



AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS

www.professoriate.org

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RESTORE ACADEMIC INTEGRITY THROUGH PARTICIPATORY UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE

Saving Australia's Universities from Failing in their Public Mission

Universities are the engine of our society's progress, cultural understanding, and innovation. They are essential for democracy and the place where human intelligence and morals can be cultivated. They must be places where curiosity drives discovery, truth is pursued without fear, and knowledge serves the public good. Today, that mission is under threat. The **Australian Association of University Professors (AAUP)** is calling for urgent and comprehensive structural reform to restore accountable academic leadership, transparency, and integrity across Australian higher education institutions.

WHO WE ARE

The AAUP is an independent, non-partisan body representing over 700 academics across all Australian universities. Our members include **85% full professors**, scientists, artists, medical experts, lawyers, sociologists, economists and other scholars whose expertise has been developed over decades. ***We are the frontline practising academics who research, teach and witness firsthand the systemic breakdowns plaguing our sector.*** We are speaking out and standing up to alert the public and to defend academic freedom, uphold scholarly standards, and ensure universities are led by accomplished scholars who represent the university staff and student community and who are committed to society's best interests.

THE CRISIS: GOVERNANCE FAILURE & LOSS OF TRUST

University governance has shifted dangerously away from collegial, academic guidance and peer-accountability towards a mainly profit-oriented top-down “business” model. This change is causing widespread harm:

- **Corporate Takeover:** Governance positions are now largely held by managers with little to no regard for academic values, academic training or accomplishment. Academics are regularly excluded from decisions that directly impact the key drivers of university quality, i.e., research and teaching.
- **Erosion of Core Values:** Collegiality, rigorous inquiry, and freedom of speech are being abandoned. Misconduct is rising as overpaid management prioritises personal profit and careers over the public good.
- **Waste of National Capital:** Generations of academic investment are being eradicated by reckless restructuring to finance a ballooning senior and middle management. This destruction imposes a heavy burden on future generations who must rebuild what has been lost.
- **Silencing Whistleblowers:** Academics who expose misconduct or state uncomfortable truths face victimisation and job loss. This not only inverts justice by protecting those responsible for malpractice but stifles innovation and teaching quality. Senator Sheldon has correctly described Australian universities as a “lawless sector”.
- **Misuse of confidentiality and GIPA (Government Information (Public Access) Act):** Current practices suggest that GIPA provisions may be utilised in ways that support non-disclosure rather than transparency. When decision-making authority regarding information access rests with the same levels of management subject to scrutiny, there is a very obvious risk of bias or coordinated obstruction of information release. To maintain public trust, applicants must be guaranteed protection from victimisation or power abuse when exercising their right to access government information. A mechanism for independent oversight of GIPA refusals is recommended to avoid conflicts of interest.
- **Dangerous Tech Adoption:** The uncritical adoption of AI tools, driven by management rather than academic expertise, threatens the quality of education and research integrity. Academics must control academic policy, including technology integration.

AAUP's VISION: UNIVERSITIES FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD, NOT INFLUENCED BY PERSONAL FINANCIAL PROFIT OR SHORTSIGHTED POLITICKING

Universities are not just service providers; they are communities of scholars dedicated to truthfulness. We strongly recommend a focus on **collegial governance led by accomplished senior academics** who have the trust and respect of the wider community. **That is, a participatory democratic model where all substantive decision-making roles, from Council/Senate to academic leadership at the department level, are filled through election by the university community**, with administrative staff returning to functions that support a university's academic mission¹.

Higher Education needs to be re-professionalised: We must clearly distinguish the **academic profession** from **management roles**. Academics possess unique expertise in knowledge creation and transmission that cannot be replicated by corporate managers. Management should support operations, but academic affairs - including curriculum development, research standards, and ethical AI use - must be led by academics. This distinction is enshrined in our published *Professional Ethical Framework for Australian Academics*². The entire Australian university management system must be aligned with the public interest, not personal *profit or political short term goals*.

