

AAUP Submission to the Universities Accord

Preamble

The Australian Association of University Professors (AAUP) was formed in 2019 by members of the academic profession to reassert the place of academics as major stakeholders in higher education after decades of corporatisation in our universities and the diminishment of the role of academia.

The AAUP sees the accord as an unique opportunity to review and re-set our universities for the future, but this requires different thinking, so we learn the lessons of the past three decades. Much has been written about the managerial university and the loss of power of academics, so it is of no surprise there are questions about the quality of research and teaching in our universities that are linked to the deterioration in the influence of academics within their institutions. For the AAUP, there are two key issues that must be addressed by the accord if our universities are to become more effective: university governance and academic professionalism.

1. University Governance

High level documents such as The Bologna Declaration, Magna Charta Universitatum and in Australia, the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) assume that modern universities operate under a shared governance model, in which academic and corporate leadership jointly take responsibility for the strategic direction and effective operation of the university. While it is recognised that tensions are likely to arise under this dual leadership model in universities (TEQSA, 2019), the AAUP sees this as a strength. We argue that university governance structures and processes should be set up with the expectation of tensions and should be designed to deal with them.

Senates (Councils) are presumed to be the key bodies for academic decision making and leadership. A healthy university culture, governance structures and processes would not only enable and encourage academics to speak out or challenge proposals, but expect them to do so, as part of a thriving university culture. Through Senate, academics need to be able to influence the strategic direction of the university through the ability to initiate strategic proposals and critique those put forward by management. They need to be involved in senior appointments to the university and have an equal say in how resources are to be allocated. If high quality academic outcomes are to be achieved, proposals must be able to be scrutinised closely to ensure academic standards are maintained. Academic freedom and autonomy are central to their work and are crucial elements in establishing and maintaining a vibrant university culture.

The reality is, however, that corporate leadership dominates academic leadership in Australian universities. This domination has been shown to reduce academic power and introduce fear of retribution, which reduces the willingness of individuals to speak out. Unfortunately, in most Australian universities, the Academic Senate (Council) is controlled by management through an excess of ex-officio academic members with positions in the hierarchy. These outnumber elected representatives, and, along with a reduced role for the professoriate, the result is Senates (or Councils) have largely become tokenistic, focussing mainly on a limited range of quality assurance issues with little influence over senior selection, strategic decision-making, policy setting and the allocation of resources.

The AAUP believes that Academic Senates (Councils) in universities need to be restructured so that they are controlled by academic leaders from outside of the hierarchy and who are primarily

accountable to the broader academic body and university community. As academic leaders, these academics need power to be able to influence the strategic direction of the university through the ability to initiate strategic proposals and critique those put forward by management. They need a say in how resources are to be allocated and into senior appointments to the university. Empowering Academic Senate in this way is important because it is considered by the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA, 2019) as the primary source of academic leadership in universities. AAUP suggests that TEQSA needs to do a risk assessment of the impacts on the effectiveness of universities.

2. Academic professionalism

The AAUP believe that the academic profession needs to be re-conceptualised for the modern context, but it is imperative that the fundamental nature of the academic role is recognised and protected. In this process the de-professionalisation of academic work is detrimental to universities achieving their academic mission and the welfare of the academic staff in general, particularly more vulnerable and younger academics.

In this reconceptualization, the AAUP has developed the *Professional Ethical Framework for Australian Academics (The Framework)*. *This Framework*, endorsed by AAUP in July 2022, is accessible from the [AAUP website](#). It constitutes an important step towards the academic profession reclaiming its place as the key participants in the effective running of our universities.

The Framework is based on the notion of the university working for the common good. It clearly differentiates the academic leadership role from the managerial leadership role. It argues that genuine shared governance implies balanced power-sharing between these groups in regard to resource allocation and strategic direction setting. It describes how, as co-leaders, academics can ensure university policies reflect and support the professional academic role in teaching and learning, in research and community engagement.

The Framework asserts academics as co-leaders in universities and offers guidance to our academic colleagues, especially those less experienced, as they form a professional academic identity. The professional values it is based on will help all academics deal with the tensions inherent in the modern university environment without losing sight of the essence of their academic role. It is also designed to help other stakeholder to understand the essence of the academic role and how it fundamentally differs from the managerial role. This understanding needs to be acknowledged and accepted if our universities are to function well.

The Framework describes the academics as professionals and scholars and links their ability to fulfil their role to the effectiveness of universities. It articulates the arguments that viewing academia as a profession is vitally important for universities to be able to play their role in a democratic society.

Research clearly links university effectiveness to fair and transparent academic workload and performance policies (Barrett & Barrett, 2008; Kenny & Fluck, 2022a; 2022b). Given the intensification and casualisation of academic work are key factors in the deterioration of the academic role, as a professional group, academia must assert control over policies that directly impact on their working conditions and establish and control meaningful professional standards of practice and the criteria used to judge academic performance and accountability. Thus, management must serve the academic mission.

In summary

The AAUP believe the accord is an opportunity to redress the power imbalance in university leadership so that academic leaders, as members of the academic profession, can work with university management to ensure policies related to these areas of academic work serve the needs of the profession, reflect the leadership role of academics, and thereby contribute to the effectiveness of our universities ensuring they are fit for purpose.

We emphasise this is not a call to revert to the past. Our ideas are based on a clear acceptance of the important role of our universities in society and recognition of the vital role both academics and managers must play within them.

The AAUP believe that what is needed is a better understanding of academic work in the modern university and more purposefully designed structures to ensure the voice of the body of academic staff is influential and instrumental in strategic decision-making and resource allocation.

In response, AAUP has proposed [Ten Pillars](#) designed to clearly outline the role academics should play in decision-making in universities and to re-establish the role of universities as places of learning and knowledge creation. This timely and important move aims to shift the balance of power by moving from the top-down corporate managerial model of governance, prevalent in most Australian universities, to a more collegial form of governance. This is seen by AAUP as a crucial first step towards retaining the essential qualities of our universities.

AAUP argue the current anomaly is linked to a clash of values. The values that underpin a corporatised managerial approach are fundamentally different to those that are at the heart of academia. Where management values efficiency, compliance and predictability, academia values critique, questioning of assumptions, evidence-based decision-making and collaboration. -

While AUPP accept that both perspectives are legitimate and need to be brought to bear on the complex issues facing modern universities, unfortunately, the reality is that, in our universities, management values dominate over academic values. This is not sustainable and poses a great threat to the viability of our universities as centers of academic excellence.

References

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