

## **The Devaluation of Academic Excellence: When 'Professor' Becomes a Management Title**

Many Australian universities are now being run by managers with little or no significant academic standing or expertise, yet they still call themselves 'Professors'. This misleading appropriation of the 'Professor' title by university managers must stop.

This is an issue of presentation that should concern us all. The title 'Professor' at a university has a long history, the precise meaning of which is generally understood to signify academic quality and not merely managerial power, status, or vanity. Traditionally it indicated that the individual so named was able to demonstrate to their peers a combination of the following attributes:

1. Academic scholarship, with the earning of a doctorate/PhD as the career entry academic qualification;
2. Research publications and/or university teaching performance at sustained high level;
3. International recognition within the academic community of superior and leading contributions to a particular academic field or discipline.

Awarding the title of 'Professor' to individuals who do not have a combination of these three attributes is liable to be both confusing and deceptive. The Australian public should be able to rely upon the title as confirmation of a level of academic expertise, quality, and performance in those who carry it.

In the same way that the title of ship's captain recognises a level of formal qualification and the associated training and experience needed to safely run a ship, the rank of 'Professor' should identify those individuals who are appropriately qualified and trained to lead academic units, be they disciplines, departments, faculties or the entirety of universities. But the title of 'Professor' is now losing its meaning, as University management increasingly makes deceptive use of it.

University managers without any academic training or experience have for some time been appropriating the professor title, with apparent disregard for academic qualifications or achievement. Increasingly there are also academics who are awarded the professor title together with a senior management role, but in absence of the scholarly achievement normally required for that status.

In both cases, the misuse of the professorial title serves to mask the failure in governance, quality control, accountability and judicious resource allocation, not to mention self-enrichment through grossly inflated executive salaries. Far-reaching academic decisions are increasingly made without senior academic competence, expertise and true commitment to the provision of quality education as one of the highest public goods.

The systematic weakening of the university's academic mission to provide research and education at the highest level undermines the very fabric of academic integrity within universities and thereby the basis for trust in the Australian Higher Education system as whole. This class of faux-professors are running Australian universities aground, in the same way someone playing 'Captain' without the appropriate nautical qualifications would run a real ship aground.

Our higher education sector is grappling with serious governance deficiencies around academic integrity and credibility. The anomaly of managers who are professors in nothing more than name, is both a symptom and an underlying cause of those deficiencies. It is thus time to stop the non-academic practice of making the 'Professor' title little more than a perk for University managers.