THE AAUP AGENDA TO REPAIR THE AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

To restore trust and protect Australia's intellectual future, the AAUP proposes a comprehensive set of reforms supported by legislation. We invite the public and media to support these actions:

URGENT ACTION REQUIRED

- **Royal Commission into University Governance:** A national inquiry is essential to document governance failures, investigate allegations of law breaches and whistleblower victimisation, and to enact legislative changes. Current management-initiated "reforms" are cosmetic; we need independent scrutiny.
- **Democratise Governance:** End the corporate monopoly on decision-making. Councils must have a **majority of academic members elected by the university community**. All senior management positions should be filled through democratic

¹ REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES INQUIRY INTO NEW SOUTH WALES UNIVERSITY SECTOR At Macquarie Room, Parliament House, Sydney, on Monday 13 July 2026 (Hansard)

² <https://www.professoriate.org/aaup-professional-ethical-framework-for-australian-academics-3/>

election and agreement by the academic collective, ensuring leaders are accountable to the academic and public mission, not just certain financial market interests.

- **Embed Academic Values in Law:** State Acts must require universities to operate according to core academic values: 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. This will provide a legal basis to contest decisions that undermine the academic mission.
- **Removal of GIPA Administration from University Management:** To ensure transparency and independence, GIPA administration should be removed from internal University management.
- **Strengthen Accountability & Integrity of the System:** The NACC (National Anti-Corruption Commission) and NSW ICAC (Independent Commission Against Corruption) should reopen and thoroughly investigate complaints against university managements, holding individuals personally accountable for abuses of power, financial misconduct, fraud, and the deliberate entrenchment of their positions at the expense of others. Those found responsible should be barred from holding future leadership roles and subject to substantial personal financial penalties and any other appropriate sanctions.

PROTECTING ACADEMICS & STUDENTS

- **Criminalise Damage to Academic Units:** Recognise academic departments as public infrastructure. Willful or negligent destruction of academic units through reckless and continuous restructuring must face criminal penalties.
- **Strengthen Whistleblower Protections:** Rectify the burden of proof situation: the onus must be on institutions to demonstrate conclusively that any actions taken against a whistleblower following their disclosure are not reprisals. Introduce penalties for oversight bodies that fail to investigate managers who retaliate and establish a **Federal Academic Ombudsman** to enforce compliance.
- **Academic Freedom & Integrity Committees:** Enshrine academic freedom in legislation and create independent committees to oversee its protection, ensuring that dissenting views and critical inquiry are safe within universities.
- **Introduce tenure for full professors** as in other countries and legislate a requirement for academic board approval before a full professor can be dismissed.

TRANSPARENCY & ACCOUNTABILITY

- **Salary Caps & Transparency:** Cap Vice-Chancellor and executive salaries at **no more than twice a professorial salary**. Require full disclosure of remuneration

details. Stop the proliferation of non-academic roles that drain resources from core university mission activities.

- **Open Governance:** Mandate open council and senate meetings with published agendas, minutes, and voting records. Universities must report to Parliament and TEQSA on how expenditures align with academic values.
- **Collaborative Decision-Making:** Major structural changes require consultation and votes by affected academic staff. No organisation can preserve its academic mission if the majority of members who know best are excluded from resource allocation decisions.
- **Independent Audits:** Mandate independent financial and ethical audits, with AAUP representation permitted in Fair Work Commission and ombudsman matters to ensure outcomes that are in line with academic values.

The AAUP is ready to collaborate with government and the public to implement genuine change, starting one institution at a time. We stand for the principles that have refined the university ethos over 1,000 years: the pursuit of truth, the transmission of knowledge, and service to society. **Let us restore the soul of Australian universities!**

Academic freedom is not merely an academic issue; it is a democratic imperative. When universities are free to question power and seek truth without fear, all of society benefits.

GET INVOLVED

- **Support AAUP's Call for a Royal Commission** into university governance.
- **Demand Transparency:** Ask your local MP about executive salaries and governance reforms in universities.
- **Learn More:** Review our *Professional Ethical Framework* and the 10 Pillars of a University³ at our website.
- **Contact Us:** aaup_council@professoriate.org

³ <https://www.professoriate.org/constitution/>