

**SUBMISSION  
OF THE  
AUSTRALIAN UNION OF STUDENTS  
FOR THE  
HIGHER EDUCATION REVIEW**

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# **SUBMISSION FROM**

## **AUSTRALIAN UNION OF STUDENTS**

The Australian Union of Students ([www.students.org.au](http://www.students.org.au)) was formed in response to a situation where the student unions set up by university councils were not representing the views of the silent majority of students. Mainstream students realised that contesting elections of official student associations was a waste of time due to elections being rigged to favour candidates supported by the university council. Their response was to set up the Australian Union of Students, which is completely independent of university councils.

Getting academics to conduct a review of higher education is rather like getting prisoners to conduct a review of corrective services. The reviewers will see things from a worms eye perspective and won't appreciate the proper place of academics in the overall scheme of things. There is a danger that the reviewers will manufacture a very large document filled with pretty graphs that will sit on a library shelf gathering dust, like 99 percent of the other output of Australian universities.

The academics who were selected to conduct this review were probably selected because they condescended to socialise with the Minister back when she was a nobody. Now that she is enjoying her ten minutes of fame, she is returning the favour, before she goes back to obscurity where she belongs. Notwithstanding the dubious circumstances leading to their appointment, there is the chance that the reviewers can deliver some substantial and lasting benefits to society, as long as they remember that their function is to deliver a "log of claims" or "wish list" to the Minister on behalf of academics and students.

Returning to our prisoner analogy, Solzhenitsyn has told of a research project undertaken by academics imprisoned in a Soviet concentration camp. Stalin was particularly interested in the project, so the slave labourer in charge was summoned to an interview with the Deputy Minister for Armaments responsible for the project. The Minister wanted to know what could be done to expedite the project, and clearly had the power and the willingness to grant any request. The academic responded that everything was fine. When he got back to his concentration camp, and told everyone what had happened, the other academics said, "We don't have any tea to drink. Why didn't you ask him for some tea?" They were very cross that their leader had passed up this chance to improve conditions for them.

Our concern is that the reviewers, in their desire to manufacture a large document, will forget that this is their opportunity to ask the Minister for some tea, as it were, on behalf of their colleagues and students who are counting on them. This is not an academic exercise but an exercise in advocacy. As we see it, the reviewers' report should be 5 to 10 pages in length and should expound a plan without giving reasons. The audience for the report are politicians not academics and are not influenced by rational argument. The following points are our suggested contribution to the "wish list" (we don't condescend to respond to the stupid questions in the discussion paper):

## **1. The Selection Method for University Courses.**

At present, students are selected for courses on the basis of so-called academic merit and interviews. In theory students can also get into courses if they pay the full fee, but the universities have nullified this avenue by insisting full fee students get a tertiary entrance rank almost as great as students who get in on the basis of academic merit. The rationale for interviews is to weed out students who don't have appropriate social skills for professions such as medicine.

Our association regards interviews as arbitrary and discriminatory. We believe the same end can be accomplished through a requirement that candidates for university entrance must complete and submit a Sports Log Book, with entries indicating participation in matches of an approved team sport. We also think it fair that students should be able to get into courses by paying the full fee, even if they have a much lower entrance rank.

## **2. The Content of the University Entrance Course.**

At present, students can get into university by studying courses in Years 11 and 12 such as Art and Home Economics. To the way of thinking of mainstream students, instead of spending two years at school studying Home Economics, it would be more productive to go to TAFE for two years to study to be a chef. Students should only stay on for Years 11 and 12 if they are going to university. If they stay on, they should study rigorous subjects. The Year 11 and Year 12 syllabus should be English, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, and two foreign languages. The university entrance qualification should be the International Baccalaureate.

At the same time, TAFE graduates should be encouraged to go to university. It should be possible to study Year 11 and Year 12 at TAFE in any city in Australia. At present it is only possible to study Year 11 and Year 12 in some cities like Sydney, and even then it is not possible to get into courses such as medicine.

