



**Australian Multicultural Action Network Inc**  
32 Quandong Street, O'CONNOR ACT 2602  
ABN: 40 172 914 431 Assn No: A06217

**Mr Ravi Krishnamurthy JP**  
PRESIDENT

## **Submission for the Quality of Governance at Australian Higher Education Providers**

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**Submitted by: Ravi Krishnamurthy**

**Position: President, Australian Multicultural Action Network (AMAN)**

### **Introduction**

The Australian Multicultural Action Network (AMAN) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry into the quality of governance at Australian higher education providers. AMAN is committed to equity, accountability, and community empowerment, and our submission reflects concerns and perspectives particularly relevant to students and staff from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. We believe strong, transparent, and inclusive governance is essential to maintaining the integrity, fairness, and international reputation of Australia's higher education sector.

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### **1. Adequacy of TEQSA's Powers to Identify and Address Governance Issues**

#### **Positives:**

- The **Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)** plays a crucial role in monitoring academic and corporate governance. Its standards framework provides clear criteria on leadership, institutional integrity, and quality assurance.

- TEQSA's powers to impose conditions or revoke registration provide **important enforcement mechanisms**.

#### Negatives and Concerns:

- TEQSA's **scope is primarily reactive**, responding to issues once they emerge, rather than being proactive in identifying systemic risks.
- Limited powers to **investigate board-level practices** (e.g., executive appointments, contractor usage, conflict of interest disclosures) reduce its ability to address governance risks early.
- There is **insufficient stakeholder engagement**, particularly with diverse student and staff communities, in TEQSA's audit and consultation processes.

#### Recommendations:

- Strengthen TEQSA's ability to **conduct governance audits** and require independent external reviews of board performance.
  - Mandate **diversity and student representation** in institutional governance as part of compliance.
  - Expand the agency's engagement with **student unions, CALD organisations, and academic staff associations** to better capture grassroots perspectives.
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## 2. Composition, Transparency, and Accountability of Governing Bodies

#### Positives:

- Some public universities have adopted governance best practices such as publishing board minutes, maintaining conflict-of-interest registers, and conducting regular audits.
- Inclusion of **academic and student representatives** on governing councils fosters some internal accountability.

#### Negatives and Concerns:

- There is **inconsistent transparency** across institutions—some do not publish financial or governance data in accessible formats.
- Board compositions often lack **cultural, gender, and socio-economic diversity**, leading to decision-making that may not reflect the broader university community.
- External members of governing bodies often have strong industry or political ties, raising concerns of **potential conflicts of interest** and undermining **academic independence**.

#### Recommendations:

- Require a **minimum quota of independent, community, and academic members** with demonstrated governance capability and ethical conduct.
  - Mandate **public disclosure of board decisions** related to remuneration, major expenditures, and risk management.
  - Introduce regular **cultural competency and governance ethics training** for all board members.
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### 3. Financial Reporting Standards and Safeguards

#### Positives:

- Larger universities are subject to annual external audits and are required to comply with **Australian Accounting Standards** and the Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act (for public institutions).

#### Negatives and Concerns:

- Financial statements often **lack sufficient granularity**, making it difficult to assess true expenditure on core education vs. external consultancy, marketing, and executive pay.
- **Cross-subsidisation from international student fees** lacks transparent oversight, raising concerns about long-term sustainability and risk exposure.

#### Recommendations:

- Require **segmented financial reporting** distinguishing teaching, research, infrastructure, and external contracts.
  - Mandate disclosure of **spending on external consultants, travel, marketing, and executive bonuses**.
  - Introduce periodic **independent financial risk assessments**, especially for institutions heavily reliant on international enrolments.
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### 4. Compliance with Workplace Laws and Regulations

#### Positives:

- Some institutions have well-documented HR policies and enterprise agreements with staff unions.

#### Negatives and Concerns:

- Numerous public cases have revealed **underpayment of casual academic staff**, indicating systemic non-compliance with workplace laws.
- The increasing reliance on casual and contract staff results in **precarious employment**, which undermines job security and educational quality.
- CALD staff often face **under-recognition of overseas qualifications**, microaggressions, and barriers to promotion—issues rarely addressed in institutional reviews.

#### Recommendations:

- Require annual **compliance reports on Fair Work Act adherence**, including treatment of casuals and underpayment rectifications.
  - Introduce stronger **whistleblower protections** and anonymous reporting mechanisms for staff.
  - Encourage **cultural safety audits and anti-racism action plans** across all institutions.
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## 5. Impacts of Employment Practices, Executive Remuneration, and Consultants

#### Positives:

- Some institutions have adopted **executive remuneration frameworks** linked to performance indicators, with board oversight.

#### Negatives and Concerns:

- Disproportionately high executive salaries and increased outsourcing to consultants are diverting resources from frontline education and student services.
- Staff morale is undermined when casual academics are paid by the hour while executives earn bonuses and perks during financial downturns.
- Over-reliance on consultants can **erode internal capability** and result in **generic, profit-driven reforms** not suited to academic environments.

#### Recommendations:

- Cap executive salaries within public universities relative to the average staff wage (e.g. 6:1 ratio).
  - Require disclosure of **consultancy contracts above a defined threshold**, including purpose and outcomes.
  - Implement university-wide **employment equity audits**, focusing on fair promotion, contract-to-permanent ratios, and inclusion of CALD staff.
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## 6. Related Matters – CALD Student and Staff Impact

- CALD students face **language, financial, and social barriers**, which are exacerbated by inconsistent institutional support and governance gaps.
- Governance failures directly impact the quality of student experience—reduced funding for student support services, cultural engagement programs, and mental health resources disproportionately affect migrant and refugee students.
- A lack of CALD staff in senior leadership roles reflects deeper issues of **institutional homogeneity**, limiting cultural inclusivity in decision-making.

### Recommendations:

- Establish a **national governance benchmark framework** that includes **cultural diversity KPIs**.
  - Fund **community-based organisations** to co-design policies that promote equity in student services, research partnerships, and staff recruitment.
  - Create pathways for **international students and CALD alumni** to be represented in institutional advisory and policy-making forums.
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## Conclusion

Strong governance is the backbone of a world-class higher education system. However, current systems reveal gaps in transparency, cultural inclusiveness, financial accountability, and workforce ethics. We urge the Committee to consider reforms that not only improve compliance and performance but also embed equity and cultural safety at all levels of governance.

AMAN is ready to collaborate with sector stakeholders, regulatory bodies, and student and staff communities to promote just, transparent, and inclusive governance across Australia's higher education landscape.

**Ravi Krishnamurthy**

President, Australian Multicultural Action Network (AMAN)