

University management must serve the academic mission

Twenty Twenty-One was a busy year for the AAUP. A very important event was the launch of *Public Universities Australia* (1) for which AAUP has served as the catalyst. PUA's joint legislation committee consisting of representatives from the AAUP, the Academics for Public Universities (2), and the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (3) has delivered draft legislation (4) which is now being finalised ahead of the next federal election. Critical goals are to make the governance of Australian public universities collegial, transparent, and accountable, ensure that all academic decisions are made collegially by the academic community, that executive salaries, remuneration and fringe benefits are reasonable and fully public. Australian public universities must also provide secure, safe, non-exploitative employment and tenured academic positions as a prerequisite for the exercise of academic freedom. A PUA public campaign that will distribute the draft legislation and related information ahead of the next federal election is in preparation.

AAUP has grown to 767 members, but associate professors still form a small minority. This group is therefore especially encouraged to join the association. Younger colleagues are the future and exceeding 1,000 members will give AAUP additional influence.

AAUP's annual conference (5) was entitled *Academics in the University of the 21st Century* and organised by the James Cook University Chapter this year featuring contributions by representatives of the national professoriate organisations of Britain (6), Canada (7) and the US (8) in addition to Australia. Developing AAUP's relationship with similar organizations internationally seems advisable in the face of a number of similar problems in different parts of the Anglosphere and beyond. The NTEU (9) was invited to speak on academic freedom in Australia.

The introduction of an Ethical Framework for academics in the 21st Century (10) was another highlight of AAUP's Annual conference. Adherence to academic values such as honesty and integrity is the first priority of a university. Adherence to academic principles is what makes a university distinct and ideally distinguished. However, the reality at many Australian universities is very different. Conditions for academic work have changed considerably over the last few decades as confirmed by many professorial colleagues who have watched the decline. The many thousand redundancies forced using the excuse of the COVID pandemic have not helped in this regard.

Many universities have divested away from core principles and in some cases have effectively become property investors, often headed by non-academic leaders that operate on managerialist principles and profit above academic values and leadership. Management, whose sole role in the past was to assist academics, is now in control of university budgets of which it consumes large amounts and has effectively unlimited legal resources to protect its own position allowing the creation of its own terms of reference. Even professorial titles are now awarded by management to people who do not fulfil the normally required academic criteria. Worse, as a result of the financial pressures due to the lack of return of international students, academics are forced out, often on what appear to be spurious or fabricated arguments. Even students of senior academics are being targeted or the destruction of their careers is accepted as collateral damage. This surely must be the bottom of managerialist depravity. However, such actions need to be documented, persecuted and those responsible brought to justice whether they hold positions in human resources, university audit departments, the offices of general counsel or anywhere else. AAUP is committed to helping its members to build a trusted academic work environment which is so important for creative work. If you believe AAUP can assist, feel free to get in touch with your local chapter or send an email to aaup-australia@gmx.com .

“You cannot change people but you can change the system so that people are not pushed into doing evil things.” (11)

Therefore, improvements to the Australian University Acts have become an urgent need as ethical values will always be under high pressure where governance structures are at odds with sound values. The latter has disastrous effects on academic work as accountability based in a culture of distrust is not accountability, but coercion (12). Accordingly, PUA is working on a model university act that is to be published ahead of the next federal election, and a post-election conference in Canberra is planned towards the end of the year. Colleagues choosing to focus mainly on achieving research excellence in their specific field to the detriment of making a wider contribution (13) are encouraged to rethink and take on more responsibilities that should allow universities to cut back on administrative positions, many of which are objectively not needed. If the professoriate comes together, we can make a significant difference and get our universities back on track. Students and their teachers, professors in particular, form the core of every university and management must serve the academic mission.

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References

- (1) Public Universities Australia (PUA) <https://puau.org/>
- (2) Academics for Public Universities (APU) <https://publicuniversities.org/about/>
- (3) Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) <http://www.capa.edu.au/>
- (4) <https://onlyo.co/3rzdkzq>
- (5) <http://www.professoriate.org/second-annual-conference-17-february-2022/>
- (6) National Conference of University Professors <http://www.ncup.org.uk/>
- (7) Canadian Association of University Teachers <https://www.caut.ca>
- (8) American Association of University Professors <http://www.aaup.org/>
- (9) National Tertiary Education Union <http://www.nteu.org.au/>
- (10) Ethical framework for academics <http://www.professoriate.org/draft-professional-ethical-framework-for-australian-academics-v3-1/>
- (11) Slavoj Žižek
- (12) Cited in Kimber, Megan & Ehrich, Lisa (2015) Are Australia's universities in deficit? A tale of generic managers, audit culture and casualisation. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 37(1), pp. 83-97.
- (13) The role of Professors <https://usap.sydney.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/role-of-professors.pdf>