

Reclaiming our universities

Universities are the places in society where academic values are protected and academic principles rule. This used to be the international consensus for many years but there have been aggressive attempts in the new millennium to change this idea.

Corporatization which pursues its own goals at the expense of academic quality turns out to be the main problem of our Australian universities at the moment.

It is apparently not uncommon now, especially in the Australian university system, to have offices of general counsel supporting management practices which leave principled academics in a very vulnerable position. There are no official data on this malpractice according to our knowledge but there is sufficient anecdotal evidence to be extremely concerned. Personal submissions to the Tasmanian inquiry into the Provisions of the University of Tasmania Act¹ speak volumes of management abuses that would not have been thinkable a few decades ago.

Moreover, to cite the example of the University of Sydney, we know of a number of submissions to the New South Wales Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) by senior academics that were not investigated, apparently for political reasons and to protect management². In fact, we are not aware of a single submission by academics of the University of Sydney that has been investigated by NSW ICAC whereas at least one submission by the management of the University of Sydney which concerned a comparatively minor and academically irrelevant matter was investigated. Similarly, the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) does not seem willing to investigate alleged criminal activity in a university environment.

It is safe to say that Australian university managers who target whistle-blowers are not deterred by the existing whistle-blowing legislation, and we are beginning to understand why this is the case. It is also clear that this must change.

The AAUP was founded to promote academic values based on the understanding that the professoriate has a major responsibility as an enforcer of academic standards at universities. This has become the more important in recent years as many contemporary university managers although at least nominally of academic background prioritize their salaries which are excessive in international comparisons over academic principles. The latter seems to be a key reason for why the Australian universities are finding themselves in dire conditions. It is not logically possible to serve two masters. We need a moral elite to run our universities, colleagues who deserve respect because they have earned it by demonstrating academic excellence. Such excellence includes but is not limited to personal honesty and integrity, scholarly achievements, and collegiality. Everyone in a university leadership role should meet these criteria. There is no place for socio- and psychopaths. Democratic election of all academic leadership positions can solve the current leadership problems which have disastrous effects on the academic culture at our universities. A viable academic culture is essential because it enables free discourse and stimulates creativity. Especially managers should appreciate this as it is well known that strategic plans are pointless if there is no healthy culture amongst staff that can carry them through.

Authoritarianism, which is typically demonstrated by weak managers, needs to be pushed back and eliminated from our universities. It creates a toxic environment that is not conducive to good work. There are appalling examples even of junior academics and students being targeted by managers aiming to go after the juniors' supervisor. Such behaviour represents the nadir of managerialist depravity in our view.

The abovementioned issues are already serious but the problems at our universities are exacerbated by the fact that Australian politicians and now also university managements rely heavily on what is best described as "paid fixers", i.e., commercial consultants that offer little or no real expertise in exchange for

significant amounts of money because it is not true expertise that is wanted but the outcomes of the "consultations" and reports they produce, which are pre-determined to achieve certain goals. Frustratingly, this also seems to apply to the recently launched Universities Accord from which AAUP and PUA (below) have been de facto excluded as they were not admitted as members of the ministerial reference group. However, considering the state of the Australian higher education system, this may be taken as a compliment and should encourage us to continue working for true reform such as the university model act³.

AAUP has been very active over the last year helping to organize Public Universities Australia (PUA) and numerous meetings were held with the various stakeholders who together represent the overwhelming majority of the Australian Higher Education sector. Several publications and submissions including to the federal Senate and the Government were the result of this productive collaboration which is growing.

The joint submission of the Australian Association of von Humboldt Fellows (AAvHF) and the AAUP to the ARC Review states that the ARC Board should be democratically elected by those eligible to apply for ARC funding. This will be key to repairing an ailing funding system in which merit-based criteria and fair competition appear to have been gradually replaced by political allocations of money that are merely called awards. The condition of the NHMRC seems still worse as "translation" (even if there is little to be said) rather than fundamental medical research has become its mantra. It is alarming to see that young academics are openly asked to adjust to these trends. Some countries have better funding systems, and we should learn from them. Examples are provided in the ARC submission.

There are plans to develop new AAUP services in the future such as legal support for academics who are being attacked for defending academic values and the development of rigorously honest consultation services, to name only two.

We also need to free ourselves of absurdities that have developed in Australia such as supervisors for professors which is a *contradictio in se*. Contractual duties yes. But collegial interactions not supervision are appropriate amongst senior academics at a university.

The need to reclaim our universities for academia is urgent. Academics who do not uphold academic values and who do not follow academic principles automatically lose their academic status and do not deserve to be at a university. They need to go. This will be most effectively achieved by democratic means, i.e., an assembly in the form of Convocation (where it exists) or similar. Our professorial colleagues at University of New England are showing the way and others will hopefully follow. Democratic societies depend on functioning strong and autonomous universities.

The AAUP constitution specifies a maximum of three successive terms for the president, and I therefore wish the next president great success and maximum support from our membership. Our next AGM will take place shortly.

It has been a privilege to serve.

10 March 2023

Manuel B. Graeber
AAUP President

References

¹ <https://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/ctee/council/LC%20Select%20-%20University%20of%20Tasmania.html>

² <https://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/ctee/council/Transcripts/UTAS/LCS%20UTAS%20Inquiry%206%20December%202022.pdf>

³ <https://puau.org/model-act/>