Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee

Inquiry into Quality of governance at Australian higher education providers

Submission by Emeritus Professor William Maley, AM FASSA FAIIA

1. I make this submission in my personal capacity, as a retired academic who completed four degrees, including a PhD, at Australian higher education institutions, and taught and conducted research at the University of New South Wales from 1984 until 2003 and at The Australian National University from 2003 to 2021. My observations relate to para.1(e) of the Committee's Terms of Reference rather than the more specific issues covered in paras.1(a)(b)(c) and (d).

2. Both universities at which I taught and conducted research are fine institutions, notable for the quality of their teaching and research staff, and their students both undergraduate and postgraduate. Nonetheless, like much of the tertiary sector, they appreciably suffered from deterioration in the quality of university governance over the period in which I was actively involved as an academic staff member. This deterioration largely reflected changing institutional frameworks, practices, and incentive structures, rather than ill intent on the part of university 'leaderships'. The following remarks identify some developments of concern. While these observations are anecdotal and impressionistic, it is worth recalling the shrewd observation that the plural of anecdote is data.[1] They cover issues of faculty governance; increasingly hierarchical organisation; and the growth of managerialism. They conclude with discussion of a specific case, namely the cancellation of the December 2024 graduation ceremony at The Australian National University, that illustrates how some of these problems can act to the detriment of students, and also of Australia's efforts to develop 'soft power'[2] through international education.

Faculty governance

3. The decay of 'faculty governance' – a system which sees critical decision-making in universities substantially devolved to frontline academic staff rather than concentrated in the hands of a relatively small clique of richly-rewarded hierarchs (Vice-Chancellors, Deputy Vice Chancellors, Pro-Vice-Chancellors, Chief 'Operating', 'Finance' and 'People' Officers) – is a notable phenomenon in much of the Western world.[3] As Professor C.A.J. Coady has put it, 'All academics are aware of a decline in democratic, consultative and open procedures and an increase in authoritarian, top-down, cursorily discussed decision-making … There is much talk of decentralisation but what is decentralised is basically debt rather than power'.[4]

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[1]See Nelson W. Polsby, 'The Contributions of President Richard F. Fenno, Jr.', *PS: Political Science & Politics*, vol.17, no.4, Autumn 1984, pp.778-781 at p.779.

[2]See Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

[3]See Mary Burgan, *What Ever Happened to the Faculty? Drift and Decision in Higher Education* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006) pp.101-123; Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why it Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) pp.65-96; Larry G. Gerber, *The Rise and Decline of Faculty Governance: Professionalization and the Modern American University* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) pp.121-126.

[4]Tony Coady, 'Universities and the ideals of inquiry', in Tony Coady (ed.), *Why Universities Matter: A conversation about values, means and directions* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2000) pp.3-25 at p.20.

4. Faculty governance is desirable for a number of reasons. Frontline staff very often, and certainly in my decades of experience, have a clearer understanding of both the problems that need to be addressed within universities, and the likely effects of policy decisions made in response to them. (In this respect, there are parallels with the Robodebt scandal, where it was frontline staff such as Colleen Taylor OAM who clearly saw what was going wrong.[5]) They are also much more likely to be in regular contact with vulnerable students than are university 'leaders' or 'managers', who have limited opportunities to get to know members of the student body. But another argument strongly favouring devolved governance is that *poor* decisions, made *locally*, may have merely local and limited effects; whereas poor decisions, made *centrally* and imposed from on-high, can have catastrophic and enduring consequences for an entire organisation.

5. Several factors have contributed to the decline of faculty governance, and the emergence of what has been called the 'enterprise university'.[6] Pressure from government, a critical source of funding, has indeed played a crucial role. But changes in the conditions of academic employment in some institutions, as well as in particular academic roles, may also have contributed materially to the decline. Three stand out.

6. First, it was long the case that the position of head of an academic department was routinely occupied by a full professor, that is, an academic who stood at the peak of the academic hierarchy. Indeed, it was the expectation that a professor would perform such duties unless there happened to be two professors within the same department. This meant that departmental heads were typically individuals of notable academic stature, and universities historically recognised this through the existence of a powerful committee of full professors known as the 'Professorial Board'. This began to change in the 1980s when universities moved to a position where academics of the level of senior lecturer or above could be heads of department. As a result, departments more and more frequently were headed by academics who did not enjoy the stature of full professors, and Professorial Boards were abolished.

