



## **Australian Historical Association Submission to Senate Inquiry on the Quality of Governance at Australian Higher Education Providers**

The Australian Historical Association (AHA) is the peak national body of historians and students which includes academic, professional, and other historians working in all fields of history. We represent nearly 1000 members researching and teaching in and on Australia.

In this submission, the AHA addresses three of the four key questions posed by the Inquiry as they pertain to the discipline of history and offers specific recommendations for consideration by the review.

### **1. The composition of providers' governing bodies and the transparency, accountability and effectiveness of their functions and processes, including in relation to expenditure, risk management and conflicts of interest.**

Historically, universities have served two crucial functions: to educate students, and to act as a repository of knowledge and expertise. These core functions have been undermined since the 1980s by two interlocking forces: managerialism, which regards universities as businesses and Vice Chancellors as CEOs, and neoliberalism, which has seen a steady withdrawal of government support from the sector in favour of entrepreneurial approaches to knowledge acquisition and transmission. This has had adverse effects on the transparency, accountability and effectiveness of universities, particularly in the discipline of history:

- Students are paying more of the cost of their education than earlier generations did. For history (and other HASS) students, this has been exacerbated by the punitive Job-Ready Graduates scheme. The managerialist desire to maximise profit (pursued by University Councils, which are dominated by business and industry, not education) is in conflict with University leaders' more fundamental responsibility to ensure that students could have continued access to affordable education.
- The effects of neoliberal managerialism is evident in the way universities now increasingly under-value their roles as custodians of history and heritage. Many university archives and special collections, which have cultural and social, rather than purely economic value, are under-resourced. Whole areas of knowledge (such as languages, and Asian and Pacific history) are discarded on the grounds of 'economic efficiency', leaving the nation's capacity to deal with challenges greatly diminished.
- A competitive system encourages risk-taking in order to remain distinctive. Yet when these risks fail in a managerialist system, senior leadership accept no accountability for their failures: instead, university staff pay the price with their jobs, as we saw in late 2023 with the savage redundancies in history and philosophy at the Australian Catholic University. Current university governance structures sideline academic leadership (such as University Senate) in favour of highly concentrated power vested in Vice-Chancellors, who consider themselves to be CEOs rather than academic leaders.

- Academic staff are forced to compete with their colleagues in other disciplines for student enrolments, yet they have no control over the ways their subjects are promoted and discovered by students both within and outside the university. While scholarship and research is intrinsically collaborative, current modes of governance focus on competition, including competition for scarce research resources and student load. Viewing the teaching and research tasks of the university as best decided by market forces leads to a narrow focus on crassly utilitarian areas of research (arguably best suited to the private sector) at the expense of broader fields of research that have longer term, often intangible community benefits.

*We recommend that staff are provided more power in university decision-making—not just in terms of voice but in terms of seats in all governing bodies. More broadly we also recommend a return of government investment in higher education as a way to reduce or reverse the ill effects of managerialism.*

## **2. Providers’ compliance with legislative requirements, including compliance with workplace laws and regulations.**

The twin forces of managerialism and neoliberalism have too often placed profit and extraction over employee rights and welfare. It has also incentivised universities to comply with recent legislation about casualisation in bad faith.

- Over 97,000 University staff have been affected by wage theft in Australia. This practice is illegal, and Universities have been forced to repay millions of dollars to affected employees.
- Early Career Researchers—who represent the future of their disciplines—have borne the brunt of this theft. They are more likely to be in insecure employment, on casual contracts, and have a disincentive to query such abuses lest they be denied future work.
- Universities’ recent attempts to limit casualisation in response to the wage theft scandal have had dire consequences: rather than converting more casual employees to continuing roles, casuals are often dropped, and their teaching is now incorporated into the workloads of already stretched permanent staff.
- Change management processes have also been cynically adopted in ways that are technically correct in terms of the letter of the law, but which clearly seek to replace ‘expensive’ staff at levels D and E (who are experts in their fields with decades of experiences) with (often teaching-only) level A staff. This erosion of expertise in the name of short-term cost-cutting will undermine the value proposition of the university in the long term.

*We recommend universities provide greater pay and workload transparency for all staff. We also recommend there be better mechanisms in place to ensure universities provide fair working conditions and job security for continuing staff for all staff rather than simply a bad-faith compliance with the letter of the law.*

## **3. The impact of providers’ employment practices, executive remuneration, and the use of external consultants, on staff, students and the quality of higher education offered**

External consultants reinforce the competitive, top-down approach of contemporary university management, and have destroyed collegial academic self-governance. External consultants are paid large sums to conduct research that could, in most cases, be done by researchers already employed by universities to conduct research. Such researchers are also more likely to be experts in their fields, unlike consultants.

We also note that much of the bloat in university management is due to the onerous reporting and regulatory requirements imposed on universities by the federal government through regulatory bodies such as TEQSA. Ostensibly designed to protect the quality of education, in practice, many TEQSA regulations place burdensome demands on academic staff that prevent them from producing the quality teaching and research they are engaged to undertake and implies that academics cannot be trusted.

However, TEQSA could also be used to counter the adverse impact of managerialist governance on university teaching. For example, it could make clear that accreditation will depend upon a clear sequencing of offerings from introductory, intermediate to advanced competency. And that to gain accreditation a university must offer a breadth of fields, including ‘foundational areas of humanist knowledge in fields such as history, languages and philosophy’.

While both university executive salaries and consultant usage have increased, the number of full-time historians in higher education has decreased. Increasingly, too, reductions in staff and resources, means unit offerings for history have contracted.

- According to an AHA report (2022), overall staff numbers of Full Time Equivalent historians in paid employment (continuing, fellowships and contracts of 1–3 years, but not honorary and not casual) were 346.5 in universities in Australia in 2016. In 2022 there were 318.7. A notable example is the University of Wollongong, which exactly halved their history staff in 2024.
- History departments all around the country report forced contractions of their curriculum, often too close to the minimum number for a major. This means a lack of choice for students as well as a mainstreaming of offerings to the most popular or best known only.
- As unit offerings shrink, areas of historical study that are crucial to understanding the contemporary world (for example histories of China, Indonesia, the Middle East, the Pacific, and Eastern Europe) are often the first to be cut because they do not attract sufficient numbers. This lack of knowledge has detrimental flow-on effects for Australia’s geopolitical position and foreign policy. At a time when we need more historical knowledge and expertise, university managements are choosing to offer less.

*We recommend a radical redistribution of funds from university executives to the teaching staff of universities, pegged to calculable student need rather than incalculable market estimates. VC salaries should not exceed those of state premiers.*

*We also recommend that all tenders for external consultancy in universities should first be offered to staff at the university which is seeking to outsource the work.*

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