

Submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee Inquiry into the Quality of Governance at Australian Higher Education Providers

Submitted by: Jasmine Toronis

Date:

I am a current university student and am writing to express my deep concerns regarding the systemic failures in governance, teaching quality and student support within the Australian higher education system, particularly public universities. I believe the current system increasingly functions as a profit-driven enterprise rather than a public institution dedicated to education, research and student wellbeing. It is a system that is fundamentally failing the very people it claims to serve: both students and educators.

My experience, an Honours year in a broken system:

During my Honours year, I've experienced firsthand how the current university system fails both students and staff. What should be a supported academic experience has instead been marked by exhaustion and confusion, not because staff don't care, but because they are overworked to the point of collapse.

There is a clear disconnect between the expectations placed on staff and the support they are given. There have been multiple times I've needed feedback, guidance or just a conversation to help develop my thesis, but have been met with delayed responses or cancelled meetings. Not because staff were unwilling, but because the system has left them overstretched, unsupported and burnt out.

I have often felt degraded by a system that treats students like customers. It feels transactional and hollow. It forces the question: who is this education system really serving?

If universities cannot provide adequate support to students because staff are overstretched, then they are failing at their most basic purpose. We cannot keep pretending this model works. It doesn't. And students are paying for its failures, both financially and emotionally.

Here are a few observations I have come across:

1) Glitz at the top, grit below

The widening gap between executive salaries and the working conditions of staff is indefensible. It is hard to reconcile the million-dollar salaries of vice-chancellors with the reality of understaffed units, wage theft investigations and burnt-out tutors. If governance were functioning as it should, this imbalance would not be possible. It sends a clear message: education is secondary to financial power.

Take this example: in 2023, [Monash University threw a \\$127,134 farewell party](#) for its outgoing Vice-Chancellor, Professor Margaret Gardner.

Meanwhile, back on campus, Honours students in my faculty couldn't even get an end-of-year celebration or acknowledgement of our research projects.

Gardner's party took place while the university was under scrutiny for [multimillion-dollar wage theft claims](#) involving casual academics. This moment captures everything: the glitz at the top, the grind below, and the sense that students and educators alike are just scenery in someone else's gala.

This is not just about money. It's about a culture of governance where extravagance at the top is normalised, while basic academic support (feedback, mentoring, continuity) is treated as optional or unaffordable.

2) Profit over purpose

University is a financial institution, not an educational one. In 2024, Monash paid nearly \$600 million on non-academic related staff and \$950 on academic staff. This split alone speaks volumes that the university is no longer education focused- it is a corporation and students are its revenue stream.

One person on the Monash University Council took home \$1.1 million in 2024

19 executives earned more than \$250,000. One of them made over \$1M.

Over \$2.5M went to external consultants.

That's not governance. That's outsourcing accountability.

And for what?

I paid over \$10,000 for an Honours year with fewer than 100 contact hours, classes thrown together last minute and minimal support. Not because of a lack of staff care but because the system is designed to keep them overworked, under-resourced and replaceable.

3) Governance without representation

The composition of university governing bodies often excludes the very people most affected by their decisions: students and academic staff. Decisions around budget allocation, course cuts, staff redundancies and even major policy changes are made behind closed doors. There is little transparency or public accountability. As a result, universities increasingly resemble corporations focused on revenue generation, not education.

A clear example of governance failure is the sector's growing reliance on surveillance-driven responses to AI use in assessment. Miriam Reynoldson, a Melbourne PhD candidate, critiques this shift toward "assessment security" over academic integrity in an article titled, [Assessment integrity in the age of AI: Where to from here?](#) She notes that strategies like AI-detection software and in-person invigilation not only fail to ensure fairness, they actively erode trust, equity and pedagogical purpose. Yet these are the kinds of measures universities are increasingly adopting, often with little consultation or explanation. This signals a governance culture more concerned with compliance than learning.

4) Education on a short-term contract

Casualisation is rampant, leaving many teaching staff without job security, adequate time for student support or fair working conditions. Students suffer directly from this: larger class sizes, minimal feedback, reduced support services and lecturers who are overworked and underpaid.

As argued by Reynoldson in the article [Where to from here: Foster educational relationships](#), a meaningful education:

“requires that teachers work with students over time, under a range of conditions, in order to understand how they’re making sense of the world.”

But that kind of continuity is impossible when staff turnover is constant, workloads are unmanageable and teaching contracts are temporary.

Recommendations:

The current governance system in Australian higher education providers is failing to prioritise education, staff welfare or student needs. What we are seeing is the slow erosion of the public university as a civic institution.

To address this, I recommend the following:

1. **Restore the public purpose of universities** as public institutions with civic missions, not profit making enterprises.
2. **Reform university governing bodies** to include student, staff and community representation with real decision-making power.
3. **Cap executives pay and limit consultant spending**
 - Cap Vice-Chancellor and executive salaries at a proportionate multiple of the median academic staff wage.
 - Tie any performance-based bonuses to educational outcomes and student wellbeing, not financial growth or enrolments.
4. **Limit staff casualisation** and improve job security
 - Require paid time for feedback and student support in all academic contracts.
5. **Reinvest in student-facing education**
 - Allocate funding toward direct student support and academic mentorship, rather than administrative growth.
6. **Support pedagogically informed education**, aligned with [Reynoldson's \(2025\)](#) call to re-centre education.
 - Rather than defaulting to punitive or surveillance-based strategies, universities must prioritise relational, equitable assessment models that respect both students and educators.

Australian universities must return to their purpose: to educate, to support research and to serve the public good. Right now, that mission is being lost to a model that treats students as customers and staff as disposable.

Thank you for considering this submission.

Signed by,

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