7. Second, it was long the case that the rank immediately below full professor, often designated 'Reader', was the highest rank to which an academic could rise through a promotion process; except for a very small number of 'personal chairs', professorial appointments came about through successful applications to fill vacancies that had arisen through the death, retirement or resignation of an incumbent full professor. Since the broad expectation was that senior lecturer was the highest rank to which an academic would generally rise in the course of his or her career, Readers were typically scholars of considerable attainment, fully capable of being appointed as professors. (A good example was Dr J.A.A. Stockwin, Reader in Political Science at the ANU from 1972 to 1981, who was then selected to be the Nissan Professor of Modern Japanese Studies at Oxford University.) The cohort of Readers functioned as a 'conscience' of the university, and many were forthright in articulating concerns about the trajectory of university governance. Over time, the position of 'Reader' was replaced by that of 'Associate Professor', with the option of promotion to full professor being open to the occupants. Perhaps

[5] *Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme: Report* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2023) p.658.
[6] Simon Marginson and Mark Considine, *The Enterprise University: Power, Governance and Reinvention in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) pp.9-11.

unsurprisingly, Associate Professors – with some notable exceptions – proved less likely to raise issues that could make 'leaders' and 'managers' feel uncomfortable.

8. Third, whereas Deans of Faculties were frequently elected by members of the academic staff, it is increasingly the case that they are either appointed by Vice-Chancellors, or selected through appointment processes in which the bulk of academic staff have no direct involvement. The result is that Deans may see themselves, and be seen by the academic and other staff, as agents of the Vice-Chancellor within Faculties, rather than as representatives of the staff *to* the Vice-Chancellor. (I personally recall one Dean stating very explicitly to a meeting of academic staff that his responsibility was as an implementing agent for the Chancelry rather than as a voice for his Faculty.) A consequence is that if the Vice-Chancellor loses the respect and trust of staff, it is likely that an atmosphere of disrespect and distrust will increasingly permeate the University more broadly.

9. While some of these developments are likely now set in concrete, one mechanism for the reinvigoration of faculty governance would be to provide that key positions should be filled only with the approval of academic staff rather than selected by unrepresentative committees within university Councils and Senates. For example, the position of Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University is filled in a three-step process: a 'VC Nominating Committee' makes a recommendation to the University Council, *which then submits it for approval to the 'Congregation'*, a body of approximately 5000 academic and other staff.[7] Such a process endows a Vice-Chancellor with a degree of 'process legitimacy' that selection by a Council or Senate clique does not. Combined with tight budgets to prevent the kind of bloating at 'executive' level that has been widely reported in recent times, such an approach could enhance the effectiveness of university functioning, as could a return to the election by academic staff of Deans.

10. Some might fear that a reinvigoration of faculty governance could provide opportunities for radical groups, perhaps animated by extremist or Marxist ideas as was the case during some campus protests in the 1960s, to infiltrate the upper echelons of the higher education sector. There are, however, reasons to doubt whether this is the case. A multi-stage process such as that used in Oxford would militate against such an outcome. Furthermore, 'revolutionary' campus activity is much less on display now than in the 1960s and early 1970s, and in any case, those with Marxist backgrounds can find their ways into the upper echelons of the enterprise university if they so choose: the current Vice-Chancellor of one major Australian university openly described herself before her appointment as 'an unreconstructed neo-Marxist'.[8]

Vertical hierarchies versus horizontal teams

11. The decline of faculty governance has occurred in tandem with centralisation and bureaucratisation in the university sector. Ironically, the push to centralise has come about at the very time that studies of organisations have proved increasingly sceptical about the value of strict hierarchical organisation. Here, it is useful to note the distinction between organic and mechanistic approaches to organisation, famously drawn by Tom

[7]https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/nominating-committee-for-the-vice-chancellorship
[8]Natasha Singer, 'Intel's Sharp-Eyed Social Scientist', *The New York Times*, 15 February 2014.

