

Making use of a crisis

COVID-19 has precipitated a crisis that had been in the making for years. It has revealed important failings of the Australian higher education system such as its phenomenal dependence on foreign money. It has brought out in utmost clarity that universities must do more to make their role and importance understood by government. Furthermore, this crisis is revealing monstrosities the old system has created and that are now developing their full impact with bullying and anti-scholarly managerialism being only one of them. However, there is also an opportunity for a fresh start. A crisis can have cleansing and healthy effects.

Students and their teachers, professors in particular, are the core of every university. However, this is not the current reality. Let us be honest, the professoriate is guilty, too. Because senior academics have allowed it to happen, managers now equate themselves with “The University”. This is misleading for politicians, the media and the general public.

There is a need for management at every university, but this management must serve to support the mission of research and teaching which are inseparable because cutting edge teaching requires teaching by researchers who work at the cutting edge. The idea to separate what is inseparable can only be born in the mind of people who have not understood either one.

Most successful academics will not be interested in anything other than their academic work so management cannot be their priority. However, credible academics are now needed as university managers because they know best what is required. Good academics must take on more responsibilities and replace a defunct system ruled by one of the lowest quality motivations: money.

If this change does not happen, ever more so-called strategic plans will be rolled out that instruct how to climb up a ladder that is leaning against the wrong wall. Such plans typically aim at aligning individual academics’ goals with institutional planning led by managers that have no or little academic background while the only directive a good academic should align with is the best argument. Management supervision for full professors? This is only possible in a university system that has lost its way and real purpose. Academics are not managed employees, and professors must be role models in the defense of this important position. Universities are not companies but have far more important functions in Society than any company can have.

One of the most important outputs of AAUP so far is a set of nationally agreed Pillars of a University (1). Company-style “productivity” assessments by managers are rejected for logical reasons: Since not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted, those who count must know what to count and when not to count. In other words, those who assess have to be scholars and disciplinary peers. Weak academics that have slipped into managerial roles are not valid peers and are thus also excluded from such a role. The fact that some professorships are now de facto awarded by management is as problematic as the fact that Academic Boards have been emasculated.

The AAUP Constitution (2) has been noted for its objects that directly address several weaknesses of the Australian university system. A number of position papers (3) have been published by AAUP over the course of last year. The goal is to assist politicians (2) with high quality information and advice, and to help them see beyond the faces of the vice-chancellors and chancellors they have appointed and know

and control so well.

Politicians come and go but universities are here to stay because their autonomy is of utmost importance for the livelihood of democratic societies. These are dangerous times, not only because of COVID but because anti-democratic authoritarianism is on the rise worldwide, and increasingly in control of internet surveillance tools, inhumane forms of artificial intelligence as well as war robotics that are already being abused.

Good universities where the freedom of speech of educated citizens is protected are able to defend democracy, and that is their most important role in society: Speaking up critically when things go into the wrong direction, soberly observing the facts and following the unforced force of the better argument when providing advice untainted by money or power (2).

The military is another defense force of society, but nobody would ever dare to suggest the military should seek its own funding. However, that is exactly what has happened to our universities, and the Australian ones in particular, although they are even more important for the survival of a democratic knowledge society.

Our universities have been left with insufficient support for many years and we can now see the catastrophic consequences. However, lack of money is NOT their main problem but the fact that attention and energy have been diverted from education and scholarship into monetary goals and administrative control (4).

We must develop the social intelligence to harness the professorial ego which is essential for our academic work but can be counterproductive when only facing inwards, as we benefit in so many ways if we act collegially. I prefer to see AAUP Council as a resourceful superior intelligence, because several educated brains not only thinking of themselves can be far more productive than one, especially when working as citizens for the common good.

The membership of the *Australian Association of University Professors* (AAUP) is approaching 700 after only two years. 39 Australian universities are represented and it is run by a Council currently representing 17 Australian universities. You can join AAUP here: <https://aaupmember.org/>

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References

1 <http://www.professoriate.org/2020/03/21/statement-on-academic-freedom-the-pillars-of-a-university-what-a-university-should-be/>

2 <http://www.professoriate.org/2020/03/21/constitution-of-the-australian-association-of-university-professors-available/>

3 <http://www.professoriate.org/>

4 <http://www.professoriate.org/first-annual-conference-2021/>