

Dear Professor O’Kane and panel members,

Thank you for providing an opportunity to respond to the Interim Report.

I was the campus coordinator for the postgraduate student association at the university where I was a PhD candidate and then president. I was also the women’s equity officer for the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] for two and a half terms, which included the Hunting Ground sexual violence on campus campaign. I am the first member of my family to attend university. Also the first member of my family to finish high school.

I am concerned by the lack of student voices. I am aware a number of student associations have provided input. In my experience these organisations, if run by students, have not been representative of the university student population. This is, in part, because a large number of students work and have other commitments as well as attending university, or are accessing education online and are unable to commit to regular on-campus meetings.

The student union I was president of is covertly run by a university staff member. During the years I was at the university, this person was also the postgraduate advocacy officer. They were not trained or qualified role, employed directly by the university and I dispute any claim by the university that they are independent of the university or that having this single staff member in this role was or is in the best interest of the students.

The legislation for Student Services, Amenities, Representation and Advocacy Guidelines, section 2.2(c) Advocacy Services states:

*These will include independent provision of information, advocacy and referral services for all students enrolled at the HEP across a range of academic, procedural and administrative issues. These include, but are not limited to, issues relating to equity, discrimination, harassment, grievances, complaints, disputes, exclusion, discipline and misconduct, supervision, and unsatisfactory progress.*

#### Section 2.2.3

*HEPs must ensure that where they provide health, welfare, advocacy or career services directly to students enrolled at the HEP, trained and qualified staff are engaged to meet the needs of students enrolled at the HEP.*

#### Section 2.2.4

*HEPs must ensure students enrolled at the HEP have access to advocacy officers for services set out in clause 2.2.2(c). Advocacy officers should act in the best interest of students and be independent from the HEP’s decision makers and other staff who administer the HEP’s academic and procedural rules and regulations. Advocacy officers must avoid potential or actual conflicts of interest in carrying out their duties.*

This staff member handled postgraduate student complaints and grievances and was noted on the university website as the staff member to contact. This person was not trained or qualified to undertake this role. It was not in their position description.

I only became aware of this when I took on the role of president. I discussed this with the staff member. They indicated they were not interested in training to become qualified to undertake this role. The constitution called for the president and vice presidents to perform advocacy roles, which they had also been doing, also without training or qualification. I took my concerns with this to the head of the SRC, a meeting with the Dean of Postgraduate Students and the university Ethics Committee where I was the postgraduate student member. Each told me they had contacted the Dean of Marketing who advised them having a trained and qualified person in this role was an unnecessary waste of university resources. The Dean of Marketing considered that this person had been undertaking the role for long enough to be considered to have 'on the job' training. I do not think this was a satisfactory response.

I had approached this person for advocacy help a couple of years earlier. I had been encouraged to upgrade from MPhil to PhD. As soon as the upgrade was finalised, I was contacted by my principal supervisor, dumped and told I would have to leave the school where my research was situated. This officer told me he could not help. I contacted him again following a meeting with one of the university's independent academic advisors over this same issue where I was, essentially, threatened and received the same response.

I contacted this officer in my role as campus coordinator. I had been asked for help by a student who had been dumped by her principal supervisor close to submission. This person asked to speak with a female advocacy officer as she did not feel comfortable discussing this with a male. This person told me he was the advocacy officer and if she wouldn't speak with him, there was nobody else she could speak with.

As an indicator of how extensive a problem this may be for the postgraduate student population at the university, I requested a copy of the register of postgraduate student complaints, which this staff member should maintain because they have positioned themselves as secretary of the postgraduate student committee. Viewing this is limited to a handful of people at the university, including just the president and secretary of the association. The resulting document, a record of student advocacy for the period of approximately four years since this person started at the university approximately ran to a handful of initials. The document had been declassified. The reason I was given was because the Dean of Marketing did not want students handling student complaints any more. I do know my initials were not on there. In contrast, the Sydney University Postgraduate Student Association's (SUPRA's) earlier submission to this Accord indicates they advocated for two thousand students that year alone.

At the same time I also advocated for an independent legal service for postgraduate students. SSAF funding could have covered this. This was also determined to be a waste of university resources by the Dean of Marketing.

I ran into similar problems with student support services and advocacy during my undergraduate program which I completed at a Group of 8 university. I later learned that this same university officer moved from student support services from the same university around the same time I did.

This university gives the impression they have representative student bodies in place when they do not.

I did try, but was unable to obtain legal help for any issue with universities. I was eventually told I would be hard put to find a lawyer who would take on a university because university gigs are the best gigs in town and no lawyer would want to put their relationship with a university at risk to provide support for an individual unless they were a family member of a very good friend.

There is an absence of adequate student advocacy and legal assistance. This, combined with self-regulation means that university academic and administrative staff can and do act with impunity.

Further, I found though my own experience the response from university and their advocates, like the independent university advisor who told me 'I would do what I was told' were closer to domestic violence and the wheel of control than supportive and conducive to finding mutually beneficial outcomes.

International students are not the only cash cows. The student HDR representative, who I shared an office with during my postgraduate experience popped his head through the door to tell me he'd just come from supervisor training. He had been told students who were not on scholarship were of no use to the university whatsoever. They were to be treated as income stream and shepherded as quickly and quietly to submission as possible.

No-one seems to have any answers about Australia's role on the world education stage, how we arrived where we are, what is driving this and whether it is sustainable. When I was a student representative, Australia was third largest education provider in the world, yet was not generating permanent jobs and we still seemed to be squeezing more and more students into classes. I was told looking after Australian students was not in the purview of the CAPA committee. Who is looking after Australian students? Surely any education we provide to people from other countries should be a result of excellence in our domestic education system.

It would like to see the Accord call for a Royal Commission into the Australian education system. This needs a big picture solution. This will allow a more representative conversation about the state of the Australian education system and encourage an unpicking of the problems in the system created by a lack of transparency and accountability in the current system. These are identical to problems seen in the secondary and primary education systems. I do not think this is a coincidence. What point is there of having a well-educated population if there is more money to be made bringing in students from overseas? How is it that a country with 27 million people where one in three children do not meet the literacy and numeracy standards indicated by the NAPLAN results this week came to be the world's third largest education provider, anyway? What are we providing and who is our education system actually serving?

Yours sincerely,

