



26 August 2025

Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Committees
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Phone: +61 2 6277 3521
Email: eec.sen@aph.gov.au

**RE: Public submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee
inquiry into the quality of governance at Australian higher education providers**

Terms of Reference 1(d): The impact of providers' employment practices, executive remuneration, and the use of external consultants, on staff, students and the quality of higher education offered

About FROLIC Inc

Fine Rendition Operatic and Lyrical Intercultural Collaboration (FROLIC) Inc is an Australian not-for-profit dedicated to reimagining opera through intercultural collaboration. Founded by musician and cultural entrepreneur Aaron Carpenne and Italian opera director Stefano Vizioli, FROLIC has created landmark productions that unite Western opera with unique cultural traditions worldwide.

Its pioneering projects include *Acis and Galatea* in Bhutan, developed with Bhutanese artists and international partners such as the Smithsonian Institution; *Japan Orfeo*, merging Monteverdi with Noh Theatre and Gagaku music under the patronage of Akie Abe and with costumes by Missoni; and *Mozart at Angkor*, an ongoing collaboration with the Royal Government of Cambodia.

In Australia, FROLIC leads *Yamaji Calisto*, a long-term cultural exchange with the Yamaji community of Western Australia, developed with partners including Dr. Charmaine Papertalk Green, Yamaji Art, Curtin University, the Square Kilometre Array Observatory, and Lotterywest.

Guided by an experienced international board spanning Australia and the USA, FROLIC continues to champion cultural diplomacy, community engagement, and artistic innovation, establishing itself as a leader in intercultural performance on the world stage.

Dear Committee Secretary,

I wish to make a submission to the Senate Inquiry into the quality of governance at Australian higher education providers, with reference to Term of Reference 1(d). My experience highlights how employment practices and executive decision-making at Curtin University have negatively impacted not only the careers of staff and collaborators, but also students, communities, and Australia's international cultural reputation.

In 2018, I was commissioned by Professor Steven Tingay of Curtin University's International Centre for Radio Astronomy Research to lead the development of *Yamaji Calisto*, an intercultural opera project in partnership with Yamaji Elders and communities in Western Australia. The project sought to celebrate First Nations culture through opera, in collaboration with leading Australian and international partners.

Over five years, FROLIC Inc (my Western Australian not-for-profit organisation) developed the project with Curtin's support, alongside Yamaji Elder Dr Charmaine Papertalk Green, Yamaji Art in Geraldton, and many national and international stakeholders. The project attracted substantial investment, including from the former Australia Council for the Arts, Lotterywest, WA Government bodies, and Curtin University. In 2024, it gained further international endorsement when the Italian Ministry of University and Research allocated €3.2 million as a flagship Australia–EU collaboration, with performances planned in WA, Italy, and France.

However, in May 2023, Professor Tingay abruptly withdrew Curtin University's institutional support, declaring that the project was "not the right vehicle for Curtin investment." This decision came despite years of alignment, prior endorsement, significant financial commitments, and the demonstrable success of intercultural workshops and performances in Geraldton, Mullewa, Perth, and Rome.

The consequences of this executive-level decision were far-reaching:

- **For staff and collaborators:** Years of professional labour and resources were nullified without transparency, consultation, or adequate accountability.
- **For students and community:** Local Yamaji participants who had been meaningfully engaged through workshops and performances were left disillusioned, undermining trust in universities as genuine partners in cultural exchange.
- **For higher education quality:** Curtin's withdrawal deprived students and academics of a unique platform to engage in international, intercultural research and practice. The opportunity to position Australia as a global leader in cultural diplomacy was lost.

- **For international credibility:** The sudden disengagement damaged Australia's reputation within European cultural and academic networks, undermining confidence in the reliability of Australian institutions as long-term partners.

This experience demonstrates how university governance and executive decision-making—without proper checks, consultation, or accountability—can cause significant harm. While resources are often directed toward external consultants and executive priorities, projects with profound community, cultural, and educational impact may be dismissed without due process.

The result in this case was reputational and financial harm to my organisation and to myself as an artist, broken trust with the Yamaji community, and a missed opportunity of national significance at a time when Australian First Nations art is gaining unprecedented international recognition.

I respectfully submit that the Committee consider the following:

- The need for **transparent governance processes** in how executive decisions are made around long-term cultural and academic collaborations.
- The importance of **accountability mechanisms** when employment practices or executive decisions directly undermine staff, students, communities, and partners.
- The risk that **excessive reliance on executive discretion and external consultancy** erodes trust, undermines cultural diplomacy, and damages the quality of higher education.

I appreciate the Committee's consideration of this submission and welcome the opportunity to provide further evidence if required.

Yours sincerely,

Aaron Carpene

Artistic and Executive Director
FROLIC Inc