellors Council, *Submission 23* (47th Parliament); NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament).

⁵ Dr Marija Taflaga et al., *Submission 6* (48th Parliament); NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament).

⁶ Dr Robert Czernkowski, *Submission 5* (48th Parliament).

⁷ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament); Dr Marija Taflaga et al., *Submission 6*; Professors Parker and Bottomley, *Submission 43*.

⁸ National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), *Submission 15* (47th Parliament).

monitoring of the Vice-Chancellor.⁹ Over time, and particularly in the case of long-serving Chancellors, this concentration of authority carries with it the power to refashion a governing body in the image of a single office-holder's preferences, networks and worldview. This system breeds insularity, invites the perception of jobs for mates, and steadily corrodes the conditions for genuine accountability.¹⁰ For example, the Hon Wayne Martin AC KC was appointed to the ANU Council in 2025. The Hon Julie Bishop, who chairs the ANU Council Nomination Committee, told us in response to a question on notice that she 'has known the Hon Wayne Martin from the early 1990s, around the time he was appointed a Queen's Counsel'.¹¹

- 1.29 Just as the Briggs Review¹² laid bare a culture of patronage, favouritism and so-called 'jobs for mates' in public sector board appointments—where discretion too often displaced transparent rules and merit-based process—so too do we now see analogous failures reflected in the appointment processes of university governing bodies. This deficit of accountability leaves our universities poorly governed, lacking the accountability expected of public institutions and leading to sub-standard outcomes for students, the pursuit of knowledge by universities, and ultimately the public.
- 1.30 When governance failures occur—whether financial mismanagement, deteriorating academic standards and student experience, systemic wage theft, or institutional crises—the people responsible for oversight remain entrenched, with no mechanism for stakeholders to demand change. Staff and students, who bear the consequences of poor governance, cannot remove council members who fail them. External appointees, who typically form council majorities, often lack deep stakes in academic outcomes and face minimal penalties for decisions that damage the university's core mission.¹³
- 1.31 The external regulatory system compounds rather than corrects these accountability failures. As TEQSA informed this committee, it lacks direct enforcement powers and cannot pursue penalties without lengthy court involvement. Its focus on individual provider compliance rather than systemic risks means it struggles to address sector-wide problems like wage theft or

⁹ University Chancellors Council, *Submission 23* (47th Parliament); Dr Marija Taflaga et al., *Submission 6*.

¹⁰ Dr Marija Taflaga et al., *Submission 6*.

¹¹ Education and Employment Committee, Question on Notice ASQ25-0070, Australian National University, Supplementary Budget Estimates 2025–26.

¹² Lynelle Briggs AO, [No Favourites: Report of the Review into Public Sector Board Appointments Processes](#) (August 2023).

¹³ Professor Gavin Nicholson, *Submission 21* (47th Parliament), Dr Marija Taflaga et al., *Submission 6*; Professors Parker and Bottomley, *Submission 43*.

cultural failures. Its multi-step, resource-intensive process delays enforcement and leaves the regulator unable to address urgent or emerging risks effectively.¹⁴ The result is a system that serves neither the public interest, students or university staff.

- 1.32 Focusing exclusively on external accountability mechanisms—such as enhanced TEQSA reporting and regulatory oversight—without addressing broken internal accountability structures risks creating governance reforms that undermine university autonomy while failing to prevent future systemic failures. While the report's recommendations, such as improved consultation, staff representation, and complaints processes, are welcome, they lack institutionalisation and depend on voluntary cultural change within Australian universities.
- 1.33 Effective accountability mechanisms must balance the competing demands of oversight and autonomy, rather than prioritising external compliance at the expense of institutional independence. In practice this means Australian universities need both effective governing bodies (existing councils) and accountability bodies. Such accountability bodies should be new internal institutions, where university stakeholders can revive internal university governance. External regulation can only act after failures occur rather than preventing them, potentially creating ongoing and increasing government involvement in university affairs that could jeopardize the autonomy of Australia's universities.

Recommendation 3

- 1.34 Inquiries into university governance should be replicated in all other Australian states and territories to ensure that universities are meeting community expectations regarding governance practices.**

Recommendation 4

- 1.35 Further to the committee's first recommendation, state and territory governments, in reviewing the establishing acts of universities, should also amend those acts to ensure they meet, at a minimum, the recommendations of this inquiry and the Expert Panel on University Governance. University establishing acts ought to have explicit public good objectives, and should require that governing bodies have the appropriate structure and composition to meet such public good objectives.**

¹⁴ TEQSA, *Submission 17* (47th Parliament).

Fixing university governance

1.36 Australian universities' accountability systems must be refocused on three core tasks: ensuring the right people serve on governing bodies through changing composition and appointment processes, and better recall powers; rebuilding internal problem-solving and complaint-handling capacity so that staff and students have a genuine voice in decision-making; and lifting transparency standards so that governance no longer occurs behind closed doors but with integrity, in full public view.

Fixing council appointment and recall processes

1.37 There are currently no clear or independent processes for managing complaints against Chancellors or other council members, nor for addressing the underperformance of council members, beyond referring the matter back to the council itself. In practice, councils are left to mark their own homework. Evidence given to this committee regarding the ANU demonstrates the weakness of this arrangement. The Department of Finance informed the committee that neither the Minister for Education nor the Minister for Finance has the authority to remove the ANU Chancellor, even in circumstances where the Chancellor is found to have egregiously breached their duties under the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* (PGPA Act).¹⁵

1.38 Accountability through the higher education regulator, TEQSA, is likewise limited. While I commend the steps TEQSA has taken to address the unprecedented governance issues at the ANU, for example, I note that this is a time-consuming process. More than six months has elapsed since I wrote to the Education Minister outlining in detail a range of concerns which he then referred to TEQSA, and which it will take at least another three to four months to complete investigations and decision making about. For Dr Liz Allen, who first lodged a workplace grievance in February 2025, the process is even more drawn out, with many months yet to run on the inquiry eventually established internally by the ANU through a Special Governance Committee being led by Dr Vivienne Thom AM.¹⁶ While criticisms have been levelled at this committee and our handling of the inquiry by the ANU Chancellor with respect to this specific case, they only serve to highlight the spectacular inadequacy of any remotely effective internal mechanism to respond to serious allegations against the most senior university leaders. The fact that the matter had to come before a Senate committee inquiry to prompt any kind of formal process to respond to the complaint underscores the extent of the internal failing.

