



A Manifesto for the Reform of Public Universities in Australia¹

Academic Principles for Action:

- 1 - Enshrine and protect academic values and freedom to debate contesting ideas collegially as the guiding principle of the university.
- 2 - Put the governance of universities predominantly in the hands of well-credentialled scholars.
- 3 - Foster mutual respect between the academic and the wider communities, enacting a shared role in guiding university management.
- 4 - Entrust the autonomous expertise of academics with freedom to teach and conduct research as they best know how.
- 5 - Provide suitable venues for disciplinary and cross-disciplinary interaction.
- 6 - Engender respect and tolerance for different worldviews and beliefs.
- 7 - Create a tolerant environment recognising all members of the academic community, with equity of opportunity for excellence by all, including students, emeritus scholars and alumni.
- 8 - Respect each University's unique tradition for excellence in providing options for industry to enhance humanity's future in a sustaining global environment.

Preamble

Increasingly, in recent years, the shift from collegial governance to hierarchical corporate management has restricted the freedom of scholarship in Australian universities. No longer is the education of our young people principally seen as an investment in the future well being of the nation. Education and the roles of the university as an autonomous community of scholars committed to creating and disseminating knowledge, and in serving as a deep reservoir of expertise for the nation to draw upon, have been subjugated to immediate financial profitability. Universities have lost academic integrity.

This corporatisation and loss in integrity is detrimental to the disciplined, informed, open inquiry and innovation which universities have promoted, guiding the intellectual development of human society for millennia, helping to shape the liberal-democratic modern world. Too often, modelling based on a consensus is substituted for creative hypotheses that can be tested against observable real-world data. The fundamental commitment to seeking the truth, irrespective of how inconvenient or unpopular it may be, has been lost. Such disrespect for the well proven traditions of scholarship has often resulted in overturning "truths" rather than in advancing them.

Underpinning this disrespect for scholarship and truth, is increasingly authoritarian abuse of

¹ This is a slightly edited version of the USAP Manifesto at https://usap.sydney.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Action_Manifesto_for_the_Reform_of_Public_Universities_in_Australia.pdf

academics and students by university management that is dissociated from the academic mission, sometimes allowing bullying and harassment with casual disregard for truth based on reason rather than emotion. The University as an autonomous community of scholars teaching students must be restored.

How can this unproductive university management be reformed?

Promote human agency for scholarship in research and teaching

Regardless of each person's identity or cultural background, all must have the freedom to contribute the best of themselves to society. Furthermore, everyone has the inherent right to be supported in developing their character, intellect and expertise. For those in academia, methods of research and teaching are inseparably bound and should be practiced together, so students should not be taught in regimented ways. This kind of well-rounded practice should seek to provide a diverse, enriched environment for teaching.

Our Action Manifesto

So how should the governing principles be prescribed?

1 - Enshrine and protect academic values and freedom to debate contesting ideas collegially as the guiding principle of the university.

Core academic values and freedom to debate contesting ideas include: rigour in expertise; commitment to advancing and promulgating knowledge; collegiality; freedom of speech; robust intellectual discourse; freedom of academic research; and truth in all academic work. Understanding must be based on empirical facts and reason, rather than emotion. New schools of thought and innovation tested robustly should be possible.

2 - Put the governance of universities predominantly in the hands of well-credentialled scholars.

Vice-chancellors or Presidents and their deputies must excel in disciplinary scholarship, operating with suitable management expertise and advice; they should be nominated for selection with major input and ownership by the academic professoriate. Restoration of an elected academic professorial board with ability to promote genuine academic values is essential to the University's autonomous future. The AAUP can recommend suitable candidates for Vice-chancellors or Presidents who are willing to fulfil these roles on a salary that is no more than double the average Level E professor salary.

3 - Foster mutual respect between the academic and the wider communities, enacting a shared role in guiding university management.

Through its role in research and education for life and as an interactive public forum between 'town and gown', and the country at large, the university should justify it is worthwhile supporting publicly. We can advance knowledge collectively through interactive use of its facilities, such as public lectures and community debates.

4 - Entrust the autonomous expertise of academics with freedom to teach and conduct research as they best know how.

Academic appointments should always be chosen from the best applying, free to develop their discipline and given adequate infrastructure and financial resources. For grievances from poor management, such as lack of sufficient support, harassment or bullying, a visible mechanism (or

ombudsman) for independent hearing, accountability and reconciliation should be available. Management must serve the academic mission and adequate time, funds and support for research, teaching and administrative tasks must be guaranteed.

5 - Provide suitable venues for disciplinary and cross-disciplinary interaction.

Such venues should facilitate interaction in disciplinary departments and with the public in clubs or designated social meeting places. Management must guarantee adequate time and funds for such interaction, providing mentoring, testing of ideas and intellectual developments. Many breakthroughs and innovations arise from such informal ambiance and serendipity.

6 - Engender respect and tolerance for different worldviews and beliefs.

Tolerance and due respect for culture should be enshrined in a code-of-practice. Grievances are best solved by the principle that prevention is better than cure or issues resolved, if possible, discreetly. However, for disrespect of diversity, an appeal to a neutral inspector for support or to an ombudsman may be required.

7 - Create a tolerant environment recognising all members of the academic community, with equity of opportunity for excellence by all, including students, emeritus scholars and alumni.

From students through to current and emeritus academics and alumni, recognise all the key agents who deliver the work of the University, and acknowledge this work publicly in a collegiate and cooperative manner. Credit all those involved in significant achievements, particularly by junior staff. Freely volunteered, all such services and exercises of wisdom should be respected by practical support. That is, rather than dwelling on past grievances, we must look to the future.

8 - Respect each University's unique tradition for excellence in providing options for industry to enhance humanity's future in a sustaining global environment.

Collectively, all universities can value their diversity of heritage, but by promoting mobility in scholarly expertise with equity of opportunity for diversity, which develop options for a productive human future. Respect should be encouraged to the philosophers and practitioners of all scholarly disciplines in the evolution of human intelligence and culture. There is room for all in discussions, though with reason guiding emotion.

Confirmation by universities of their action manifesto performance

Responsible university management should consciously comply with all the principles enunciated above. National needs for professional expertise should be considered, never using a system of increasing gross net income to abolish faculties or for minimum class size. The criteria for management performance should be collectively, transparently and critically assessed by academics, and revised on a regular schedule, ensuring improvement of universities.