

Submission to the Review of Australia's higher education system

Sunday 18 December 2022

I welcome the Australian Universities Accord and the review of Australia's higher education system. In my career I have been very fortunate to have had opportunities to think deeply at a national level about teaching (ALTC discipline scholar 2010-2012), research (ARC executive director 2013-2015), and the organisation of science (president of the Australian Council of Deans of Science 2016-2020) in higher education settings.

As requested, I will focus my response on identifying my priorities for the review process, in terms of the key areas suggested in the terms of reference for the review:

- I support the importance of areas 1-4 and 7. These are key functions of a university.
- To some extent, area 6 should be taken account of under 1-3. I can see sense in highlighting 'quality and sustainability' separately, but it should also be an integral part of the discussions under 1-3.
- Area 5 is a complex issue and in my experience the desire to have a continuous pathway through tertiary education can lead to compromises for both the VET and higher education systems. Nevertheless there is value in exploring opportunities for greater engagement and alignment. The important thing is to respect both systems for the outcomes they provide for Australian society.
- I would like to focus on area 4 in the rest of my response.

4. Governance, accountability and community

It is very important to get the governance and accountability right in universities. As a former leader embedded in the practice of teaching and research in higher education, this has clearly changed over the last 10 years and I am not sure it is working properly anymore.

My main point I wish to make is that while the corporatisation of university governance is a welcome trend in order to help institutions address national and global challenges in society, I believe the pendulum has swung too far in some cases and that corporate rationale now trumps academic requirements on too many occasions. We need to find a better balance in university governance.

I believe the changes started with the reforms introduced by Minister Brendan Nelson in 2002 to move universities away from governing bodies made up of traditional academics to ones which had a better balance of people with external experience, including in business, industry, school education and the community. TEQSA legislation later required university governing bodies to simply have 'fit and proper persons' to govern appropriately. These good intentions were very sensible as universities evolved, but I think they have had some unintended consequences.

Over the last 10 years these reforms have allowed the governing bodies of universities to have a lack of people with significant experience in the practice of teaching and research in a higher education setting (i.e. the core business of a university). At UTAS, there are only two people with this experience out of 13 or so people on University Council, and only one of these is elected as a representative of academic staff.

Whereas once upon a time, the Vice Chancellor could be relied upon to have had an academic career this is no longer the case. UTAS is not unique in having a non-academic as its Vice Chancellor. This can be a good thing, but my premise is that whereas the changes in higher education legislation were intended to help balance the traditional academic leadership with corporate or external experience, the traditional academic leadership is now sometimes no longer present.

(I acknowledge that you are undertaking a national review of higher education, and some of my comments here are focussed on UTAS. UTAS may be an exception, but I believe the imbalance on UTAS Council is the reason why many people (staff, students, Tasmanian community) have questioned recent leadership decisions and the current direction of UTAS. More broadly, lack of good governance and accountability in the University has been a common thread in the ongoing inquiry by the Tasmanian Legislative Council.)

In terms of accountability, universities are accountable to their staff and students and to the broader community. With the changes in university governing bodies over the last 10 years, there are often not enough elected representatives on the governing body to provide robust accountability to the students and staff of the institution. Without returning to a system when the majority of members were elected, there does need to be greater representation from staff and students. In addition, to address the need to be accountable to the community, universities need to report to state government (or some other state-based authority) in a transparent and fulsome manner. I hesitate to say that universities should be accountable to state parliament, but there does need to be a stronger connection.

One solution to the issues I have raised might be to look at legislation (TEQSA or other) to ensure two things:

- Greater representation from staff and students on the governing body
- Mandating significant experience in the practice of teaching and research in higher education as a skill set for half of the people on the governing body

I would like to conclude by emphasising that governance and accountability in universities have changed considerably since the time of the Bradley review in 2008. I suggest the panel explore this more deeply to see whether or not the current state of play is working well, and whether sufficient guidelines are in place to ensure appropriate governance and accountability of universities for the future. It is particularly important to hear the views of academic leaders in universities. One could start with the question – ‘is current university governance getting the best results in terms of the energy and contributions from academic staff?’.

Emeritus Professor Brian Yates, University of Tasmania

Australian Learning and Teaching Council Discipline Scholar in Science 2010-2012

Australian Research Council Executive Director Physical Sciences 2013-2015

Dean and Executive Dean of Science UTAS 2015-2021

President, Australian Council of Deans of Science 2016-2020