¹⁵ Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee, Supplementary Estimates 2025–26, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 2 December 2025, p. 80.

¹⁶ Australian National University, [Special Governance Committee](#) (accessed 11 December 2025).

- 1.39 The Nixon Review highlighted this gap saying that the '... management of complaints about staff and students at ANU is fragmented which makes community safety initiatives difficult to assess from a whole-of-university perspective. Not all matters that should be handled as complaints are recognised as such or appropriately managed'.¹⁷
- 1.40 Christine Nixon AO's work also highlighted another deeply problematic practice reflected in other testimony to the inquiry about the frequent and inappropriate use of non-disclosure or non-disparagement agreements:
- During the course of this review, I requested information in relation to two academics that the University declined to provide because it had entered deeds prohibiting it from disclosing the information.
- It has also been difficult for staff to obtain timely legal advice through the University Legal Office, which does not include specialist industrial relations expertise.¹⁸
- 1.41 Where a university council or its members breach the Threshold Standards, TEQSA may initiate an investigation. In severe cases, the regulator may conclude that particular council members are not 'fit and proper' or impose registration conditions requiring their removal.¹⁹ Either intervention would be unprecedented for an Australian university. Nevertheless, TEQSA has confirmed in evidence to the committee that it is currently considering both possibilities in relation to matters raised about the ANU, underscoring the gravity of the governance failures presented to this inquiry.²⁰
- 1.42 These structural gaps demonstrate the need for the formal introduction of recall provisions—clear, enforceable mechanisms for removing underperforming or unfit council members in cases of demonstrable failure, breach, or loss of confidence. Creating a new, independent body representing university stakeholders, empowered either to review council performance or to remove senior management in serious cases, would realign governance settings toward

¹⁷ Professor Christine Nixon, AO, APM, [Report of a Review into matters of gender and culture in the ANU College of Health and Medicine and its constituent Schools, the John Curtin School of Medical Research, the School of Medicine and Psychology, and the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health](#) (27 May 2025), p. 37.

¹⁸ Professor Christine Nixon, AO, APM, [Report of a Review into matters of gender and culture in the ANU College of Health and Medicine and its constituent Schools, the John Curtin School of Medical Research, the School of Medicine and Psychology, and the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health](#) (27 May 2025), p. 37.

¹⁹ Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee, Estimates, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 4 December 2025, Canberra, evidence of Mr Nicholas Riordan, General Counsel, Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency.

²⁰ Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee, Estimates, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 4 December 2025, Canberra, evidence of Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency.

genuine accountability. Such a shift would strengthen institutional stewardship by ensuring that authority is matched with consequences for poor behaviour.

- 1.43 In parallel, a committee of that independent appointments body could replace existing university nominations committees, which often operate through opaque and insular processes. A transparent, merit-based, publicly visible appointments system—supported by open advertising and rigorous assessment—should be mandated to eliminate patronage and favouritism and broaden the pool of high-quality candidates available for council roles. Collectively, these reforms would introduce disciplined governance standards, enhance public confidence, and embed accountability at the heart of university leadership.

Recommendation 5

- 1.44 That independent bodies representing university stakeholders be created with powers to appoint new governing body members and, in cases of serious failure, breach, or loss of confidence, to terminate the appointment of existing members.**

Recommendation 6

- 1.45 Update university practices and procedures to prohibit or severely limit the circumstances in which non-disclosure or non-disparagement clauses or agreements can be used, and establish a mechanism to oversee and challenge any such use.**

Strengthening accountability through an institutionalised university community voice

- 1.46 This inquiry has heard from a wide array of peak bodies that claim to speak for the university sector, and many of them have appeared before the committee in this process. Yet it is also clear that the overwhelming weight of organised representation rests with senior management, chancellors and institutional leadership—through bodies such as Universities Australia, the University Chancellors Council and the Australian Higher Education Industrial Association—as well as with various councils of Deans. Those perspectives, while legitimate, are not always aligned with the experiences or interests of the staff and students who constitute the living heart of our universities. The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), of course, plays a vital role in representing the industrial and professional interests of its members. Yet it is a striking and consequential absence that academics themselves—as the custodians of teaching, research and scholarship—have no independent, non-union national voice through which to speak to the governance of the institutions they serve.

- 1.47 And speak they most certainly did in this inquiry. From the hundreds of submissions received, a consistent thread emerges. Academics care deeply about the governance of their universities, and much of what they told us was not flattering. That should not be dismissed as discontent but as the accumulated frustration of those who have given their working lives to institutions whose public purpose is being steadily eroded.
- 1.48 The evidence presented to the inquiry is entirely consistent with my own lived experience in what is, unequivocally, a university town, with five separate universities having campuses here. I have been stopped on the street by constituents wanting to talk about university governance more than any other issue since being elected to Parliament.
- 1.49 Strengthening the voice of academics, students and the wider university community within institutional governance is not optional. It is essential. Those who create the knowledge of our universities and those who come to be educated within them hold the deepest and most enduring stake in institutional quality, and they possess forms of operational and institutional knowledge that too rarely reach the highest levels of decision making.
- 1.50 This failure in the upward flow of critical information leads to poorly informed decisions. When policy and budgets are shaped by management without the informed input of the academic community, governing bodies are left unable to provide effective oversight.
- 1.51 The evidence before the inquiry strongly indicates that university staff, students and the wider community require robust, formal mechanisms to scrutinise the decisions of senior executives and governing councils. Witnesses consistently argued that a pervasive lack of transparency and accountability has damaged institutional integrity and contributed to poor governance outcomes. University governance was repeatedly characterised as secretive and opaque, an information 'black hole'.²¹ According to the Monash University Branch of the NTEU, requests for access to minutes are 'regularly refused and no effort is made to make these public documents available to staff, students or the community'.²² The ANU Governance Project reported that 'Council and senior Executive processes were seen as secretive, with key deliberations closed and data withheld'.²³

²¹ Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee, *Quality of Governance at Australian Higher Education Providers, Proof Committee Hansard*, 10 November 2025, Adelaide, evidence of Mr Richard Denniss, Co-Chief Executive Officer, Australia Institute.

