



EXPERT COUNCIL ON UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE

April 2025

University of the Sunshine Coast submission

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Introduction

The University of the Sunshine Coast (UniSC) is pleased to provide a submission to the Expert Council on University Governance.

Our submission focuses on governance experiences at UniSC and offers suggestions for improvement in terms of state-based founding legislation, professionalisation of university governance bodies, and balancing accountability with autonomy.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our submission in further detail. If this is of interest, please contact the Office of the Vice-Chancellor and President on [REDACTED]

About UniSC

Since opening our doors in 1996, UniSC has grown to be a vibrant and globally recognised institution founded on the idea of serving its regions and transforming lives through learning and knowledge. Our growth has been rapid, reaching 19,000 students in 2025. We have achieved remarkable success in equity, diversity, and inclusion, and have had a significant impact in our regions, generating productivity, innovation, educational participation, and incredible social and economic benefit.

Today, our award-winning facilities span five campuses across Southeast Queensland, an area of unique geographical importance. UniSC is the world's only university with campuses on three connecting UNESCO biosphere reserves, including the World Heritage Listed K'gari. At the end of 2024, UniSC also opened a new campus in Adelaide, in partnership with a leading education provider, offering students an expanded choice of study locations and further enhancing the University's national presence.

Our vision, to create a better tomorrow, expresses a sincere and long-standing commitment to making a positive difference in the lives of others. Our purpose, to transform lives through learning and knowledge in every place we operate and with every community we serve, describes our focus on genuine collaboration with our communities, taking a place-based approach that appreciates the unique character of our own university campuses and their social, cultural, and environmental landscape.

We are proud to be Queensland's leading public university for undergraduate overall educational experience, and number two in Australia for postgraduate teaching quality. The Good Universities Guide 2024/25 awarded us five-star ratings in key areas including teaching quality, overall educational experience, learning resources, skills development, social equity, student support and learner engagement.

UniSC has also become a global champion for sustainability, recognised by the Times Higher Education Impact Ranking as the top-ranked Queensland university. UniSC ranked first place in Queensland in categories – Zero Hunger and Climate Action – and among the top four percent of universities around the world for impact. We are committed to driving meaningful progress toward the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Our partner engagement and research focus is on sustainability, social and environmental justice, addressing global challenges, expanding strategic partnerships, deepening connections in the Asia-Pacific, and enhancing our global reputation through key strategies. Over the next ten years, we aspire to be globally recognised as a leader in applied research addressing key challenges to ensure healthy people and a healthy planet to improve lives, communities and the environment.

1. Governance improvements

Consistent with requirements under the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021, standard 6.1.3 (d) requires periodic independent reviews of the effectiveness of the governing body and academic governance processes. In meeting this requirement, most recently in 2023, UniSC engaged an experienced external consultancy firm to conduct a review of our Council and aspects of the University's governance and make recommendations for improvement. Apart from the Threshold Standard requirements as they relate to governance, the 2023 review was also guided by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) Guidance Note: Corporate Governance, and the requirements of the Universities Chancellors' Committee (UCC) 2018 Voluntary Code of Best Practice for the Governance of Australian Public Universities (superseded by UCC December 2024 version).

The final report concluded that UniSC's Council is performing well, and the reviewers considered that the Council has sound structures, policies and processes in place for it to effectively perform its role. Further, the reviewers acknowledged that UniSC's Council members are committed to the University and that this is driven by a clear and shared agreement on the University's purpose and its success. Even so, several recommendations were made, which we have been actively addressing, and some of which align with the Education Ministers' ten priority areas and risks identified in the Australian Universities Accord. As such, we are progressing well with implementing a range of actions to strengthen our capacity to address issues including industrial relations compliance, workforce management and student safety. A renewal of our Council membership and guidelines for Council member remuneration is also underway.

UniSC, like other Australian public universities, faces the challenge of being established under state legislation while also subject to federal government regulation. The University recognises the importance of identifying and implementing opportunities for harmonisation in governance and regulation to promote accountability, uphold high standards, and provide safeguards and avenues for recourse when necessary, while at the same time, UniSC values the benefits of maintaining flexibility and preserving institutional autonomy.

We have also reflected on the importance of further professionalising our governance committees to enhance standards, be proactive in responding to increased public scrutiny of institutions and embed robust accountability structures.

Based on specific recommendations by the independent review of UniSC's Council to consider changing its composition (in terms of both size and membership), and the most appropriate timing for when it might advocate for this change, and to introduce remuneration for members, we provide the following examples of where we believe governance improvements could be made across the sector.

1.1 Less prescriptive state-based founding legislation

Our current state-based founding legislation does not fully support UniSC's mission and strategic ambitions in respect of membership size and composition. There are two specific issues arising from the Queensland Government legislation currently, both with potential for amendment.

The first issue relates to the minimum requirements for Council/Senate Membership and Categories of Membership. Currently, the legislation requires UniSC to appoint an 18-member Council. This is a very large governing Council for the size of the university, creating ongoing challenges for the recruitment of appropriate Council members and maximising the effectiveness of Council meetings. Recruitment of members is guided by the Council's skills-mix framework, but for an outer metropolitan and regional university, finding the necessary level of skills and experience in our locations is not always easy. Appointing out-of-state members may be successful but can also create

challenges for attending Council meetings in person, travel and accommodation costs, and lack of connection with our communities.