Burns and G.M. Stalker in their study *The Management of Innovation*.[9] Mechanistic approaches, based on hierarchical organisation and rules, are valuable in times of stability, whereas organic approaches, emphasising creativity as a way of responding to challenges, are preferable in times of uncertainty – such as the tertiary sector in Australia is currently facing.

12. Hierarchical organisation has emerged at the expense of integrated teams. Recent analysis has highlighted the great benefits that can derive from giving a primary role within organisations to horizontally-organised teams, with very high levels of transparency providing the lubricant to protect against dysfunctional outcomes. As General Stanley McChrystal and his co-authors put it, 'the connectivity of trust and purpose imbues teams with an ability to solve problems that could never be foreseen by a single manager – their solutions often emerge as the bottom-up result of interactions, rather than from top-down orders'.[10] Within universities, teams used to be the order of the day. Within individual departments, academic staff and professional staff (such as departmental secretaries, research assistants, and student support officers) were typically found who had spent years in the same positions, becoming deeply familiar with issues that needed to be addressed, and engaging in problem-solving. To put it another way, high levels of social capital tended to be nurtured in the departmental environment. Large numbers of long-serving professional staff were worth their weight in gold. All this changed when universities, in the name of offering improved 'career paths', began to separate academic from professional staff, who were increasingly tasked with answering to *other* professional staff in a hierarchy parallel to that of the academics. Teams broke down; professional staff moved from one position to another with bewildering frequency, and students and academics more and more found themselves having to deal with relatively inexperienced support staff with little understanding of academic or student needs. Without becoming overly sentimental, one could certainly argue that effective teams delivered a high-quality product for both students and the University.

13. Hierarchical structures are much more vulnerable if there is a failure of leadership at the top. As the saying goes, a fish rots from the head down. Here it is important to understand that effective leadership involves far more than simply appointment to a particular office with formal powers, and the exercise of those formal powers. As James MacGregor Burns put it, 'Power wielders may treat people as things. Leaders may not'.[11] A former US university president elaborated on this point by arguing that the core of leadership is 'providing solutions to common problems or offering ideas about how to accomplish collective purposes, *and mobilising the energies of others to follow these courses of action*'.[12] Or as the late Henry Kissinger wrote, 'good leaders elicit in their people a wish to walk alongside them'.[13] University 'leaderships' often miss this point, and in the process run the risk of encountering what in another context has been called

[9]Tom Burns and G.M. Stalker, *The Management of Innovation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) pp.119-125.
[10]Stanley McChrystal with Tantum Collins, David Silverman and Chris Fussell, *Teams of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World* (London: Penguin, 2015) p.114.
[11]James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978) p.18.
[12]Nannerl O. Keohane, *Thinking about Leadership* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010) p.19. Emphasis added.
[13]Henry Kissinger, *Leadership: Six Studies in World Strategy* (London: Allen Lane, 2022) p.xv.

'everyday forms of peasant resistance'.[14] Trust and respect have to be earned; they do not come automatically to office-holders. The very holding of this inquiry signals a certain discontent about the quality of leadership within universities, and this discontent suggests that it may be timely to revisit the processes by which 'leaders' in universities are chosen. Astronomical salaries do not necessarily attract great leaders; they may simply attract people with an appetite for astronomical salaries.

14. Problems arising from the replacement of teams with hierarchies have been aggravated in many universities by a push to amalgamate discipline-based departments (for example History, Political Science, Sociology, Philosophy, and Anthropology) into larger 'Schools' with 'Executives' of their own. Such 'Schools' are administrative structures rather than academic communities, and they do not necessarily foster the norms of reciprocity and cooperation that allow academic communities to add value to a university's life. This has left ordinary academics ever more detached from the life of the university, with many opting to work largely from home on their own research, eroding the value of the academy as a venue for the Socratic exchange of ideas. This does not mean, of course, that smaller discipline-based departments are necessarily idyllic, but if something goes wrong in a small department, the consequences may not be nearly as destructive as a breakdown in relations within a large multidisciplinary school.