²² NTEU Monash University Branch (NTEU Monash), *Submission 117* (47th Parliament).

²³ Australian National University Governance Project Working Group, *Submission 18.1*.

- 1.52 During the course of the inquiry, my office was inundated with questions from university staff, students, parents of students and others seeking answers from university management. In the case of staff in particular, many expressed a fear of retribution should they raise concerns openly, while others reported that questions directed to management are frequently ignored. The proliferation of proton.me email addresses this inquiry has sparked speaks volumes. This evidence points to a systemic failure to provide safe, credible and effective avenues for scrutiny within universities. It shouldn't be the job of the Senate to be the intermediary between university management and their staff.
- 1.53 The committee heard compelling and consistent evidence of a persistent information asymmetry between those who manage our universities and those who constitute their core academic life. Academics, professional staff and students hold deep operational and institutional knowledge, yet time and again that knowledge fails to reach the governing bodies charged with oversight. Staff and student representatives told this inquiry that their contributions were frequently marginalised in council deliberations, and in some cases that access to documents and core information was actively constrained, frustrating conscientious attempts at scrutiny.²⁴
- 1.54 The consequence of this disconnect is not abstract. It is decision making that is insufficiently informed by the lived realities of teaching, research and student life. Where governing bodies lack grounded experience of the institution's core functions, they are left poorly equipped to steward complex strategic choices. The risk that follows is clear and present: decisions that are poorly conceived, weakly tested, and ultimately misaligned with the public mission universities exist to serve.
- 1.55 In response to these systemic weaknesses, the committee heard calls from a number of witnesses for a substantial strengthening of democratic representation within university governing councils. In particular, it was proposed that the Threshold Standards should prescribe a minimum number, or proportion, of elected staff and student members on Australian university councils, in order to anchor decision making more firmly in the lived reality of the institutions being governed.²⁵ Chancellors, by contrast, expressed concern that a majority of elected members would alter the character of governance and

²⁴ Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee, *Quality of Governance at Australian Higher Education Providers, Proof Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, Canberra, evidence of Mr William Burfoot, President, Australian National University Students Association.

²⁵ NTEU, *Submission 15* (47th Parliament); The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament); Dr Terry Dwyer, *Submission 2*; Dr Robert Czernkowski, *Submission 5*; Australian National University Governance Project Working Group, *Submission 18.1*.

risk blurring the distinction between the role of academics as employees and their duties to the institution as a whole.²⁶

- 1.56 There is a legitimate debate to be had on this question. But the evidence before the committee makes one point unmistakably clear. A guaranteed minimum proportion of elected staff and student representatives would strengthen scrutiny and improve the flow of critical institutional knowledge, without transferring control of councils to narrower internal interests.
- 1.57 Finally, the committee heard a major reform proposal aimed squarely at restoring scrutiny where it has been allowed to erode. Witnesses argued for the creation of a structured and protected avenue through which the university community could question, advise and scrutinise the governing body and senior executive on matters of performance, strategy and institutional direction. The case put to us was that this mechanism would strengthen internal accountability, help to rebuild trust that has been so visibly strained, and reduce the sector's increasing dependence on blunt external parliamentary or regulatory intervention as the primary means of correction. This proposal goes directly to the architecture of good governance, as I will return to later in these Additional Comments.

Recommendation 7

- 1.58 The Threshold Standards should prescribe an explicit minimum proportion of elected staff and student members on Australian university councils of at least one-half.**

Transparency

- 1.59 Transparency is desperately needed for these public bodies. Evidence to the inquiry shows a broad pattern of opaque governance across Australian universities. Key documents are routinely withheld, decision-making often occurs in camera, and there is no general obligation to publish council minutes. Staff, students, and unions describe a system that shields information from public view, creating a private company culture without corresponding shareholder accountability.

Financial transparency

- 1.60 Financial transparency is poor. Universities frequently avoid scrutiny of internal financial data. And financial data are reportedly poor. According to one accounting academic who serves on UTS Council, 'my university's cost

²⁶ For example, Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee, Quality of Governance at Australian Higher Education Providers, *Official Committee Hansard*, 8 September 2025, Sydney, evidence of Professor Jennifer Westacott AC, Chancellor, Western Sydney University.

accounting system is so structurally weak that its design wouldn't earn a pass for a second-year accounting student'.²⁷

- 1.61 Financial transparency concerns raised in the evidence centre on allegations that universities routinely misrepresent their financial position, obscure major categories of expenditure, and tightly control access to financial information. There is a concern that institutions craft a narrative by publishing an 'underlying operating deficit' that sharply diverges from the audited consolidated surplus. Universities do this, despite the fact that the underlying figure is not subject to audit, to present a financial narrative that suits management by selectively including or excluding items of revenue or expenditure. According to some staff, unions, and other stakeholders, a calculated presentation of financial fragility is used to rationalise job cuts, outsourcing, and large-scale organisational change. The practice of reporting unaudited underlying operating results has eroded public confidence in universities, contributing to widespread scepticism about the accuracy of financial data. The effect is a deepening mistrust in institutional leadership, as stakeholders increasingly view the published financial story not as an honest representation of university finances but as an instrument to secure managerial objectives.

Recommendation 8

- 1.62 All universities should transition to adopt a single, transparent, standard method for calculating and publishing their 'underlying operating result', developed with the Australian Tertiary Education Commission and appropriate consultation, with the full methodology openly disclosed and reasons for inclusion or exclusion of revenues and expenditures individually and publicly reported. In addition to this standard measure, universities should also report common private-sector indicators such as earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortisation (EBITDA). States and territories should align their reporting requirements with this standard method.**

Transparent disclosure of interests

- 1.63 Transparent disclosure of interests is central to maintaining the integrity, legitimacy, and public trust in university governance. When senior executives and council members exercise significant authority over budgets, strategy, appointments, and commercial partnerships, the public has a reasonable expectation that these decisions are made free from undisclosed personal or financial interests. Across many institutions, such disclosures are either incomplete, inconsistently maintained, and/or not publicly accessible. This lack of visibility creates fertile ground for real or perceived conflicts of interest—particularly when universities increasingly engage in commercial ventures, property development, industry partnerships, and consultancy arrangements

²⁷ Dr Robert Czernkowski, *Submission 5*. [p. 2].

that can overlap with the external roles or financial interests of decision-makers. Public, real-time disclosure is essential to maintaining integrity and trust, particularly as universities expand their commercial and partnership activities.