## **3. The Governance of Universities**

At present, universities are run by University Councils appointed by State Governments. The criterion for appointment seems to be the same as for appointment to the British House of Lords, that is, for services to the governing political party. University Council members are typically low calibre power-brokers who wish to use the university for purposes unconnected with the advancement of knowledge.

Our association would have Commonwealth funded universities registered under a Universities Act, which would make them into corporations of the Australian Capital Territory. Universities would be under direct ministerial control in the same manner as the CSIRO and TAFE colleges. Vice-Chancellors would report to a Director-General of Higher Education.

Academic freedom is not about university councils being free to waste taxpayers' money on a scale that exceeds that of ATSI. Academic freedom is about intellectuals like Galileo or Freud not being locked up at Guantanamo Bay for writing a book saying that "the Earth revolves around the Sun" or that "all children start out bisexual and some end up as homosexuals due to improper socialisation".

#### **4. The Organisational Culture of Universities**

At present, Australian universities have a culture that is completely antagonistic to their social function. Students have a sense that the university is not the place where it is all happening, or an exciting place to be. On the contrary, they have a sense that nobody attending such a place is ever likely to amount to much. They have a sense that the place where it is all happening is far away, in America or somewhere.

In the review committee's discussion paper, they have referred to a study by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne. The study purports to find that Australian students are very content with their universities. The authors would have people believe that Australian universities are not responsible for Australia having one of the highest rates of youth suicide in the world.

Our association questions the methods employed by the academics carrying out the study. Questionnaires were mailed to a randomly selected one percent of students at certain selected universities. Only about a fifth of the students responded. It was assumed that this one-fifth who responded were representative of the sample. However it may well have been that students who were discontented with the university were completely cynical about the survey and thought the universities would do as they wanted anyway, regardless of the results of the survey.

The survey results would have carried a lot more weight if the figures had not been aggregated, but had been broken down according to such factors as how well the respondents had done in the Year 11 and Year 12 examinations. Who cares if students who came in the bottom 50 percent of the state academically are happy with the way universities are run? They are supposed to be going to TAFE. Another factor that should have been looked at is whether the respondents were studying TAFE type courses, hobby type courses, or professional type courses. Once again, who cares if nurses and sociology students are happy with their universities? They are not going to invent a vaccine against cervical cancer.

There is also the credibility of the researchers at this Centre for the Study of Higher Education. Essentially what they were doing was an exercise in market research. We rather doubt that multinational companies are beating a path to the door of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education in an effort to poach their staff. Our suggestion that the research was amateurish is substantiated by the failure of the questionnaire to look at how well the respondents did at school, what courses the respondents were doing, and how they thought about the university five years after they graduated and realised their degree wasn't worth the paper it was printed on.

## **5. The Geographical Location of Universities**

At present, Australian universities are located in the major cities. In Britain and America, universities were traditionally located in remote towns where the university is the main economic concern in the town, such as Cambridge or Princeton. There are too many people in Australian capital cities, leading to high housing costs, long commuting times, and a high energy consumption to transport students from home to university. A university is the type of economic concern that can be relocated from a capital city to a remote town.

There are advantages in having a university close to where a student lives with his/her parents. One advantage is that students can live with their parents, saving them huge amounts of money. Another advantage is that the parents can act as “moral tutors” and counteract the negativity of the dysfunctional university culture. But these are advantages only because of the unsatisfactory way in which universities are run at present.

We would have no universities at all in the cities. Rather we would have them relocated to country towns. This would have the added benefit that universities would be housed in modern, energy-efficient buildings rather than buildings designed with penny-pinching as the primary consideration. Students would live in apartments in multi-storey buildings. Each apartment would have a bedroom, a living room, a bathroom, and a study. Each apartment building would have a dining hall where meals would be available at no extra cost.

## **6. The Renumeration of Students**

There is a view that it is desirable for students to be impoverished so that, after they have graduated and are rich and famous, they will sympathise with those less fortunate. While this sounds reasonable, there is no evidence former impoverished students have any sympathy for the poor. In any case it is the aim of Australian society not to have poor people. By not paying students a reasonable salary, the result is that students drop out or get lower grades and have a more superficial understanding of the subject.