15. An additional aggravating factor relates to the flow of information. This is a much larger problem than the mere enforcement of secrecy in respect of critical issues, something which has received some recent press attention.[15] It is more an issue of transactions costs associated with lack of clarity about decision-making and decisions. Minutes of key meetings may be difficult to obtain, or to obtain promptly. With hierarchies displacing teams, it becomes harder to identify whom one may need to contact in order to solve a problem, and online 'policies' and 'guidelines' are often poorly-worded, and poorly understood by managers charged with applying them. When there is a dearth of real information, rumours tend to circulate, often with destructive consequences.[16]

Managerialism

16. Universities have been affected by various pathologies of managerialism, and its associated jargon – KPIs, SWOT analysis, Strategic Planning and the like. It may be useful for the Committee to reflect on whether this kind of managerialism is useful and appropriate for universities, or merely the expression of a fad of fading relevance. Managers have interests of their own,[17] which need not coincide with those of academic staff and students. The paraphernalia of managerialism can create false senses of security; for example, the completion of 'risk matrices' is a useful exercise if and only if those who have framed the matrix in the first place understand the kinds of risks that it may be important to anticipate and include. Otherwise one is left with a box-ticking exercise serving simply to cover managers' backs. Similarly, the securing of 'ethics approval' for academic research often proves to be a risk-management exercise rather

[14]James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).
[15]Julie Hare, 'I will "hunt you down": ANU staff rebel at its culture of fear', *Australian Financial Review*, 3 December 2024.
[16]See Cass R. Sunstein, *On Rumors: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, and What Can Be Done* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).
[17]James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960) pp.77-95.

than a serious exploration of ethical issues.[18] In one case in which I was directly involved, a former PhD student found herself wrongly pursued for paperwork *after* she had been awarded her PhD and taken up an academic position at another university! In general, managerial thinking runs the risk of seeing academic work, and especially research, as a tightly-constrained and precisely-defined sphere of activity that can be fitted into neat boxes, rather than a voyage of exploration. This may true of mediocre research, but it is a poor model for truly pathbreaking work. As Oliver Cromwell put it in the 17th century, 'a man never mounts higher, than when he knows not whither he is going'.[19]

17. More recently, Professor Stefan Collini warned that 'Not everything that counts can be counted'.[20] This is a sage and timely warning, but it has not prevented the growth of bureaucratic structures in universities devoted to the time-consuming process of gathering data about research outputs from academic staff. This exercise is in large measure a response to a government-driven funding model, but I am aware of no credible evidence to suggest that it has brought about an improvement in the quality of research conducted in Australian universities, although it has undoubtedly absorbed a significant quantum of resources, as well as discretionary time which is itself a scarce commodity.[21] Karl Jaspers warned that 'Creativity is wholly inaccessible to objective testing'.[22] The use of metrics designed to capture productivity in the natural sciences – where key insights are often supplied in journal articles – may be quite misleading in the humanities and social sciences, where book-length studies are a more appropriate outlet.[23] Similarly, attempts to measure the 'impact' of research[24] may miss the point that it may only be in the long-run that the value of particular works comes to be properly appreciated; David Hume's lament that his 1739 *Treatise of Human Nature* – ultimately a work of enormous impact on social philosophy – fell 'dead-born from the press' is worth remembering. Most dangerously of all, some universities have come to see grant-money raising as a measure of academic achievement: anyone who has recently been involved in university promotion processes will be aware of the weight that this can carry in the minds of at least some academic hierarchs, especially if there is an opportunity to 'skim' funds from the top of a research grant in order to cover other university expenditures. The problem with this approach, however, is that research grants are an *input* to the research process rather than an *output* from it. A tendency to celebrate the scale of inputs rather than outputs was one of the reasons why Soviet-type command economies ultimately found themselves in trouble. In any venue but an Australian university, producing significant outputs on the basis of limited inputs would be seen as an example of high productivity rather than academic inadequacy.