Recommendation 9

1.64 Universities make disclosure-of-interests registers for senior executives and governing body members public and update them in real time.

Procurement transparency

- 1.65 Concerns regarding procurement practices and the extensive use of external consultants were widely raised in submissions and hearings, with witnesses arguing that opaque, poorly documented, and occasionally self-serving contracting practices undermine financial accountability, institutional integrity, and the safeguards that prevent corruption in other parts of the public sector. Universities spend significant amounts of public and private funds on external expertise, yet disclosure is frequently inadequate. Each year, public universities collectively spent hundreds of millions of dollars on consultants and professional services, but this expenditure is often obscured within broad, uninformative categories in annual reports, making it difficult to identify which firms were engaged, on what terms, and whether conflicts of interest were appropriately managed. Staff and academic representatives also noted that consultant reports used to justify major restructures or strategic decisions are routinely withheld under claims of 'commercial-in-confidence', limiting scrutiny and falling short of the transparency standards expected across the broader public sector.
- 1.66 Of particular concern is the pervasive influence of Nous Group and its UniForum benchmarking data. I was concerned to learn through the inquiry how many Australian universities Nous Group had contracted to in the past five years. Also of concern are potential conflicts of interest given contracts Nous Group has held with the Australian Public Service (APS). Nous Group has also been a destination of choice for multiple senior department officials over the years, often with no cooling off period or other safeguard in place. I return to this in more detail below.
- 1.67 To respond to these systemic problems, stakeholders proposed stronger, enforceable procurement transparency requirements aligned with public-sector norms. First, many advocated adopting national itemised disclosure obligations modelled on the Victorian framework, requiring universities to publish clear, detailed information about all consultancy expenditure, including the purpose of each engagement and whether internal capability was considered. A similar model of disclosure operates for APS departments and agencies, known as the Murray motion. This level of disclosure would enable staff and public oversight, help guard against conflicts of interest, and reduce opportunities for corrupt or improper conduct. More generally, there is no reason that universities should

not comply with public sector standards for full transparency over tendering processes, including independent probity sign-off for major contracts, and ensuring that procurement decisions are defensible and free from perceived or actual bias. Second, witnesses argued for greater 'insourcing' of expertise, noting that the over-reliance on consultants represents poor value for money and bypasses the substantial in-house capability available within universities.

Recommendation 10

1.68 To strengthen financial accountability, prevent conflicts of interest, and align university governance with established public sector integrity standards, universities should be required to report all procurement contracts through their jurisdictions' reporting portal. For the Australian National University, this would mean registering their contracts with the Commonwealth's public sector reporting platform, AusTender.

Transparency of council proceedings

1.69 Making the proceedings of university governing bodies public would help restore legitimacy and accountability in their governance. These proposals aim to directly address the pervasive sense that university decision-making processes are currently shrouded in secrecy. The ANU Governance Project, an academic and student-led initiative, explicitly recommended that the ANU 'Council meetings should immediately be made fully accessible to the community', reflecting established practices at United States public universities.²⁸ The Australia Institute also recommended that university council meetings should be generally run in public by default, comparable to how parliament operates, specifically recommending that council meetings should be livestreamed, with provisions could be made for a specific 'in camera session' to address highly sensitive matters.²⁹ For this to work, there needs to be very clear guidelines about what material at council meetings there is a genuine public interest in remaining confidential, distinct from unjustified secrecy.

Recommendation 11

1.70 Universities should adopt a clear transparency framework under which council meetings would be open to the public and livestreamed by default. Only a tightly limited in camera session would remain, reserved for matters where there is a demonstrable and compelling public interest in confidentiality. Council should publish reasons for the confidentiality of each in camera item. To support this, universities should establish clear and codified criteria that distinguish legitimate confidentiality from unnecessary

²⁸ Australian National University Governance Project Working Group, *Submission 18.1*, p. 8.

²⁹ The Australia Institute, *Submission 105* (47th Parliament).

secrecy, ensuring that staff, students, and the broader community can be confident that closed sessions are the exception rather than the norm.

Recommendation 12

1.71 Specific timeframes for publishing council minutes should be established and rules adopted governing the appropriate labelling and sourcing of all reports and documentation presented to council. This will both improve transparency and also help guard against any unwitting reliance on data, analysis and documents provided by external consultants by council members in their decision making.

Complaints

1.72 The committee heard confronting evidence from staff who described, often at great personal cost, gruelling and distressing experiences of having serious complaints mishandled.³⁰ Many showed remarkable courage in coming forward despite fears of retaliation, reputational harm and career damage. Their evidence revealed complaint processes that are widely perceived as unsafe and ineffective, marked by weak accountability, inconsistent consequences for misconduct, cultures of fear and retaliation, and failures to address serious abuses of power. Routine use of non-disclosure and non-disparagement clauses are perceived to be used to silence complainants, suppress criticism and conceal wrongdoing. While the establishment of the National Student Ombudsman is a welcome and important step, no such institution exists for staff.

Recommendation 13

1.73 The Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 should be amended to require all Australian universities to maintain genuinely independent, safe and transparent complaints and misconduct-handling systems, including for complaints made against senior leadership. In the case of the latter, such processes must be fit-for-purpose and not rest in the hands of more junior staff.

Consultants

1.74 The inquiry heard compelling evidence that management consultants now exert pervasive influence across the university sector, operating in effect as shadow decision-makers who advise both the Department of Education and universities while driving major restructuring programs. Firms such as Nous, Deloitte, and KPMG earn vast public contracts, with estimates as high as \$734 million on

³⁰ Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee, Quality of Governance at Australian Higher Education Providers, *Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, Canberra, evidence of Dr Liz Allen.

consulting and professional advice in 2023 alone.³¹ Their work spans restructuring portfolios, managing public communications during crises, redesigning academic services, streamlining operations and lifting research performance. In doing so, consultants routinely handle confidential information for multiple universities and the Department of Education.