A possible solution would be to reduce the Council membership size and for the legislation to require not less than 12 Council members comprised of:

- Three Official Members (e.g., Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Chair of Academic Board); and
- Not less than three Government-appointed Members, three Elected Members (Staff, Students) and three Additional Members

This approach would:

- Facilitate the appropriate representation of skills, experiences, and interest groups aligned with the University's mission and strategy.
- Ensure that the governing body comprises a balanced mix of independent members, staff representatives, student voices, and external experts.
- Ensure that the governing body provides broad oversight and informed decision-making by drawing on its expertise across corporate and academic governance spectrums (e.g. higher education, community engagement, finance, health/medicine, property and infrastructure, IT, law, and business).

There are precedents for the review and modification of university Acts, for example, the University of Tasmania's enacting legislation has been modified in 2001, 2004 and 2012 to ensure "the Act supports a contemporary governance structure that allows the University to deliver on its mission in sector-leading ways. This reduced their membership size from the original 24 down to 18 and is currently not less than 10 and not more than 14 members.

WA and QUT Universities have also reduced the size of their Councils through Amendment Acts:

- [https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/Bills.nsf/4498575C0EC93A1148257FB8000C670B/\\$File/EM172-2.002.pdf](https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/Bills.nsf/4498575C0EC93A1148257FB8000C670B/$File/EM172-2.002.pdf)
- <https://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/Work-of-the-Assembly/Tabled-Papers/docs/5721t1307/5721t1307.pdf>

Nevertheless, the process to change such legislation in Queensland is complicated, lengthy, and time-consuming. It could potentially take as long as two years to change the University of the Sunshine Coast Act (1998), and at least a further two years to fully implement the legislative changes as membership tenures expire.

We therefore recommend that mechanisms for reviewing and amending universities' enabling legislation to be streamlined and standardised, to support more agile and responsive governance reform across the sector.

The second issue relates to the loss of experienced members and institutional knowledge because of the simultaneous expiry date for both Appointed and Additional Members. In particular, the term of all six of the Government appointed members expires this year on 8 December, requiring considerable effort to recommend a set of new members for the consideration of the Queensland Minister for Education and the Arts.

This situation could be remedied if membership for Appointed and Additional Members could remain fixed in tenure (e.g. not more than four years), but the legislation amended to allow for the replacement of casual vacancies to not be aligned with the remaining length of the vacant term. This would ensure that membership terms do not all fall due on the same date.

1.2 Professionalisation of university governance bodies

We acknowledge the critical importance of further professionalising university governance bodies. Key elements of professionalisation within the higher education sector include:

- the recruitment of experienced and qualified members with diverse and relevant expertise;
- a stronger emphasis on accountability and performance;
- ongoing training and professional development; and
- regular evaluation and implementation of continuous improvement opportunities.

All members of UniSC's governing body meet the requirements of the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 to be 'fit and proper persons' and ordinarily resident in Australia, but nevertheless, we have initiated a process to review and refresh our Council and its subcommittees. This includes addressing the points above and consideration of appropriate remuneration for non-staff members, in recognition of their contributions and responsibilities.

In the broader context of sector-wide efforts to enhance governance standards, we recommend the following be considered:

- The introduction of sector-specific, standardised Continuing Professional Development (CPD) offerings for members of legislated university governance committees; and
- The implementation of mandatory remuneration, fully or partially government-funded, for non-staff members of legislated university governance committees.

This shift toward greater professionalisation and accountability is consistent with regulatory and governance reforms seen in other sectors, such as healthcare, banking and financial services.

1.3 Accountability vs institutional autonomy

Of all the governance principles identified, we believe accountability stands as one of the most critical, both in ensuring public trust and in fostering a culture of integrity and responsibility within institutions. This belief is reinforced by the findings of recent Royal Commissions, including those into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry, Aged Care Quality and Safety, and Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. These inquiries highlighted systemic failures in accountability and transparency, often rooted in weak oversight mechanisms and blurred lines of responsibility. A recurring recommendation across these reports is the strengthening of accountability frameworks for institutions, directors, and senior executives, as a central lever for improving risk management, ethical standards, and overall governance culture.

In the context of higher education, this underscores the need to embed robust accountability structures that reflect both the public interest and the complex operational realities of universities. As recipients of substantial public funding, universities must be answerable to government, students, and the broader community. However, striking the right balance between institutional autonomy and public oversight is essential. Accountability frameworks must be carefully designed to uphold transparency and stewardship without becoming overly prescriptive or bureaucratic, which could inadvertently stifle innovation, responsiveness, and the ability to pursue long-term strategic goals.

Crucially, any accountability regime must protect the foundational values of academic freedom and freedom of speech. These are not only core to the identity of universities but are essential to their public mission: enabling open inquiry, challenging orthodoxy, and generating new knowledge for societal advancement. A governance model that integrates clear accountability with a commitment to academic independence will best support universities in delivering on their civic, educational, and research mandates in an increasingly complex and rapidly evolving world.