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[18]See William Maley, 'Research as an Outsider: Positionality, Ethics, and Risk', in Kateira Aryaeinejad, Alastair Reed, Emma Heywood and Jacob Udo-Udo Jacob (eds), *Researching Violent Extremism: Considerations, Reflections, and Perspectives* (Washington DC: RESOLVE Network, 2022) pp.485-501.
[19]Quoted in Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) p.119.
[20]Stefan Collini, *What are Universities For?* (London: Penguin Books, 2004) p.120.
[21]See C.H. Sharp, *The Economics of Time* (New York: John Wiley, 1981); Robert E. Goodin, James Mahmud Rice, Antti Parpo and Lina Eriksson, *Discretionary Time: A New Measure of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
[22]Karl Jaspers, *The Idea of the University* (London: Peter Owen, 1960) p.115.
[23]See Jerry Z. Muller, *The Tyranny of Metrics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018) p.78.
[24]On challenges in measuring 'impact', see James Gow and Henry Redwood, *Impact in International Affairs: The Quest for World-Leading Research* (London: Routledge, 2021).

18. One final management innovation to note is the use of external 'review committees' to appraise the performance of units within universities. I have served on such committees for universities in Southeast Asia (Singapore) and the United States (Princeton University), but based on decades of observation, I am very sceptical of the uses to which they have been put in Australia. Here, I cannot improve on a scathing assessment offered in July 1983 by Dr L.J. Hume (1926-1993), author of *Bentham and Bureaucracy* (1981), Reader in Political Science at the ANU, and before that a longtime officer of the Prime Minister's Department in Canberra:[25]

> Fundamental to my attitude are the beliefs that such committees are not a good means of making academic policy and that they were not devised as a way of making good academic policy. They were developed, I believe, for a quite different purpose, namely as an exercise in public relations, and they bear the marks and handicaps of such an origin.
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> In my interpretation of their genesis, the University authorities – 'the Chancelry' – were conscious of an increasingly critical attitude towards Universities among officials and within the public at large. They were also aware that in both areas – but especially among officials and journalist – there was developing a widespread and naive enthusiasm for monitoring and reviews. In this atmosphere, it was seen, it would be helpful to be able to maintain that one was continuously reviewing one's own activities, doing so with the co-operation of outsiders, accumulating a large number of (but perhaps not too damaging or too radical) recommendations for improvement, and adopting many of them. For this purpose it would not matter whether any of the recommendations was of any value, or was based on a close knowledge of the situation, and it would not matter whether adopting some of them would do more harm than good from an academic (or indeed from an economic) point of view. The important thing was to appear to be self-critical, since this was what external and influential opinion seemed to require. Review committees appeared an appropriate instrument for this purpose. From the Chancelry point of view, too, they might bring an incidental benefit. They would unsettle and place on the defensive the members of the Departments that were being reviewed, and would thus make it easier to proceed towards the general 'managerial' goal of shaping the pluralism of university life and university decision-making into a hierarchical structure.
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> I believe, then, that these were the purposes underlying the establishment of the great and expensive structure of committees. I believe also that they have been the real functions of the committees – what they have actually achieved. The reports that I have seen, including the report on our own Department, seem to reveal little success in identifying the real problems of Departments or of coming to grips with them if the committees happen to stumble across them. (Perhaps I should say 'especially the report on our own Department', which does strike me as a notably trivial and irrelevant document.) They display, instead, the typical views of committees: a propensity to make recommendations (in vague and pompous language), come what may; a much smaller commitment to marshalling arguments in favour of their recommendations; and a susceptibility to the fads of their members and to energetic lobbying. But they have succeeded in creating a picture of self-critical activity, and they have unsettled members of the academic staff and made them ready to accept hierarchical arrangements and centralised management.

Dr Hume went on to argue that there existed 'strong grounds for not treating their reports and their recommendations very seriously *unless they happen to be cogently argued* … No doubt *some* of what they say will turn out to be valuable, but that will have to be discovered by examination; and the burden of proof rests with them, in terms of the arguments that they can provide or have bothered to provide'. This should surely be an uncontroversial proposition. He concluded with a warning that the Chancelry had a 'highly selective attitude to the reports and recommendations', and had 'no hesitation in

[25]L.J. Hume, 'Of Review Committees and Their Reports', Department of Political Science, The Faculties, The Australian National University, 13 July 1983.

endorsing recommendations that impose burdens on Departments or cut across departmental goals and values, but have equally little hesitation in ignoring those that place burdens on the University and its budget or cut across Chancelry goals and values'. This is as true today as when it was written more than forty years ago.