- 1.75 The inquiry also heard troubling evidence of a 'revolving door' between universities and major consulting firms, creating real and perceived conflicts of interest. The University of Wollongong case—where Professor John Dewar, a partner at KordaMentha, was appointed interim Vice-Chancellor shortly before the firm secured a major operational review contract—is particularly concerning. While the Chancellor denied any connection, documents later showed Professor Dewar remained engaged in business with KordaMentha during his tenure. Similar issues arose during the creation of Adelaide University, where Deloitte's Asia-Pacific CEO sat on the University of Adelaide Council before Deloitte was appointed as the merger's integration partner. More broadly, witnesses reported that consultants are frequently appointed to universities' governing bodies, embedding a culture that privileges restructuring over academic values.
- 1.76 The inquiry also heard that heavy reliance on consultants undermines universities' own expertise. At ANU, for example, the new Vice-Chancellor sought advice in 2024 from an external consultancy on foundational questions about the university's future direction rather than drawing on internal academic capability. These consultancy reports, which shape strategic direction, are not subject to independent peer review and are treated as confidential trade secrets, despite universities existing to advance and transmit knowledge. And too often, they are of poor quality. As one council member informed the inquiry, 'upon seeing a set of slide decks and asking to see the report itself, I was informed that the slide decks were the report. This is the basis on which multimillion dollar decisions are being made'.³²
- 1.77 Finally, the use of opaque, commercially driven tools such as UniForum benchmarking was strongly criticised. These metrics are used to justify job cuts and structural change but measure service costs only through professional staff hours, ignoring administrative work shifted onto academics. This can create the appearance of efficiency while increasing workloads and damaging teaching and research. These risks are compounded by UniForum's ownership by Nous Group, which both sets the benchmark and sells the consultancy solutions to

³¹ NTEU, *Submission 15*, Attachment 1 (47th Parliament).

³² Dr Robert Czernkowski, *Submission 5*.

address it. This creates a situation where one part of the firm 'identifies' problems and another part can then swoop in to design the 'solution'.³³

- 1.78 We heard suggestions of other types of poorly managed conflicts of interest regarding consultancies.³⁴ The first relates to the risk of sharing confidential information by consultants between clients. For better or worse, universities see each other as competitors in some areas of work, meaning that their plans and aspirations are often commercial-in-confidence. This means that management consultants, whose work often involves helping university management shape their visions and the strategies and tactics for achieving them, are in a position to trade upon these secrets. In short, unscrupulous management consultants could sell the secrets of one university to another. There appears to be demand for that service from Vice Chancellors.³⁵
- 1.79 The second relates to the Department of Education. The committee heard that the Nous Group's work for the Department of Education during the development of the Universities Accord in 2023 raised concerns about a potential conflict of interest. The firm earns a large share of its income from universities at the same time as the role of external consultants ought to have been in the spotlight in the Accord process. This firm alone is currently conducting consulting work for 19 universities worth \$5.9 million dollars.³⁶ The Department of Education engaged Nous to analyse submissions to the Accord consultation process. Its resulting 80-page report did not refer to external consultants at all, an omission that was widely described as extremely concerning given Nous's position in the sector. In response, representatives of the firm noted that staff who prepared the Department of Education's report were generally not working on university consulting at that moment, describing this as an imperfect defence but asserting that the conflicts had been managed as well as possible. Nous confirmed that it had undertaken \$9.8 million worth of contracts for the Department in the period 2000–2025, and \$23.1 million worth of contracts for state and territory education departments over the same period.³⁷

³³ Tim McLellan, *Submission 16*.

³⁴ Tim McLellan, *Submission 16*.

³⁵ According to emails released through Freedom of Information requests, within days of commencing as Vice Chancellor at ANU, Professor Genevieve Bell sought to commission 'some competitive benchmarking and strategic research analysis of the Australian HE [higher education] sector generally and some key competitors specifically, Rick Morton, [The consultancy driving ANU cuts](#), *The Saturday Paper*, 10 May 2025.

³⁶ Nous response to QoNs taken at the hearing on November 12.

³⁷ Nous response to QoNs taken at the hearing on November 12.

Recommendation 14

- 1.80 Universities should be required to publicly disclose all consultancy contracts, consistent with Recommendation 10, and to publish any consultant-produced advice in a timely manner, including the underlying data and methodologies, with only narrow and clearly defined exemptions.**

Recommendation 15

- 1.81 To prevent real or perceived conflicts of interest arising from the revolving door between universities and consulting firms, individuals should be prohibited from holding senior university roles and consultancy positions concurrently, and a mandatory cooling-off period should apply before a former executive or council member can be employed by a consultancy firm, and vice versa.**

Risks of an unbalanced reform agenda

- 1.82 The committee's interim report recommendation for greater external accountability to TEQSA is welcomed. However, the internal accountability recommendations rely mainly on voluntary action and cultural change within universities. Feedback I have received on the report suggests that without strong external enforcement mechanisms, or strong internal institutionalisation, internal governance reforms will have limited meaningful impact because they depend on universities choosing to fully implement them. This is a surface-level fix that does not shift internal incentives.
- 1.83 This enforcement gap where the government creates a powerful regulator but leaves internal governance largely dependent on norms and cultural change, creates a potentially dangerous dynamic. While stronger external reporting may encourage some internal reforms, real progress depends on restoring a clear chain of accountability inside universities. Without institutionalised internal accountability mechanisms, university councils would remain self-perpetuating and resistant to scrutiny. Relying solely on external oversight to compensate for weak internal governance opens up the risk of ongoing and increasing government involvement in university affairs, potentially jeopardising the autonomy of Australia's universities while still failing to prevent governance failures before they occur.

Making our national university the gold standard of governance

- 1.84 As a Senator for the ACT, I welcome the particular attention this inquiry has paid to the ANU. The ANU is unique in the tertiary education sector as a higher education institution established by an Act of Federal Parliament, in 1946. This unique status means the Commonwealth has legislative responsibility for the institution, placing the Federal Parliament in a unique oversight role over the university compared to other higher education providers established by acts of state and territory governments.