Part of the opposition to paying students adequately is the belief that they are not doing anything worthwhile, and in many cases this is so. But most people would agree that a student who has an international baccalaureate and is studying a course for a traditional profession such as engineering is deserving of generous assistance. If the government spends an extra \$40,000 on an engineering student, so that the student gets grades of “A” instead of “C”, this \$40,000 is likely to be recouped in higher taxes within ten years.

The review committee has asked in its discussion paper for any evidence in support of the proposition that having students spending more time on study and less time on part-time jobs will lead to them getting higher marks. Such a question makes one wonder about the background of the review committee members. Have any of them invented a drug that will save millions of lives? Have any of them written a book that will be read a hundred years from now, or even ten years from now? Maybe not, but perhaps there are students working in menial part-time jobs that will. Or maybe they will drop out of university because they don't like the humiliation of living in extreme poverty.

## **7. The Demarcation between Universities and TAFE Colleges**

Universities are increasingly taking over the functions of TAFE Colleges. For example, the University of Tasmania has absorbed the Australian Maritime College, so that the university is now in the business of issuing marine engine driver tickets. This merger has led to drastic reduction in the prestige of both institutions. These mergers are driven by the belief that TAFE Colleges are for second-rate people and hence that there should be no TAFE Colleges and everyone should go to university. They are also driven by a desire on the part of TAFE Head Teachers to acquire the title of Professor.

In Australia, being a Professor is equivalent to a peerage in Britain. If Steve Irwin had lived in Britain, he would have been made "Lord Irwin of Beerwah, for services to crocodile wrestling". But because he lived in Australia, if he hadn't been killed by a "gorgeous stingray", he would have undoubtedly been appointed "Professor Steve Irwin, Professor of Reptile Movement Studies".

The proper demarcation between the two types of institution is that a TAFE College is concerned with the "state of the art" and the "real world", while a university is concerned with improvements in existing methods and in a hypothetical "dream world" of the future. Therefore "a university for the real world" is a contradiction in terms.

Our association advocates that universities would be open only to students training for the traditional professions. All non-professional courses such as nursing would be the responsibility of TAFE Colleges. The Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science degrees would be only available to aspiring teachers, and would include a component relating to teaching. There would be no Bachelor of Education. Most students who currently study for Bachelor of Science would instead study for Bachelor of Engineering. Someone wanting to become a public servant would study either law (Bachelor of Laws) or accountancy (Bachelor of Commerce) or teaching (Bachelor of Arts). Upon admission to a professional association, a BCom would be upgraded to a MBA, just as an Oxford B.A. is upgraded to a M.A.

TAFE Colleges would be located in the cities, so could use the premises vacated by universities when they move to remote rural areas as we have proposed. For example, the Camperdown campus of the University of Sydney would become part of the Sydney Institute of Technology.

## **8. Distance Education**

At present in Australia there are only three professional courses available by distance education, that is, Law, Teaching and Accountancy. There is scope for increasing distance education. People will then be able to work part-time in a capital city and study for a university degree part-time. Or a student can live with his/her parents in a capital city and study for a university degree by distance education. Distance education has the advantage of being very economical. If academics were paying a university's operating costs out of their own pockets, this advantage might carry some weight with them.

Distance education is not restricted to such courses as Law or Architecture. Even Medicine could be taught in large part by distance education. A MBBS degree could be restructured so there is four years of distance education, or eight years part-time, followed by two years where full-time attendance at the university is required. There is no reason to think that a medical degree taught in this way would be inferior to a conventional medical degree. We confess we do not have any evidence to substantiate this proposition.

## **9. The Role of Student Associations**

In part the role of a student association is to act as a trade union for students, communicating the concerns of students to the university administration. But the role of student associations is also to act as a educational organisation and impart students with a sense that they are in an exciting place where it is all happening. Student associations cannot perform this function if they are hijacked by minority groups who wish to use the student association as a vehicle to promote ideologies which are antagonistic to the values of the majority of students and their parents.

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