A case of poor management

19. What can go wrong when faculty governance is weakened, mechanistic hierarchical administrations supplant teams, and managerialism becomes dominant? The answer, sadly, is 'almost anything', but the following case provides a concrete example of a disaster rolling out. It is not a case-study in the strict sense of the term, but an unsettling example of poor process.

20. *Graduation ceremonies* are amongst the most important events in the life of a university student. I made a point of attending every graduation ceremony at which one of my students was graduating. For many students, Graduation Day may be the most important day of their lives apart from their wedding day. For international students, such ceremonies may be important both for cultural reasons derived from the importance of graduation ceremonies in their home countries, and because if they come from poor countries, they may well be the first members of their families ever to attend a university. Graduation symbolises the completion of a journey, and provides an opportunity for students to celebrate their achievements in the company of family and friends, many of whom may have made significant sacrifices in order to enable them to study at university. Even if students have struggled during the course of their studies, a happy Graduation Day can send them into the wider world with positive recollections of their university experience. Graduation is a form of ritual, and its power, to quote one eminent scholar, 'stems not just from its social matrix, but also from its psychological underpinnings. Indeed, these two dimensions are inextricably linked. Participation in ritual involves physiological stimuli, the arousal of emotions; ritual works through the senses to structure our sense of reality and our understanding of the world around us … People derive a great deal of satisfaction from their participation in ritual'.[26] Senators would have an understanding of the importance of ritual through their attendance at the ceremonial opening of Parliament, and at citizenship ceremonies which are also significant family events.

21. The ANU for many years held graduation ceremonies in July (for students who completed the requirements for the award of their degrees at the end of first semester) and December (for students who completed the requirements for the award of their degrees at the end of second semester). In June 2024, however, it determined that there would be *no* graduation ceremony in December 2024, and that the next ceremony would be in April 2025 (a date later changed to February 2025). Since many international students held visas that expired on 31 January 2025, and many Australian students had planned to leave Canberra after a December graduation, this caused widespread consternation among students.

[26]David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) pp.10, 14.

22. On its website,[27] the ANU published responses to 'Frequently Asked Questions' (FAQs). To the question 'Why is ANU changing the graduation schedule?', the university offered the following answer: 'The change will enhance the student and staff experience, bringing the full graduating year together to celebrate in unison. Benefits include creating a vibrant campus atmosphere by bringing the full graduating year together, enabling resource sharing across events and providing enhanced opportunities to activate public lectures, exhibitions and engage our alumni'.

23. How the 'full graduating year' would come together 'to celebrate in unison' was unclear, given that many students' visas would have expired. In response to the question 'How will this change impact international students on a visa?', the university stated 'International students may need to apply for a new visa if the graduation ceremony date falls outside their current visa expiration. Detailed information about visa requirements and extensions can be found on the Department of Home Affairs website'.

24. Nothing of which I am aware in the public domain demonstrated that the university had turned its collective mind to visa condition 8535 ('No further stay unless government support') routinely attached to Student (subclass 500) visas.

25. Nothing of which I am aware in the public domain demonstrated that the university had been formally advised by the Department of Home Affairs of the processing times required for any such visa extensions to be granted.

26. Nothing of which I am aware in the public domain demonstrated that the university had taken account of the costs in time and money that would have to be carried by international students obliged to engage with the Home Affairs Department to seek visa extensions.

27. Nothing of which I am aware in the public domain demonstrated that the university had turned its collective mind to the specific limitations contained in section 8.5 ('Applying for a further student visa') in the *Australia Awards Scholarships Policy Handbook*. Nor do I have any reason to believe that government officials responsible for administering the Australia Awards scheme had given their imprimatur to the proposed abandonment of the December graduation.