1.85 The ANU is also the primary recipient of the National Institutes Grant, which provides long-term and stable funding to undertake research of national importance. As Australia's only national university, the ANU has a unique responsibility to serve the whole of Australian society. As witnesses from ANU noted, it is ideally placed to model what good university governance should look like in Australia.³⁸

A new accountability body for ANU

1.86 I am persuaded that the ANU requires a dedicated, statutory accountability body to address long-standing failures in transparency, scrutiny and accountability in governance.³⁹ The inquiry revealed a persistent gap between the council and executive on the one hand, and staff, students and the wider university community on the other. This gap has enabled information asymmetries to flourish, fostered internal dissent and entrenched a perception that major decisions are insulated from meaningful scrutiny. In my view, these problems cannot be resolved through procedural reforms to governing bodies alone. What is required is a structural accountability institution, protected by enshrinement in the ANU Act, to give practical effect to the principles of voice, scrutiny and appointment and recall. It has been suggested that such a body could be called the 'ANU Senate' or 'ANU Forum'.⁴⁰

1.87 Such a body would not replace or compete with the university council as the governing authority. The council would remain the Accountable Authority and retain responsibility for the control and management of the university. Instead, the new body would operate as a permanent internal accountability mechanism with specific and limited functions and powers. It would provide a protected forum for staff and students to question the executive, require the production of information, convene regular public question-and-answer sessions, and report formally to council with a corresponding obligation on council to respond. It would possess appointment and, in extraordinary circumstances, recall powers in relation to the Chancellor and council members.

1.88 The ANU Senate or Forum could also play a formal role in overseeing major institutional change programs, such as Renew ANU, which have repeatedly become flashpoints for crises across the sector. By sharing real decision-making authority over certain restructuring decisions with an accountability body of this kind, the quality, legitimacy and durability of change management would

³⁸ Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee, *Quality of Governance at Australian Higher Education Providers, Committee Hansard*, 12 August 2025, Canberra, evidence of Dr Jessie Moritz; Australian National University Governance Project Working Group, *Submission 18.1*.

³⁹ Dr Marija Taflaga et al., *Submission 6.1*.

⁴⁰ Australian National University Governance Project Working Group, *Submission 18.1*, pp. 95–96.

be strengthened, reducing the risk that internal change processes escalate into damaging public institutional crises.

- 1.89 Staff and students should form the core of this body, reflecting their direct and ongoing stake in the university's mission, supported by representation of the wider public interest including representatives of this Parliament and First Nations stakeholders. It should operate with transparency as the default, meeting regularly in public, publishing recordings of debate and reporting annually on its work.
- 1.90 This proposal represents a far more conservative and modest reform than granting staff and students a majority of seats on council. It preserves the existing governance model and the primacy of the council, while introducing a measured but meaningful layer of accountability alongside it.
- 1.91 In my view, this is a pragmatic reform that would produce a structural shift in university governance, not radical but not merely cosmetic either. It would address the core accountability deficit facing the ANU by embedding accountability directly into the architecture of the university. This institutional architecture provides a credible internal alternative to the blunt instrument of external regulation, while accounting for and balancing stakeholder interests. Reform that creates concrete incentives for behavioural change within the university can begin to restore trust in an institution whose public mission depends fundamentally on openness, integrity and democratic legitimacy.

Recommendation 16

- 1.92 **That the *Australian National University Act 1991* be amended to establish a statutory Australian National University Forum or Senate as a dedicated internal accountability body, with defined powers of providing advice, scrutiny, public questioning, information access, and appointment and recall in relation to the Chancellor and council members.**

Recommendation 17

- 1.93 **That the Australian National University leadership methodically work through and provide a public response to each of the recommendations in the final report of the Australian National University Governance Project.**

Senator David Pocock
Senator for the Australian Capital Territory

Appendix 1

Public hearings and witnesses

Tuesday 12 August 2025

Committee Room 2S3

Parliament House

Canberra

National Tertiary Education Union – National Office

- Dr Alison Barnes, National President
- Dr Terri MacDonald, Director, Public Policy & Strategic Research
- Mr Kieran McCarron, Policy and Research Officer

National Tertiary Education Union – ACT Division

- Dr Lachlan Clohesy, Division Secretary

Group of Eight

- Ms Vicki Thomson, Chief Executive

Universities Australia

- Mr Luke Sheehy, Chief Executive Officer

Australian National University Students' Association

- Mr Will Burfoot, President

National Union of Students

- Ms Ashlyn Horton, National President

Dr Liz Allen, Private capacity

Dr Francis Markham, Private capacity

Mr Millan Pintos-Lopez, Private capacity

Professor Peter Tregear OAM, Private capacity (via videoconference)

Australian National University

- Mr Jonathan Churchill, Chief Operating Officer
- Mr Michael Lonergan, Chief Financial Officer
- Ms Kate Witenden, Chief People Officer

Department of Education

- Mr Ben Rimmer, Deputy Secretary, Higher Education, Research and International
- Ms Jessica Mohr, First Assistant Secretary, Policy, Payments and Data Division
- Ms Felicity Ryan, Assistant Secretary, Higher Education Policy and Engagement Branch

Office of the Fair Work Ombudsman

- Ms Anna Booth, Fair Work Ombudsman
- Ms Tiina Debevc, Executive Director, Operations

Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency

- Professor Kerri-Lee Krause, Chief Commissioner
- Dr Mary Russell, Chief Executive Officer
- Ms Jen Bahen, Executive Director, Regulatory Operations

Monday 8 September 2025

Corinthian Room, Sydney Masonic Centre
66 Goulburn Street
Sydney

Western Sydney University

- Professor Jennifer Westacott, Chancellor
- Distinguished Professor George Williams AO, Vice-Chancellor and President

*Professor Larissa Behrendt, Private capacity**Ms Danielle Donegan, Private capacity**Professor Mary O'Kane AC, Private capacity**University of Technology Sydney*

- Professor Andrew Parfitt, Vice-Chancellor and President
- Professor Kylie Readman, Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President (Education and Students)
- Mr Glen Babington, Chief Operating Officer and Vice-President

Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations

- Mr Jesse Gardner-Russell, National President
- Mr Richard Lee, National Vice President
- Mr Weihong Liang, International Officer
- Ms Mia Campbell, President, UTS Students' Association

University of Wollongong

- Mr Michael Still, Chancellor
- Professor Max Lu AO, Vice-Chancellor and President

Australian Technology Network of Universities

- Professor Kent Anderson, Executive Director

Innovative Research Universities

- Mr Paul Harris, Executive Director

Regional Universities Network

- Mr Alec Webb, Chief Executive Officer

Macquarie University (via teleconference)

