

Submission on quality of governance in Australian universities

My name is John Doland Nichols. I was academic staff member at Southern Cross University from November 13, 1998 to December 26, 2025. From 2007 I was an Associate Professor and Course Coordinator for the program in Forest Science and Management.

University council, governance

In the view of many academics, university governance has gone steadily downhill over the last 50 years. At one time, it was common to say that tertiary education was run by clueless ivory tower types and was in need of people who know about “business”. There may have been something to that, but today councils and university governance are almost entirely controlled by people with business expertise only.

Managerial control

This is the core problem. **Universities are run by managers for their own benefit**, as businesses that need to make a profit. Students are seen as sources of money whereas infrastructure and academic/technical staff are seen as “costs”.

Selection process for deans, heads of schools, vice-chancellors, etc.

Corruption of this process is a key problem and needs to be addressed urgently.

Traditionally a process was followed for hiring anyone into a permanent position, anyone from Associate Lecturer to Vice-Chancellor. It was gruelling gauntlet for candidates and it wasn't perfect, but it offered an opportunity to get to know people not just from their resumes, but in many situations – lecturing at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, discussing research in seminars, socializing, etc.

NOW Vice Chancellors tend to **handpick** Heads of Schools and other administrators to work for them. Previously members of the School itself would have been on a committee that included academic staff members and even students and the committee members would have discussed who to hire, in detail.

In the current system, at least at SCU, **the VC exerts a kind of Trump-like total control, with a Council acting as a standover man**. I saw a sign over door of Head of Academic Board: Office of the VC. That is a board that was meant to engage in rigorous oversight, so called “quality control”.

International students

We experienced the best and worst of the policy of including international students in our programs. From ~2000~2019 we admitted a few highly qualified international students, most of whom were working professionals in our field and who had outstanding academic

records. Most of them greatly enhanced the learning experience of all students in our program and continue to be colleagues with each other and Australian students.

As a Course Coordinator I looked at applications for admission, which I considered carefully. Beginning around 2020, people at the university who described themselves as being “in sales”, started by-passing us and directly admitted students, many grossly unprepared. I gave three live lectures in Semester 1 2020 and then, because of Covid, the rest of the unit was delivered online. Managers told us to tell any students who complained, that what they were given was adequate, no need to make up the four days in the field that were the core of the unit.

65% of the students in that class achieved failing marks on the final exam and their major reports. Of course we were not allowed to fail that many but these were students for the most part marginally qualified to **begin a BSc**, certainly not ready for the MSc program into which they’d been admitted.

Marketing/money

Does it make sense for ~39 universities to compete against each other for students, whilst spending millions of dollars of public funds on “marketing”? Each time a new VC starts – typically for us it was about every 4-5 years – a new marketing team is hired, the old logo and motto gotten rid of and new ones introduced, at great expense. Whilst it provides a bit of entertainment ridiculing silly marketing slogans, one could think of better ways to spend money.

The book *Dark Academia* by Peter Fleming is an excellent description of the current state of tertiary education in Australia.

Thank you

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