28. There was no suggestion in any of the university's material explaining the decision that cost might have been a pertinent consideration. However, in an online briefing on 3 October 2024, a university official posted the following slide, setting out cost-cutting measures that the university had taken, including 'Moving from two graduation periods per year to one':

[27]See https://www.anu.edu.au/students/graduation/adjustment-to-graduation-schedule (accessed 13 February 2025).

Students with whom I spoke were unimpressed that university officials had made no mention to them of the schedule changes as a cost-cutting measure, instead endeavouring to dress it up as a step to improve the students' experience.

29. Over 2000 students signed an online petition protesting the proposed changes.[28] The petition provided an opportunity for signatories to offer comments, of which the following are merely a selection:

> I am an international student and I don't want to apply for a new visa just to attend my graduation ceremony.
>
> The decision made by the Administration is discriminatory for the international students. I am appalled that the decision was made without proper consultation and would suggest the Administration to learn proper public policy making process with renowned professors at Crawford School of Public Policy.
>
> This is not fair for international students to have to apply for another visa just to graduate - this makes us feel like nothing but cash cows. Most graduate programs also start in February/March - many employers may not allow us to take leave for graduation when we literally just started employment one or two weeks prior.
>
> This is just another example of the Administration deciding things with no consultation. This is supposed to be an inclusive institution but again they show that they don't work their talk.
>
> It's an outrageous decision by ANU admin to change the graduation date such that international students would no longer be able to attend what should be a hard-earned celebratory capstone to years of hard work. Shame on ANU for making this change that favours money over student experience.
>
> Grandiose ideals about 'bringing the full graduating year together to celebrate in unison' cannot be applied when the current system means a significant portion of the student body literally cannot come to a single graduation without going through the tedious process of applying for a visa or taking leave from graduate jobs.

[28] https://www.megaphone.org.au/petitions/save-our-graduations (accessed 13 February 2025).

> I'm leaving Australia at the end of the year to start a fellowship position after my PhD. I specifically planned to still be in the country for the December 2024 graduation. I won't be able to take time off work in April, so I'm heartbroken that I'll miss my graduation.
>
> My parents purchased flight tickets at the beginning of the year solely to attend my graduation. This decision puts our plans and finances at risk.
>
> Because I want to attend one ceremony that belongs to me.

30. Despite this, the university did not reinstate the December graduation ceremony. Instead, it offered students a 'Testamur and Photo Opportunity'. It stated that 'Students who do not wish to attend the February 2025 graduation can select "In Absentia" and will have the opportunity on Thursday 12 December and Friday 13 December 2024 to collect a hardcopy of their testamur and have photos taken in academic regalia at Melville Hall.' Students with whom I spoke saw this as the equivalent of telling a bride that she could not have a wedding ceremony with family and friends, but as a consolation she could be photographed somewhere in a white frock. Whoever devised this idea clearly had no understanding of graduations as family occasions, imbued with ritual symbolism.

31. Students were made one other offer: 'Graduation Duck: Receive the University's coveted Graduation Duck "Etta"'.

One might seriously doubt whether the offer of a free rubber duck would adequately compensate for the loss of the opportunity to celebrate one's graduation with family and friends.

32. This episode has done the University considerable reputational harm. To my certain knowledge, at least some international students who were denied the opportunity to graduate at a proper ceremony (including some Australia Awards holders) are now advising students in their home countries to avoid the ANU. To the extent that the Australia Awards scheme is designed to enhance Australia's reputation overseas, it does not help Australian public diplomacy if the universities at which students may have

studied contrived to leave the students with a bad taste in their mouths as they head home.

33. The decision to do away with the December graduation appears to have been taken by the top university 'leadership'. A more pluralistic and consultative decision-making process might well have allowed some of the dangers of what was being proposed to be identified before a decision was locked in. And where cost-saving is concerned, the lack of transparency leaves real doubts as to whether decision-makers adequately modelled the loss of future student fee income that could arise from damage to the University's reputation as an institution that really cared about its students, and factored it into their cost-benefit analysis. With 'leaders' receiving salaries well above that of the Prime Minister, one might reasonably expect that the students of what is a world-class university would benefit from world-class leadership decision-making.