- Dr Martin Parkinson AC PSM, Chancellor

Australian Higher Education Industrial Association

- Mr Craig Laughton, Executive General Manager

Monday 10 November 2025

Crystal Room, Stamford Plaza Adelaide

150 North Terrace

Adelaide

Adelaide University

- Ms Pauline Carr, Chancellor, Transition Council
- Professor Peter Høj AC, Co-Vice Chancellor
- Professor David Lloyd, Co-Vice Chancellor
- Professor John Williams AM, Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic)

The Australia Institute (via teleconference)

- Mr Richard Denniss, Co-Chief Executive Officer
- Mr Jack Thrower, Senior Economist

Dr Simon Longstaff AO, Private capacity (via teleconference)

Flinders University

- Mr John Hood, Chancellor
- Professor Colin Stirling, President and Vice-Chancellor
- Mr Marc Davies, General Counsel and University Secretary

University Chancellors Council

- Professor John Pollaers OAM, Convenor

Wednesday 12 November 2025

Committee Room 2S3

Parliament House

Canberra

The University of Melbourne

- Professor Michael Wesley, Acting Vice-Chancellor
- Ms Katerina Kapobassis, Vice-President (Administration and Finance) and Chief Operating Officer

The University of Sydney

- Emeritus Professor Alan Pettigrew, Pro-Chancellor
- Professor Annamarie Jagose, Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Provost

Nous Group

- Mr Tim Orton, Managing Principal and Chief Executive Officer
- Mr Paul Taylor, Principal

Charles Darwin University (via videoconference)

- The Hon Trevor Riley AO KC, Chancellor
- Professor Scott Bowman AO, Vice-Chancellor and President

Monash University

- Dr Megan Clark AC, Chancellor
- Professor Sharon Pickering, Vice-Chancellor and President (via videoconference)

Queensland University of Technology

- Ms Ann Sherry AO, Chancellor (via videoconference)
- Professor Margaret Sheil AO, Vice-Chancellor and President

ANU Governance Project

- Professor Quentin Grafton
- Professor Alexander (Sasha) Mikheyev
- Dr Jessie Moritz

Department of Education

- Ms Jasmina Joldić PSM, Deputy Secretary, Higher Education, Research and International Group
- Ms Jessica Mohr, First Assistant Secretary, Policy, Payments and Data Division
- Ms Felicity Ryan, Assistant Secretary, Higher Education Policy and Engagement Branch

Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency

- Dr Mary Russell, Chief Executive Officer
- Mr Nicholas Riordan, General Counsel
- Mr Tabor Akman, Regulatory Reform Lead

Appendix 2

Submissions and additional information

Submissions

- 1 Australian Multicultural Action Network
- 2 Dr Terry Dwyer
- 3 Mr Ganesh Sahathevan
- 4 Professor Ben Goldsmith and Associate Professor Jana von Stein
- 5 Dr Robert Czernkowski
- 6 Dr Marija Taflaga, Dr Francis Markham, and Professor Keith Dowding
 - 6.1 Supplementary to submission 6
- 7 Fine Rendition Operatic and Lyrical Intercultural Collaboration
- 8 Miss Jasmine Toronis
- 9 Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia
- 10 Group of academics at the University of Sydney
- 11 Friends of the School of Music ANU
- 12 Mr Christian Flynn
- 13 Dr John Doland Nichols
- 14 Professor Nicholas Biddle
- 15 Australian Academic Alliance Against Antisemitism
- 16 Dr Tim McLellan
- 17 University of Technology Sydney Branch of the National Tertiary Education Union
- 18 Australian National University Governance Project Working Group
 - 18.1 Supplementary to submission 18
 - Attachment 1
 - Attachment 2
- 19 Social Work Policy and Advocacy Action Group at RMIT University
- 20 Confidential
- 21 Confidential
- 22 Confidential
- 23 Name Withheld
- 24 Confidential
- 25 Confidential
- 26 Name Withheld
- 27 Confidential
- 28 Name Withheld
- 29 Confidential
- 30 Confidential
- 31 Name Withheld
- 32 Confidential

- 33 Name Withheld
- 34 Australian Dental Association
- 35 Name Withheld
- 36 Canterbury Bankstown Flora & Fauna Association
- 37 Community and Public Service Union NSW Branch
- 38 Dr John Goldsmith
- 39 Western Australian Government
- 40 Confidential
- 41 Mr Robert Hogan
- 42 Confidential
- 43 Emeritus Professor Stephen Parker AO and Emeritus Professor Stephen Bottomley
- 44 Confidential
- 45 Confidential
- 46 Ms Colette Geier
- 47 Professor Peter Tregear OAM
- 48 Confidential
- 49 Mr Aadian Iles

Additional Information

- 1 Australian National University—statement in response to comments made at a public hearing in Canberra on 12 August 2025 from Professor Rebekah Brown, Provost and Senior Vice-President (received 8 September 2025).
- 2 Australian National University—statement in response to comments made at a public hearing in Canberra on 12 August 2025 from the Hon Julie Bishop, Chancellor (received 8 September 2025).
- 3 Education and Employment Legislation Committee—response to correspondence from the Hon Julie Bishop, Chancellor, Australian National University (provided 18 September 2025).
- 4 Honorary Professor Andrew Podger AO—correspondence regarding Recommendation 4 of the committee's interim report (received 29 September 2025).
- 5 UNSW Sydney—correspondence regarding content of the committee's interim report (received 29 September 2025).
- 6 Professor David Lloyd—corrections to evidence given at a public hearing in Adelaide on 10 November 2025 (received 24 November 2025).
- 7 Adelaide University—corrections to evidence given by Professor David Lloyd and Professor Høj at a public hearing in Adelaide on 10 November 2025 (received 24 November 2025).
- 8 The University of Queensland—correspondence regarding section 3.25 of the interim report (received 14 November 2025).
- 9 Southern Cross University—correspondence regarding interim report (received 12 November 2025).

- 10 Flinders University—correction to evidence given at a public hearing in Adelaide on 10 November 2025 (received 19 November 2025).
- 11 ANU Governance Project—corrections to evidence given at a public hearing in Canberra on 12 November 2025 (received 28 November 2025).
- 12 University Chancellors Council—correction to evidence given at a public hearing in Adelaide on 10 November 2025 (received 27 November 2025).

Answers to Questions on Notice

- 1 Australian National University—answers to questions taken on notice at a public hearing in Canberra on 12 August 2025 (received 26 August 2025).
- 2 Australian National University—answers to written questions on notice from Senator David Pocock (received 26 August 2025).
- 3 Australian National University—answers to written questions on notice from Senator Faruqi (received 26 August 2025).
- 4 Universities Australia—answer to a question taken on notice at a public hearing in Canberra on 12 August 2025 (received 28 August 2025).
- 5 Australian National University—answers to written questions on notice from Senator David Pocock (received 28 August 2025).
- 6 Office of the Fair Work Ombudsman—answer to a question taken on notice at a public hearing in Canberra on 12 August 2025 (received 3 September 2025).
- 7 Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations—answers to written questions on notice from Senator David Pocock (received 8 September 2025).
- 8 Regional Universities Network—answers to written questions on notice from Senator David Pocock (received 8 September 2025).
- 9 Innovative Research Universities—answers to written questions on notice from Senator David Pocock (received 8 September 2025).
- 10 Macquarie University—answers to questions taken on notice at a public hearing in Sydney on 8 September 2025 and written questions on notice from Senator David Pocock (received 12 September 2025).
- 11 University of Wollongong—answers to questions taken on notice at a public hearing in Sydney on 8 September 2025 and written questions on notice from Senator David Pocock (received 15 September 2025).
- 12 University of Technology Sydney—answers to questions taken on notice at a public hearing in Sydney on 8 September 2025 and written questions from Senator David Pocock (received 15 September 2025).
- 13 National Union of Students—answers to written questions on notice from Senator Faruqi (received 18 November 2025).
- 14 National Tertiary Education Union—answers to written questions on notice from Senator Faruqi (received 21 November 2025).
- 15 Flinders University—answers to questions taken on notice at a public hearing in Adelaide on 10 November 2025 (received 24 November 2025).
- 16 Adelaide University—answers to questions taken on notice at a public hearing in Adelaide on 10 November 2025 and written questions on notice from Senator Faruqi (received 24 November 2025).

- 17 Fair Work Ombudsman—answer to a written question on notice from Senator Faruqi (received 24 November 2025).
- 18 Western Sydney University—answers to written questions on notice from Senator Faruqi (received 25 November 2025).
- 19 The Australia Institute—answers to written questions on notice from Senator Faruqi (received 25 November 2025).
- 20 Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations—answer to a written question on notice from Senator Faruqi (received 21 November 2025).
- 21 University Chancellors Council—answers to written questions on notice from Senator Faruqi (received 25 November 2025).
- 22 University of Wollongong—answers to written questions on notice from Senator Faruqi (received 25 November 2025).
- 23 University of Technology Sydney—answers to written questions on notice from Senator Faruqi (received 25 November 2025).
- 24 Queensland University of Technology—answers to written questions on notice from Senator Faruqi (received 26 November 2025).
- 25 Charles Darwin University—answers to written questions on notice from Senator Faruqi (received 1 December 2025).
- 26 Flinders University—answers to written questions on notice from Senator Faruqi (received 2 December 2025).
- 27 The University of Melbourne—answers to questions taken on notice at a public hearing in Canberra on 12 November 2025 and written questions on notice from Senator Faruqi (received 28 November).
- 28 Nous Group—answers to written questions on notice from Senator Faruqi (received 1 December 2025).
- 29 Department of Education—answers to questions taken on notice at a public hearing in Canberra on 12 March 2025 (received 27 November 2025).
- 30 Department of Education—answer to a question taken on notice at a public hearing in Canberra on 12 August 2025 (received 27 November 2025).
- 31 Department of Education—answer to questions taken on notice at a hearing in Canberra on 12 November 2025 and written questions on notice from Senator Faruqi (received 28 November 2025).
- 32 Monash University—answers to questions taken on notice at a public hearing in Canberra on 12 November 2025 and written questions on notice from Senator Faruqi (received 26 November 2025).
- 33 Nous Group—answers to questions taken on notice at a public hearing in Canberra on 12 November 2025 and written questions from Senator Faruqi (received 1 December 2025).
- 34 Macquarie University—answers to written questions on notice from Senator Faruqi (received 1 December 2025).
- 35 The University of Sydney—answers to questions taken on notice at a public hearing in Canberra on 12 November 2025 and written questions from Senator Faruqi (received 1 December 2025).

- 36 Monash University—answer to a written questions on notice from Senator Faruqi (received 10 December 2025).
- 37 Adelaide University—answer to a question taken on notice at a public hearing in Adelaide on 10 November 2025 (received 10 December 2025).

Tabled Documents

- 1 Australian National University—Guidance document: Right of Entry Notice (26 November 2024)—tabled by Dr Lachlan Clohesy, Division Secretary, National Tertiary Education Union ACT Division, at a public hearing in Canberra on 12 August 2025.
- 2 Australian National University—University Five Year Financial Plan (including 2024 Budget and 2025-28 Forward Estimates)—tabled by Senator David Pocock at a public hearing in Canberra on 12 August 2025.
- 3 Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency—Notice of Compliance Assessment: Australian National University—tabled by Dr Mary Russell, Chief Executive Officer, Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, at a public hearing in Canberra on 12 August 2025.
- 4 Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency—Explanatory letter for compliance assessment with the Australian National University—tabled by Dr Mary Russell, Chief Executive Officer, Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, at a public hearing in Canberra on 12 August 2025.
- 5 University of Technology Sydney—Email sent to all staff from Professor Andrew Parfitt, Vice-Chancellor and President—tabled by Senator Dolega at a public hearing in Sydney on 8 September 2025.
- 6 University Chancellors Council—Opening statement—tabled by Professor John Pollaers OAM, at a public hearing in Adelaide on 10 November 2025.
- 7 Adelaide University—Adelaide University Corporate Brochure—tabled by Ms Pauline Carr, Chancellor, Transition Council, Adelaide University, at a public hearing in Adelaide on 10 November 2025.
- 8 Adelaide University—Correspondence from Hon. Catherine Branson AC KC to NTEU SA—tabled by Professor Peter Høj AC, co-Vice Chancellor, at a public hearing in Adelaide on 10 November 2025.